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The Imperceptible Divide between Valour and Violence: Robin Hyde's *Passport to Hell*

Abstract I: Tra i numerosi testi sulla partecipazione australiana e neozelandese alla Grande Guerra, *Passport to Hell* (1936) di Robin Hyde è considerato uno dei romanzi migliori. Ispirato a una storia vera, quella dell'eroe di guerra ed ex ragazzo di riformatorio Douglas Stark, esso indaga la realtà dietro la quintessenza del soldato perfetto. Stark è un emarginato con un passato di violenza che in battaglia si tramuta in eroismo, un ribelle il cui disprezzo per il pericolo e la disciplina diventa una risorsa inestimabile. In questo preciso "discours" (secondo il concetto di Foucault) la violenza è un valore da manipolare e trasformare in strategia di guerra.

Abstract II: Among the multitude of books on the Australian and New Zealand participation in WW1, Robin Hyde's *Passport to Hell* (1936) is considered one of the finest novels. Based on the real story of an ex-borstal boy and war hero, Douglas Stark, Hyde's work offers an insight into the quintessence of the perfect soldier: a misfit with a past of violence transmuted into valour, a rebel whose contempt for danger and discipline alike becomes a worthy resource. In this particular 'discourse' (in Foucault's terms) violence is a value, manipulated and used as war strategy.

In her brief tragic life Iris Wilkinson (1906-1939), better known with the *nom de plume* of Robin Hyde, became one of New Zealand's most significant writers of journalism, poetry and fiction. A crusading journalist, she was an outspoken advocate for the marginalised and downtrodden. Her search of a distinctive New Zealand voice coincided with a deep concern for the injustices suffered by the disadvantaged in her country, in particular women and Maori. In 1932 she participated in the Queen Street riots in Auckland, where women were protesting for better working conditions, and in 1937 she wrote passionate articles in the *New Zealand Observer* on the expulsion of Maori from their land at Orakei (Bastion Point). She also challenged the boundaries of women's writing in journalism, broadening the range of subjects generally considered suitable to women and tackling controversial political and social issues as a lady editor of newspapers and magazines (Matthews 2014). In 1938 she travelled to the China-Japan war front, the first woman

journalist to do so (Robinson & Wattie 1998: 251-253). A fine poet, she was the first New Zealander to be included in Macmillans' *Contemporary Poets* series. The author of ten books of prose and poetry, she stands out as an original woman voice in the panorama of a rising national literature populated mostly by male writers[1].

In February 1935 Robin Hyde began a series of interviews with a notorious war veteran, private James Douglas Stark, also known as Starkie, which would become the basis of her novel *Passport to Hell*, published in 1936. Hyde had first heard of him in her investigative journalism on prisons for the *New Zealand Observer*. Starkie had been detained at Auckland's Mt Eden prison and was still in touch with its chaplain, George Moreton. The chaplain told her the veteran's story and gave her a manuscript with the account of his war adventures (Smith 1986: x). Starkie had served in the Fifth Reinforcement of the Otago Infantry Battalion within the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) and fought as a bomber in the Great War of 1914-1918, against the Turks in the Gallipoli campaign and against the Germans at the Somme Offensive and at Ypres. *Passport to Hell* is not however based on that manuscript – signed by another prisoner, C. Murhpy[2], that Starkie had used as a ghost writer – but rather on Starkie's direct oral tales: images collected in notes and then translated into writing by Hyde's fervent imagination. Hyde highlights in the "Author's Note" that the book is not a work of fiction (Hyde 1986: 1)[3] and Calder defines it a "novelised biography" of Starkie's childhood and war experiences (Calder 2008: 67). In fact, as most war books, *Passport to Hell* is a mix of fact and fiction. It owes much to Starkie's ability in relating his adventures as a set of visual memories as well as to Hyde's capacity to see them and weave them into a story. In comparing the Murphy manuscript and Hyde's novel, Smith found some small but significant differences when the same incidents are described (Smith 1986: xi). He also underlines that Hyde's imagination was not the only one at work: Stark himself adapted his oral narrative to suit his hearer. A clear example is the veteran's account of his father's exotic figure, which Hyde followed carefully (expanding where she had the opportunity to do so) but which appears quite different from the old man's description in his obituary (Smith 1986: xiii). The veteran's 'creative' memories are also found in the Murphy manuscript including a passage on "Stark fondly leaving his parents on the way to the War when his father had been dead five years" (Smith 1986: xii). Altogether, Hyde's book can be defined as an imagined work "that uses the resources of fiction to tell a non-fictional story" (Calder 2011: 195).

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[1] For Hyde's biography see also: http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/people/robin-hyde and http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/writers/hyder.html (accessed on 28 February 2016).

[2] In an interview with George Moreton reported by Smith, the chaplain says he gave Starkie's diary to Hyde. Smith comments that it would have been impossible and illegal for Starkie to keep a journal on the front. He therefore suggests that the manuscript could be the account of Stark's war experiences handwritten by Murphy, contained in a black exercise which is part of the collection of Hyde's papers assembled by her son.

[3] Any other reference to *Passport to Hell*, henceforth added in brackets in the text, refers to this edition.

On publication, it raised amazement from the public that a woman in her late twenties, who had hardly ever left New Zealand, could describe the horrors of war so vividly. A returned serviceman like John A. Lee, author of *Civilian into Soldier* (1937), said it was the most important New Zealand war book yet published and made special mention of its realism (Smith 1986: xviii). Hyde had to face criticisms too, in particular that of John Tait, who had served in the Otago Infantry Battalion like Starkie and attacked her in two letters published by the *Southland Times*. While accepting Hyde's depiction of Starkie as a wild and reckless character, he corrected with obstinate pedantry factual details, spelling of names, and references to places, questioning the value of the book as a faithful chronicle of historical events. The point is that war books, like historical novels and even memoirs, are always "shaped" or, as William Blissett put it, "based on experience and thoroughly composed, 'a thing made'" (Smith 1986: xiv). *Passport to Hell* is not only an account of a soldier's war experience resulting from the interplay between two imaginations at work, it also reflects Hyde's interest in Starkie as both a psychological case study and a direct outcome of the contradictory social patterning functional to a certain 'discourse' – to use a term coined by Foucault, which will be explained later.

The narration of Starkie's life strikes the reader for the protagonist's total contempt of discipline and danger alike. During the war, Starkie was court-martialled nine times and amassed sentences totalling thirty-five years' penal servitude, most of which were cancelled for conspicuous gallantry in action. As Alex Calder underlines "Private Stark had cheek and charisma as well as bravery, and wore the stars of a captain of infantry *tattooed* on his shoulders – an indelible 'fuck you' to those in authority. Despite his insubordinate attitude he kept the respect of his often exasperated commanding officers and was a man his comrades looked up to – at least most of the time" (Calder 2011: 195). Most of his violations were committed when he was on leave and included drunkenness, assaults, jailbreak, blaspheming the King, Queen and Royal family, involvement in riots, and firing bullets through the locked door of a sergeant's latrine. On the battlefield, instead, he was an example of reckless courage and took part in the most dangerous actions, never withdrawing before barrages and the fire of machine guns, going back to No Man's Land to rescue wounded comrades or bury the dead ones out of pity, creeping into the enemy dugouts to shell bombs and clear the way to his troops. He risked death innumerable times and his lungs were permanently damaged by the bullets of enemy fire.

The inclination to break rules was actually present before his underage enlistment at sixteen and continued when the war was over. Starkie was the third child of a Spanish woman and a Delaware Indian from the regions of the Great Bear Lake, who had made a fortune with the Australian gold rush and had then landed in New Zealand with some "money and prestige" (Hyde 1986: 11). Starkie's features don't seem to fit in New Zealand's ethnic duality. He is too dark to avoid racial prejudice from white New Zealanders and not dark enough to identify with the proud Maori minority. Hyde's

original title "Bronze Outlaw", converted to "Passport to Hell" by the publisher, suggests the interconnection between Starkie's racial connotation and his unruly character: two features of diversity. She depicts Starkie's childhood as a period of unrestrained freedom outdoors, in Huckleberry Finn's style: catching eels in rivers, playing truant from school, and refusing to wear boots. "The New Zealand bush world was as disorderly as himself" (Hyde 1986: 17) says Hyde, alluding to that type of natural education that was common for a boy in an Antipodean Dominion. When he was forced to wear his first pair of boots to walk to school, he sold them to a friend for twelve marbles (Hyde 1986: 14). Once he got home, he was thrashed, but nothing could diminish the satisfaction of a boy whose "toes enjoyed an Arcadian existence of muddy freedom" (Hyde 1986: 17). No school except borstal would have him and he made the first of his many court appearances when he was twelve years old: "The rebel had two choices, to be trodden underfoot or to give battle. From the time when he could walk he had preferred to give battle" (Hyde 1986: 14).

Starkie's upbringing was mainly carried out through corporal punishment by his father and his elder brother George. While Starkie's father is described as a "dignified almost an austere figure, and physically superb" (Hyde 1986: 11) but is basically affectless, his big brother really cares for him and wants to act as a normative figure. His way to show his love, however, was by teaching him discipline through violence like their father. Starkie understood the extent of his brother's affection only when they met on the French front, a little time before George was torn into pieces by a shell during the Somme offensive (Hyde 1986: 138). What Starkie ultimately learnt from his upbringing is violence rather than discipline, as Calder contends: "You use violence to get your lesson across, but you don't teach a lesson, you teach the violence" (Calder 2008: 71).

Starkie joined the army to avoid a further detention in jail. Throughout all his life he kept escaping from normative environments only to get into similar ones: school, borstal, prison, army. As Calder puts it: "They are all places where people are knocked into shape" (Calder 2011: 201). It is as if Starkie needed, first of all, to be saved from himself: an enemy within. Hyde seems to allude to this in the scene where Starkie spends the night at Zealandia Hall, waiting for enlistment and watching the Union Jack fluttering: "The mere shadow of the arrogant little cotton flag was some ghostly protection to him" (Hyde 1986: 52). But after his return from the front he seemed not to have learnt much about legality and discipline. That is perhaps the reason why he was unable to settle back into civilian life.

Hyde met him in this period and found an ex-soldier with a lot of good stories to tell but no job prospects, a man who had accumulated a long series of sentences for petty theft, drunkenness, and assault. The paradox is that all the elements that make Starkie a delinquent, a nuisance and a criminal in the eyes of the society are the very qualities that also make him a perfect soldier in combat (Calder 2011: 200). Starkie's violent temper, instinctive nature, lack of control, and recklessness create a misfit at home and a hero on

the front. Some of his war actions recounted in the novel are questionable and oscillate between war crimes and conspicuous deeds of bravery deserving a Victoria Cross. For example, he likes playing cat and mouse with the enemy. When a Turkish sniper camouflaged in No Man's Land makes a mistake revealing his position, he enjoys killing him little by little, with a small fire: first injuring him, then keeping him under the fire, frightening him sadistically, until Starkie's captain finishes off the wounded Turk. On another occasion, in an eruption of rage after finding George's body ripped off in half on the battlefield, he goes back to camp and empties his revolver into a line of German unarmed prisoners. Sometimes he kills in cold blood just as a necessity of vengeance or because he wants to get even for some previous incidents (Hyde 1986: 174). But he is always pardoned because he is too useful in that context. At Ismailia, near Cairo, in a period of transit from one front line to another, he is taken up for court martial with the charge of using language to a colonel and trying to brain him with a tent mallet. He sends for Captain Dombey, his commanding officer, as a person who can speak for him. This is Dombey's testimony:

> Presently he opened his mouth and said, "This man is the biggest, laziest, rottenest, most troublesome –" He stopped dead again, and I could see he was having a lot of trouble to keep his language what they call Parliamentary. "In times like this he's more trouble than half a battalion put together". […]
> I began to wish I had left Captain Dombey in the desert until he had melted there.
> Then he said: "And in the trenches he's one of the best soldiers I ever had". He said a lot more after that, which I should blush to repeat, the end of it was that I got off with fourteen days" (Hyde 1986: 107).

The same system creates two opposite 'discourses', to use Foucault's term, one feasible in peace and another in war, one ruling over the civilians or the soldiers on leave and another over the combatants in the trenches or in No Man's Land. A 'discourse' is the conceptual territory in which knowledge and truth are formed and produced, and is the field within which language itself is defined. It is rooted in human practices, institutions and actions that vary according to different eras. In "The political Function of the Intellectual" Foucault underlines the interrelationship between truth and power. Truth is never outside power or deprived of power. The production of truth is a function of power and "we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (Foucault 1977: 12). This means that good and evil, legality and illegality are not absolute concepts but relative ones, determined within a certain discourse. Foucault also maintains that in modern states power is productive as opposed to the repressive power of the ancient regime, which was exercised through exemplary physical punishments such as torture and public executions. Power manifests itself not in a downward flow from the top of the social hierarchy to those below but, more obliquely, it extends itself in a capillary fashion:

it is part of daily action, speech and everyday life (Foucault 2003: 82-83)[4]. As Loomba underlines commenting Foucault's theory, "human beings internalise the systems of repression and reproduce them by conforming to certain ideas of what is normal and what is deviant. Thus our ideas about madness, criminality or sexuality are regulated through institutions such as the madhouse or the prison, and also by certain ideological 'regimes'" (Loomba 1998: 41). With ideological 'regimes', Foucault means the family, schools and mass media that help propagate the rules of a certain discourse. Starkie's story evidences the way power, even in the same age and within the same economic and political paradigm, can create different discourses – that is, different systems of values and disvalues according to changing situations and convenience – can define violence and valour as relative terms, and can manipulate truth.

Interestingly, in Starkie's antipathy to discipline Calder has seen "a sort of charismatic larrikinism" in which Antipodean men identify, since traditionally they don't like authority, are easy going and intolerant of petty forms of discipline, pride themselves on their "egalitarian matiness" – and so forth (Calder 2008: 70). In Australian and New Zealand English 'larrikin' means "a boisterous, often badly behaved young man"[5], an equivalent of hooligan. Starkie comes to embody the 'larrikin' qualities of the typical Anzac soldier (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) and, ultimately, of Antipodean men. He represents the quintessential colonial combatant. According to D.I.B. Smith, "The troops from the Dominions were noted both for their magnificent fighting qualities and their casual attitude toward discipline The two aspects were not unconnected" (Smith 1986: xx). He continues by affirming that the British Old Army taught its men discipline by breaking them down with endless drill and repetitive burdensome trivial tasks. As long as a soldier could be guaranteed to obey all orders, he could be considered "trained". On the other hand, the Australian general Monash defended his men against criticism of unruly behaviour by stating that the notion of discipline had been misunderstood. It should not mean obsequious homage to superiors nor servile observance of forms and customs nor suppression of individuality. It was only a means to an end, that is, a way to coordinate the action of a large number of individuals. Whether the Australian general was right or wrong, concludes Smith, the colonials had proportionately nine times the number of men in military prison than had the British, but they also fought better, were better adapted to trench fighting and supplied the storm troops of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to the end.

The origin of 'larrikinism' as a value can probably be found in the pioneer and early colonial period, which promoted an idealized masculinity rising from life in an idealized nature, and produced the cult of mateship and male camaraderie. The irrepressible male

[4] For Foucault the 'modern epoch' starts from the beginning of the 19th century. See also Michel Foucault 2008.

[5] See http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/larrikin.

qualities of pioneers and settlers were the result of life in the bush, hardships, manual work, down-to-earth language devoid of intellectualism. Here we are in another discourse: the colonial one in a settler colony. In this context there is more flexibility in judging the intolerance of authority and undisciplined behaviour (at least of white settlers and colonists, not of the indigenous population) insofar as these (dis)values distinguish the colonial from the "feminised" British or the "New Chum" (the newcomer from Britain), who is "a gentleman in the drawing room, not in the bush", as we can read in an early New Zealand short story entitled "A Tale I Heard in the Bush" (Wevers 1991: 204)[6]. The 1930s marked the beginning of New Zealand national literature. For the first time a group of writers were able to convey the preoccupations and the real voice of this Antipodean country as distinct from Britain. The works of Allen Curnow, A.R.D Fairburn, Denis Glover, Charles Brasch, and John Mulgan depicted the emerging prototype of New Zealander – encompassing the essence of what was true and vital in the colonial spirit as opposed to the sophistication of his European counterpart – and supported proud nationalist attitudes. They reflected, in fact, the preoccupations of the New Zealand white male subject over and against the 'lower' gender (the female) and the 'lower' race (Maori). Frank Sargeson and Roderick Finlayson also belong to this generation, although they stand out from the group for the complexity of their view (Della Valle 2010: 29)[7]. In representing the ultimate colonial soldier and indirectly the distinctive qualities of the Antipodean man, Starkie seems to be therefore altogether morally absolved within the imagery of an ex British settler colony like New Zealand and its system, which exalts him in war and 'contains' and tolerates him in peace, because he is functional to the discourse set by power.

In relating a man's memories, Hyde's position stands between the identification with the male point of view and her gender perspective. Her double-gendered position seems to be reflected in the choice of her pen name (the most used but not the only one adopted by the writer in her career): Robin can be both feminine and masculine and Hyde seems to allude to her concealment behind Starkie (Calder 2011: 196). Starkie's oral narrative was certainly mediated by the imagery of war available to Hyde and women in general, consisting in war paintings, newsreels and photographs: the public visual memory of the war. Moreover, like many other women, Hyde had seen the men of her family going to the front. Her own father left in 1916 and returned two years later "without injury as a stranger to the family" (Calder 2011: 196); her uncle died at Gallipoli. So, while this is a book about Starkie, Hyde also conveys her own gendered response to the war. Two moments of the troops' departure from New Zealand seem to exemplify this double register, as testified in the following quoted passages:

[6] The story is from the collection *Literary Foundlings (*1864), quoted in Lydia Wevers.

[7] Finlayson stands out for his anti-conformist focus on Maori life; Sargeson for the wide range of issues he raises and his complex condition of "founding father" of New Zealand Literature and closet homosexual.

> They were lined up and told they were the finest body of men that had ever left New Zealand. This was not a new experience for most of them. On the Invercargill station a fat man had told them the same thing. At Christchurch, where the wet brigade had joined them and turned their progress into the first real grog party, a man yet fatter had repeated it. Once again on the Wellington wharves they were informed of their own fineness; and as with one voice the troop replied:
> 'Aw, go wipe your chin' (Hyde 1986: 64).
> Father, lover, son, all drawn together in the one person, and the receptacle of your secret thoughts – in God's name, how can you lose that and remain the same? How could the men on the ship expect to come back to the same women when, departing, they had destroyed them? (Hyde 1986: 65).

Hyde first ironically depicts the disenchanted reaction of soldiers to war rhetoric, then in the next page she conveys, with lyrical sensitivity, the impotence of women's sorrow before being parted from their men. However, she was also aware of belonging to a generation of women that had contributed to idealising the patriotic war effort and making a romance out of the uniform; women "that gave to that grim uniform the unthinking hero worship which may have helped all modern men to despise all modern women", as she writes in an unpublished manuscript (Smith 1986: xxi)[8]. The scene that probably epitomises her thinking – and is completely different in the Murphy manuscript (Calder 2011: 207) – is at Invercargill station, where a woman, "healthy as a sheep-dog" but with "her apple-red cheeks streaming with tears", throws her arms at Starkie, kisses him passionately on the mouth, offers him a sewing kit and then, to Starkie's disappointment and jealousy, repeats the same performance again with the next (aroused) soldier and the next, and the next, in a sort of collective emotional/erotic ritual (Hyde 1986: 55).

In conveying Starkie's memories Hyde's main concern is however to be the advocate of the damaged war veteran. She wants to stand on Stark's side because she believes in the underdog and the possibility of change. This is in tune with her sense of the need for social justice, which we also find in her investigative journalism, and will be the subject of *Passport to Hell*'s sequel: *Nor the Years Condemn* (1938). The gender motif is a minor thread, sacrificed to the larger scope of the book that Robin Hyde herself summarised in a letter, in which she explained her reasons for writing *Passport to Hell*:

> I wrote the book because I had to write it when I heard his story, and because it's an illustration of Walt Whitman's line: "There is to me something profoundly affecting in large masses of men following the lead of those who do not believe in man" (Smith 1986: ix).

[8] From an unpublished manuscript. Quoted from Smith.

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