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The Boredom and Futility of War in Patrick White's Fiction

Abstract I: Questo articolo prende in esame la rappresentazione della guerra come espressione di inutilità e spreco nella narrativa di Patrick White, e in particolare nel racconto "After Alep", scritto nel 1945 quando l'autore era arruolato nella RAF come Intelligence Officer. Analizzando il racconto alla luce dell'approccio di White alla guerra come alla "più spaventosa perdita di tempo" della sua vita (Marr 1992: 493), l'articolo cerca di dimostrare come le strategie narrative utilizzate da White contribuiscano a de-mitologizzare la retorica della guerra e dell'eroe di guerra in un modo che può essere strumentale alla diffusione di un messaggio di pace attraverso la percezione dell'estremo senso di futilità trasmesso da qualsiasi guerra.

Abstract II: This article investigates the representation of war in terms of uselessness and waste in the fiction of Patrick White, with a particular emphasis on the short story "After Alep", written in 1945 when the writer was enrolled in the RAF as an Intelligence Officer. By analysing the story in the light of White's approach to the war as to "the most horrifying and wasteful period" of his life (Marr 1992: 493), the article attempts to demonstrate how the narrative devices used by White contribute to demythologize the rhetoric of the war and of war heroes in a way that may be instrumental in conveying a message of peace out of the ultimate sense of futility transmitted by any war.

The intense world-wide debate that developed in the immediate aftermath of World War II on the role of literature in wartime, and on the social and political commitment of writers in a nation recovering from war (McKernan 1989: 6), lay emphasis on the responsibility of literary culture of contributing to a process of education that should give readers an anti-war message and promote anti-war sentiments. Nevertheless, as Clare Rhoden notices, a fundamental difficulty in writing for anti-war discourse purposes stands on the risk of describing war violence and horrors in a way that, despite being intended to generate repulsion for the war, ends up sensationalizing the very same waste and barbarity that are supposed to be abhorred (Rhoden 2012: 5). Likewise, the risk in portraying soldiers' heroism and endurance is that of overshadowing the disgust with the

war and promoting a feeling of nostalgia, in the meaning given by David Lowenthal of “memory with the pain removed” (Lowenthal 1985: 8) – which, necessarily, would make the use of war literature for pacifist ends inefficient. This article intends to analyse Patrick White’s war fiction in the light of this debate and it attempts to demonstrate that the writer’s refusal to exalt any heroic figures, or to depict gruesome pictures of the cruelty of war, can plausibly be interpreted as a precise anti-war narrative strategy, deriving both from the writer’s socio-political commitment to the cause of peace and from his personal experience of the war.

It must be pointed out that White’s involvement with the war tends to be considered by literary critics as a part of his life that somehow separates his juvenile, mundane, and mostly European experience from his more mature, retired, Australian years. The war is seen, in Michael Ackland’s words, as “a great caesura” (Ackland 2002: 402) in Patrick White’s life and work. And it is probably because it actually represents a ‘dividing line’ between what was before and what came thereof, that White’s engagement in it has hardly drawn critical commentary. As Bruce Bennett confirms, “a neglected aspect of White’s experience, from the standpoint of the literary historian, is the period from 1940 to 1945 when he worked in Air Force intelligence in North Africa, the Middle East and Greece” (Bennett 2010: 127). It is only in the careful and engaging biographical reconstruction by David Marr (1992) that a vivid picture of White’s war years is given. For this reason the present article will mostly refer to Marr’s biography and White’s letters (1996) and autobiography (1982) as the most authoritative and comprehensive sources to document the writer’s approach and response to the war.

When World War II breaks out White is in the USA where he has travelled to, after living most of his life as an expatriate in London, with the aim of finding a publisher for his first novel, *Happy Valley*, and where, soon after his arrival, he has meant to settle down and continue his career as a writer. But when his sense of guilt for living safe in Manhattan intensifies, he decides to go back to England and try to be useful somehow. A decision, however, that is made out of a totally un-heroic approach to the war: “I am doing this for no personal desire”, he confesses in a letter to a friend, “but just because I don’t feel I can ignore the war altogether” (Marr 1996: 32). A common sense of human responsibility, therefore, is what determines White’s intention to enrol – a situation which is significantly paralleled in the novel he has just finished writing, *The Living and the Dead* (1940), whose protagonist, Joe Barnett, resolves to go and fight in the Civil War in Spain for no heroic desire of glory, but for the mere realization that a war cannot be “other people’s business” to be read in the papers, it gets to “being part of yourself. You couldn’t keep out your feelings no more. It got mixed up with what you did” (White 1962: 288). By finding a moral justification for his character’s decision, White, as David Marr points out, “was drafting an unheroic formula for his own resolve” (Marr 1992: 200).

In the days of the Blitz in London, White is induced to think about the nature of heroism at war, scaling it down to a simple acceptance of the ordinariness and inevitability of death, as he appears to imply in a letter written to his New York agent, Naomi Burton: "I'm inclined to believe that heroism is probably also a myth and that the ones who go out and face death are as indifferent to it as the civilians who continue to work with the planes overhead, or at most, sit under the stairs with a cup of tea" (Marr 1992: 204). White's involvement in the war machine begins with his assignment to the Postal Message Scheme of the Red Cross, which helped members of families separated by war to keep in contact. His first approach to the factuality of war is therefore with the tragic personal and sentimental stories produced by it: families to be traced, lovers to be comforted, intimate messages to be delivered. When he is eventually appointed squadron Intelligence Officer of the R.A.F. and sent to the Middle East, Egypt and Greece, his duties continue to exempt him from active service. He is expected to pass on information of operations from the headquarters to the pilots of the squadron and then send back accounts; to retrieve any documents, maps, letters and diaries from the corpses of the enemies; to interrogate refugees to find out bombing targets; to censor the letters written by the airmen, most of which disclose, week after week, the tragedy of personal relationships falling apart. In short, to use David Marr's words again, "White fought a novelist's war" (Marr 1992: 203): it was his imagination as a creative writer that fed upon it, more than his loyalty as a heroic soldier. An opinion that is shared also by Bruce Bennett who, in an essay dealing with White's involvement in espionage during the war, lays emphasis on the connection between 'spying' and 'writing', stating that "many of the techniques of imaginative engagement and analysis required of the intelligence officer and the writer of novels are closely correlated" (Bennett 2010: 128).

"Hitler's War", as White will call it ever after, is the war of "that greater German megalomaniac" (White 1982: 104). But White's war is a war of ordinary human stories and consequent story-telling: enemies' stories, servicemen's stories, civilians' stories, the stories he cannot write, the stories that will come out of the war, the stories that keep him alive. Story-telling becomes in wartime a sort of survival strategy for White and it is, in a sense, his way to participate in the war even without experiencing actual combat and so, again, with no aspirations to heroism. White is not fighting for a cause. He is not fighting at all. Wearing a uniform is for him a matter of embarrassment, neither a source of honour, nor of pride, he feels the uniform is giving a wrong image of him, whilst inside it he is still himself. The sense of split identity caused by the war, the schizophrenic condition in which writer/officer, creativity/aridity, life/death coexist, emerges from the pages of a diary White kept for a few months while he was stationed on the West Coast of Africa: "Since joining the RAF I have lost what I know as myself. I want to say to the people who know me during this period. This is not I, I am somebody quite different" (Marr 1996: 36). The effect of the war is for the writer de-personalization, it is a sense of unreality, of "being

suspended in sleep somewhere between the living and the dead" (Marr 1992: 220). As Michael Ackland notes, a shared uniform, a common enemy and prescribed duties gave White only a "transitory sense of belonging", what the experience of the war enhanced, instead, was "his terrible sense of otherness" (Ackland 2002: 402). This feeling would accompany White for the rest of his life together with the anti-heroic perception that the war represented his loss of innocence. In a conversation with the Greek academic Vrasidis Karalis, a few years after White's death, Manoly Lascaris, White's life companion, refers to the war as to the main reason for their withdrawn life in Sydney. It was as a consequence of the impact and ravages of the war, in which they had both been involved, more than because of their homosexuality, that they had opted for a solitary existence: "Our chosen solitude was the only way to purify our existence from the stains of experience" (Karalis 2008: 133-134).

White's anti-heroic perspective is also evidenced by a recurrent feeling that accompanies his recollections of war, that is, the futile waste of time, the sense of time lost, "the long boredom and isolation of war in the western desert" (White 1982: 33). Boredom is described as "the worst enemy" (White 1982: 86) in the endless voyages from one post to another, when monotony and self-searching go hand in hand. "We are fighting this absurd war", he writes in his diary. "Absurd only in its necessity" (Marr 1996: 45). This sense of waste and apathy, divested of any heroic ambition, is contrasted by an insatiable thirst for reading, it is overcome by the books White devours when he is off duty. This is the real life to him, literature becomes in his words "the intact jugular vein of a life which must continue" (White 1982: 96). When the war is over, of course. In the so much longed-for peace in which he would finally be able to write the novels that were waiting in his mind to be written. Because if the war, as he admits, does not allow the brain to function creatively (Marr 1996: 34-35), still his nature of writer continues to emerge and so the pieces of information, of lives, of relationships scattered around by the war that he collects and puts together in his Intelligence reports become the seeds of his future novels (of *Voss*, of *Riders in the Chariot*, of *The Aunt's Story*) that will germinate when his creative will, frozen into silence by the war, will finally thaw in the warmth of peace. As White recollects in retrospect in his autobiography, "our activities were probably only of importance for the novelist in myself" (White 1982: 92).

As an officer entangled in the meaninglessness of warfare, White can only write letters, which help him face the sense of alienation and maintain the human relationships the war is disrupting, and very few short stories that allow him to give vent to his suffocated creative impulse. However, what he writes after the war is largely influenced by it. The war appears frequently, and since the earliest stages, in Patrick White's production but it is never described in terms of frontline fighting, killing and bloodshed. Instead of the heroic glaze which generally permeates the realistic accounts of war literature we find in White's references to the war a concern with more metaphysical

questions: the irrational nature of war, the sense of responsibility as human beings, the moral degeneration, the psychological side-effects, the sense of alienation and disease. Adding to this, as Brigid Rooney maintains, the experiences linked to World War II, and reflected in his writings, definitely contribute to shaping White's "visceral sense of apocalypse" (Rooney 2010: 5).

Starting with *Happy Valley* (1939), his first novel, written before the outbreak of World War II, it is soon evident that the Great War, introduced as just a vague experience in the background of the protagonist's youth, represents utmost futility. This is underlined by the 'embryonic' condition in which Oliver Halliday, who enrolls at the age of 16, remains closed for the rest of his life. The war is also the temporal frame of *The Living and the Dead* (1941), set in the span of time between the Spanish Civil War and the beginning of World War II, and tackling, as mentioned above, the issue of moral choice and human responsibility that makes one participate in a war in another country, fighting for foreign people. In *The Aunt's Story* (1948) the war, though remaining unmentioned again in the background of the second part of the novel, is to be interpreted as an objective correlative of insanity: the destruction of Europe brought about by World War II is implicitly paralleled to the fragmentation of Theodora's mind into madness. Metaphors of disease and mental derangement related to the war are to be found also in the genesis of *Voss* (1957), where the insane megalomania of the eponymous German explorer is derived by White from the conquering madness of Hitler. In *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) the war is epitomized by the madness of anti-Semitism and of the concentration camps where Himmelfarb is transported to, and its consequences are connoted with absurdity and irrationality through the lynching and mock crucifixion of the Jewish refugee many years later in Australia. In *The Vivisector* (1970) World War I represents for the young Hurtle Duffield an opportunity to escape from the oppression of his foster mother's near-incestuous love, but it turns out being an even more insane nightmare. In *The Twyborn Affair* (1979) World War II appears like the ultimate destruction of western civilization in the apocalyptic images of bombing raids on London, the apotheosis of corruption over the salvific transgenerational and transsexual regeneration of the protean protagonist, Eadie/Eadith/Eddie/Eudoxia. Eventually, the theme of the war also haunts White's final creative phase in his last, unfinished and posthumously published novel, *The Hanging Garden* (2012), sketching the story of two refugee children from World War II Europe to safe Australia, and facing the consequences of war in terms of disruption of family bonds and emotional wasteland.

In the short stories, where White's narrative bite is more sharp and immediate, the war – whether it is the Second World War or the 1922 sack of Smyrna (and the destruction of the Anatolian Hellenic community), of which he had direct knowledge from his life companion Manoly Lascaris and his family, and which represents a recurrent leitmotif in all his Greek stories – is presented as a destroyer of the spirit. In a story like "The Full

Belly", for example, the tragic dimension of the war is reduced by White to basic corporeal needs, especially hunger, that put virtue to the test and force characters to a slow, inexorable de-humanization and regression to the level of beasts. Again, White is not interested in writing the war as a piece of history, but in representing the personal tragedies, the individual facets, within the historical, collective event.

But what is definitely the most exemplary wartime story by White, thoroughly set in the context of World War II, and the only remaining creative piece written during this period, is "After Alep". The story, published in 1945 in the third series of *Bugle Blast. An Anthology from the Services*, and written when White was stationed in Palestine, reflects one of the most stagnant phases of the war for the writer. Taking part in an advance operation on Turkey, a feint to suggest to the Germans that the Allies' invasion of Europe might come through Anatolia, he got as far as Aleppo in a ramshackle train which then moved slowly into Turkey. The unreal, end-of-the-world atmosphere of wartime Aleppo, beaten by winter winds, is fictionally reproduced in the story in which the boredom and futility of war predominate and are reflected in the tedium of the protagonists, caught in a railway journey through the night and in the long expiring pauses *en route*:

Christ, it's a long wait, waiting to leave Aleppo, watching the Ankara Express go [...]
The rags wave on the roofs of the houses that nobody finished. As if they're so used to seeing what's tumbledown, they can't finish what they put up new. So the new houses in Alep finish off about the shoulders, and stand there waiting for more. They'll wait (White 1945: 147).

The story has no real plot and once again White focuses on the inner conflicts of his characters (reduced to ethereal voices and memories rather than physical presences), which are given additional depth through the use of the flash-back and the interior monologue. It is emotional privations, more than material hardships (although relevant themselves) that are emphasized, resulting in a story of psychological subtlety that neglects the typical elements of war fiction. The protagonists represent an ironic (and self-ironic) debunking of the war-hero fighting on un-heroic battlefields, in the rear, against abstract enemies, who are not less difficult to defeat: "We are the ones that fight the war in trains. The trains we fought in make many battlefields" (White 1945: 148), says the narrating voice underlining how the long-time stops from one station to the other and the never-ending journeys are their real enemies in this war that virtually imprisons them in a sort of "static movement". The time of private life that flies away is in sharp contrast with the time of the war that stands still. When Fred, the internal narrator of the story, is about to leave his wife and his civilian life, the minutes run fast on the clock, so that "you wanted to hold up that bloody clock while there was still time" (White 1945: 151) but when he travels with other soldiers from Alep to Tripoli, time becomes unbearably slow:

“if only you could shake up the clock” (White 1945: 151). Time is an enemy that does not threaten their lives and their bodies but tears their souls because there is no defence against its blows: “There’s no blood, but there’s just on everything else. Even the brave can die, many times over, waiting, counting up the years” (White 1945: 148).

Even the weapons of these un-heroic soldiers become insignificant objects, desecrated and deprived of their main function, they too symbolize the “non-condition” of these characters: a bayonet is carelessly dropped as the train jerks out, another one is used to beat the time of a song on the woodwork. Arms are useless and will not make them heroes: “It isn’t us wins the war, that’s certain”, sarcastically admits Arthur, with a certain disillusion.

The sense of detachment, of non belonging brought about by the war, emerges in this story through images of cultural alterity surrounding the characters, everything around them looks and sounds incomprehensible, impossible to assimilate, thus enhancing their sense of isolation and loneliness, and the difficulty to communicate or to establish personal relationships: “The egg-shaped mud houses” (White 1945: 150), the “strange [Syrian] faces [...] talking their lingo”, “The sharp words that you can’t understand” (White 1945: 153). The feelings of disruption and disorientation caused by the war seem to require a reaffirmation of origins and the need to get back to one’s family, to what was before Alep, even though only in memories, dreams and letters. Letter-writing is indeed ingrained in the structure of the story because, within the impressionistic sequence of blurred pictures reflecting the disconnected voices and thoughts of the four protagonists, White introduces the correspondence between Fred and his wife Lily as a story within the story that gradually reveals the breaking up of their marriage, a personal drama that White in his duties as a censor of letters knew all too well. The letters Fred receives from home are his only connection with life and, paradoxically, at the same time, they also cut the bond with his family by sentencing his sentimental life to death: “But it happened. I made my bed. Now, dear, I’ve sent the kids to Mum. Don’t you worry for Kitty and Tom. I’m going up to London, because that’s as how it’s got to be. Never thought it would come to this. Now, Fred, try to forget” (White 1945: 154). The war destroys, it makes things change and lose their shape, it leaves behind only uselessness and waste and the incapacity to understand.

The anti-war message deriving here from the focus of the narration on un-heroic sentimental failure is enhanced by White’s debunking of the centrality of war itself through the subversion of certain recurrent elements in war literature. First of all, the mateship usually associated in official war narratives to soldiers is ignored here, there is no sense of solidarity, of fighting for the same cause, of comradeship. The four characters share a constricted space, scarce and unpalatable food and physical hardships, but they do not really participate, emotionally, in each other’s lives, they are all closed in their own personal tragedies, in their loneliness, in their boredom. Even the idea of masculinity, so often shaped by war literature, is de-constructed by White in presenting a soldier as a

victim of his wife's unfaithfulness and unable to react in his suspended condition, waiting for something to happen, wondering what will become of him after Alep. Moreover, the virtues of endurance, fidelity, ingenuity, calmness, embodied by these four anti-heroes, are irreconcilable with the codes of behaviour of war ethics, like aggression, violence, hatred and revenge, to which instead they do not conform. Each of them has a different enemy to fight (or, simply, to come to terms with) in a diverse battlefield: for Arthur it is the gonorrhoea he has caught from an Armenian girl, for Percy it is hunger and homesickness, for Bill it is the lack of human warmth, for Fred it is the incapacity to save his marriage. There is no heroic view of war in a war that is just a background to stories of personal loss and powerlessness.

These narrative devices, in which motifs of futility and anti-heroism appear to be employed in support of an anti-war ideology, also convey obliquely a message of peace and above all the author's wish to give prominence in his narrative to human beings. In the 1980s White became passionately engaged and socially committed as a spokesperson to the cause of peace. He was a leading figure in the front line of many Palm Sunday peace marches in Sydney, where he was especially keen on stating the need to eradicate "the habit of war" (Flynn & Brennan 1989: 110). He also became involved in the nuclear debate and, as a sponsor to *People for Nuclear Disarmament*, he gave a series of lectures for the anti-nuclear cause. In one of these speeches, delivered at La Trobe University in 1984, White refers to the Russell-Einstein manifesto that exhorted to "remember your humanity and forget all other things" (Flynn and Brennan 1989: 161). In the words of these two 'apostles of peace' as he defines them, White finds a correspondence with his own idea of peace and war – the former as the life force of 'humanity', the latter as an expression of the meaninglessness of 'all other things' – and with his own way of representing them in his narrative: it is the humanity of the individual, no matter how frail it can be in a war context, that deserves to be given a central place in order to exorcise the horrors, the devastations, the adulteries of war, to foster mutual respect and create faith in life and humankind.

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