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# How to Tell the War? Trench Warfare and the Realist Paradigm in First World War Narratives

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## Abstract

This paper will analyze how memoirs and novels of the First World War reflect the challenges which modern warfare poses to realist narrative. Mechanized warfare resists the narrative encoding of experience. In particular, the nature of warfare on the Western Front 1914–1918, characterized by the fragmentation of vision in the trenches and the exposure of soldiers to a continuous sequence of acoustic shocks, had a disruptive effect on perceptions of time and space, and consequently on the rendering of the chronotope in narrative accounts of the fighting. Under the conditions of the Western Front, the order-creating and meaning-creating function of narrative seemed to have become suspended. As I want to show, these challenges account for a fundamental ambivalence in memoirs and novels which have largely been regarded as paradigmatically ‘realistic’ and ‘authentic’ anti-war narratives. Their documentary impetus, i.e. the claim to tell the ‘truth’ about the war, is often countered by textual fragmentation and a “cinematic telescoping of time” (Williams 29), i.e. by a structure which implies that such a ‘truth’ could not really be articulated. In consequence, these texts also explore the relationship between fact and fiction in the attempt at rendering an authentic account of the modern war experience. My examples are Edmund Blunden’s *Undertones of War* (1928), Robert Graves’s *Goodbye to All That* (1929) and the novel *Generals Die in Bed* (1930) by the Canadian Charles Yale Harrison, as well as German examples like Ernst Jünger’s *In Stahlgewittern* (1920; *The Storm of Steel*, 1929), Ludwig Renn’s *Krieg* (1928; *War*, 1929) and Edlef Köppen’s *Heeresbericht* (1930; *Higher Command*, 1931).

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## 1. The Ambiguity of First World War Narratives: Disorientation Versus the Claim Towards Authenticity

Comparing the books written about the Spanish Civil War to those from the war of 1914–1918, George Orwell remarked:

[...] the books about the Great War were by common soldiers or junior officers who did not even pretend to understand what the whole thing was about. Books

*Like All Quiet on the Western Front, Le Feu, A Farewell to Arms, Death of a Hero, Good-Bye to All That, Memoirs of an Infantry Officer and A Subaltern on the Somme* were written not by *propagandists* but by *victims*. They are saying in effect, ‘What the hell is all this about? God knows. All we can do is to endure. (108; original emphasis)

Orwell rightly saw that disorientation and stoic acceptance set the tone in many First World War narratives. However, these works also make an emphatic claim towards telling the ‘truth’ about the war, which clearly contradicts notions of passivity and utter bewilderment. This claim was of eminent importance with regard to interpretations of the war experience and their ideological significance in the political context of the 1920s and early 1930s. In Germany in particular, the struggle for political dominance in the Weimar Republic comprised a battle over interpreting the war between bellicist young nationalists like Ernst Jünger or Werner Beumelburg on the one side, and pacifists like Remarque, Ludwig Renn or Edlef Köppen on the other (cf. Bornebusch; Brückner; Travers). Struggling for sovereignty of interpretation, authors attempted to testify to their experience of the war and mediate between the world of the frontline and the contemporary experience of their readers. They were thus propagandists after all, besides victims, if maybe not in the straightforwardly political sense implied by Orwell. No matter how contrary their ideological intentions were, however, their attempt at conveying their individual image of the war to their readers relied on ‘realistic’ representation, and thus on a mode of writing that conveys notions of structure, purpose and agency rather than aimless disorientation. Considering Orwell’s pronouncement, there is thus a profound ambivalence in First World War narratives which derives from the fundamental contradiction between a sense of helplessness and “passive suffering”<sup>1</sup> on the one hand, and the claim (often explicitly expressed) towards ‘authenticity’ and ‘truthful’ testimony on the other.

In this essay, I want to show, upon the example of selected British, Canadian and German war memoirs and autobiographical novels, how the troubled question of ‘authenticity’ or ‘truthfulness’ with regard to First World War narratives must also be asked before the challenges which modern warfare poses to realist narrative. Mechanised warfare resists the narrative encoding of experience. In particular, the nature of warfare on the Western Front 1914–1918, characterised by the fragmentation of vision in the trenches and the exposure of soldiers to a continuous sequence of acoustic shocks (cf. Leed 126–131), had a disruptive effect on perceptions of time and space, and consequently on the rendering of the chronotope in narrative accounts of the fighting. Jan Mieszkowski has characterised the First World War as a total war which “no longer respect[ed] epic conventions of time, space and pacing” but which was “distinguished [instead] by radical discontinuity, as if with each subsequent day, hour, or minute the

proceeding began anew with no regard for what had taken place” (152). Indeed, it seemed that under the conditions of the war, and especially those of the war on the Western Front, the capacity of narrative to create order and meaning had been suspended: “A writer might experience the war, [but] he could not put his experience into a narrative form – a story with causal connections, direction, and a resolving ending – because that would give it the significance it did not possess, or did not reveal” (Hynes 106).

Trench fighting undermined important parameters of realist narrative: spatial orientation, linear chronology, causality, teleology and the assumption of a transparency of language with regard to its referential objects. The disintegration of these parameters is a vital factor contributing to the ambivalence in war memoirs and novels mentioned above, countering as it does those elements and techniques which effect coherence and a sense of purpose, and which are thus significant for the authentication of the narrative. These are, first, an emphasis on historical facticity (also in novels) which suggests a purely mimetic function, avoiding the impression of any attempts at ideological manipulation; second, the authority of direct experience established by the testimony of the *écrivain combattant* and, finally, the very ‘plain style’ of war narratives. These ‘authentication devices’ have helped to produce powerful cultural imaginaries, in particular the phenomenon which James Campbell has called “combat gnosticism,” i.e. the privileging of the frontline fighter’s perspective as the only ‘true’ perspective on the war, to the marginalization or even exclusion of others. A memorable example, which also illustrates the importance of plain style as an ‘authentication device,’ is the presumed identity of author, first-person narrator and protagonist in Ludwig Renn’s *Krieg* (1928). “Renn” is a private soldier, and the text accordingly renders a private’s perspective. However, “Ludwig Renn” was the pseudonym of Arnold Friedrich Vieth von Golßenau, who came from a Saxon aristocratic family and served in the war as an officer. The case of Renn/von Golßenau is instructive not only because of its emphasis on autoptic experience, including the implication that the perspective of the ranks (from ‘below’) provided the most representatively ‘authentic’ depiction of the frontline, but also because of its blurring of the boundaries between factual memoir, as signalled by the proffered “autobiographical pact” (Lejeune), and fiction. However, these boundaries must also appear as permeable because of the co-existence of contradictory elements in Great War narratives, namely disorientation vs. a representationally constituted ‘truth claim,’ a co-existence which hindered ‘storification’ in the sense of a causally and teleologically founded arrangement of narratemes. Conversely, the infringement or even disintegration of the ‘realist paradigm’ and of concomitant forms of *emplotment* enhanced the experiential dimension of narratives, i.e. the sense of a re-enactment rather than a coherent re-structuring *post festum* of fragmented and chaotic experience.

In the following, I want to look at the aforementioned parameters of realist narrative (narrated space, time, agency, and semantic transparency) and discuss

the impact that epistemological and psychological factors of trench warfare might have on them. My focus will be on the aesthetic and structural consequences this impact had for renderings of the war experience in (fictionalized) autobiographical writings of the First World War – consequences ranging from narrative fragmentation and ‘filmic’ montage to the emulation of theatrical farce. I am therefore concerned not with the socio-cultural sense making of trench warfare, but with its narratology. This is why I have chosen works that are consciously literary, as it were, and which indicate that their authors agonized over issues of representation, even if this means moving on well-trodden ground in the case of canonical writers like Aldington, Blunden, Jünger or Graves. The fact that these works were written by “junior officers” (in Orwell’s phrase) is primarily relevant not with regard to differences between their war experience and that of the ranks (indeed, these hardly existed when it comes to the experiential parameters of trench warfare outlined here), but mainly with regard to their ‘literary awareness.’ They had come to the frontline as nascent (and sometimes already published) writers with literary ambitions – well-educated volunteers, in any case, who had read much literature. Struggling for a style to express their experience of a war that was in many ways so different from everything they had read and heard about war, they scrutinized the literary tradition (including that of ‘realist’ writing); they turned against that which appeared inadequate and adopted what might be useful. My argument is that the experiential conditions of trench fighting engendered a re-living rather than a re-telling of experience in their retrospective accounts (all written at the distance of at least a decade from the events). The dynamics of such a re-living are manifest on the aesthetic and structural levels of these works, relativizing notions of the creation of meaning, from a temporal distance, in ‘epic’ form.

In her ground-breaking book on *Representing War* (1993), Evelyn Cobley analyses narrative techniques in First World War novels to show how “modes of representation generate critiques of the war which nevertheless remain complicitous with the Enlightenment values which the experience of war can do nothing but undermine” (3). She thus perceives a fundamental discrepancy in the novels between their subject matter and the rationalizing, explicatory functions of some of their narrative techniques. Unlike Cobley, I am not primarily interested in the ideological implications (and contradictions) conveyed by narrative structures, but in their psychological significance (i.e. in the way they reflect the conditions of the front as a psychological space), and in narrative as a cognitive instrument for ‘framing’ the trench experience. Relating to basic perspectives on human experience, cognitive frames become functional in the mediation of that experience in narrative discourse. In this sense, the narrative reliving of the front line in (autobiographical) accounts may be grasped in terms of the frame models proposed by cognitive narratology (see, for instance, Fludernik): while trench fighting tended to disrupt ‘telling frames’ dependent on parameters like chronology, causality and teleology, the ‘experientiality’ of First World War narratives might be enhanced

through the fragmentation of the chronotope and (in homodiegetic narratives) the blurring of boundaries between experiencing and narrating selves. These strategies emphasize a continuity of experience and narration despite the time-lag of the narrative act itself. As I shall try to show, narratological analysis may thus add important facets to a psycho-historical understanding of Great War narratives and their modernity, as well as to the still troubled issue of their ‘authenticity.’

## 2. The Realist Paradigm and Its Disruption by the Trench Experience: Narrated Space, Time, Agency, and Semantic Transparency

In spatial terms, trench fighting along most of the Western Front was characterised by fragmentation and a resulting visual and cognitive particularity. While the sites of battle had greatly extended, the individual soldier’s range of movement and vision were extremely limited. The visual limitations could only partially be compensated by the use of periscopes and aerial photographs, the latter being normally available only to the staff behind the lines.<sup>2</sup> The enemy, too, remained invisible most of the time: “As for men, they were seldom to be seen. For this was the peculiarity of the Western Front: The uproar seldom ceased and the number of men involved was countless, but the terrain seemed deserted” (Wolff 34). The resulting feeling of disorientation, and the impression that the fighting had come loose from the spatial coordinates of human action, are memorably expressed in Richard Aldington’s *Death of a Hero*:

The fighting was so impersonal as a rule that it seemed rather a conflict with dreadful hostile forces of Nature than with other men. You did not see the men who fired the ceaseless hails of shells on you, nor the machine-gunners who swept away twenty men to death in one zip of their murderous bullets, nor the hands which projected trench-mortars that shook the earth with awful detonations, nor even the invisible sniper who picked you off mysteriously with the sudden impersonal ‘ping!’ of his bullet. (292)

This ‘impersonal’ dimension of the fighting is also emphasised in the following passage from Ernst Jünger’s *In Stahlgewittern (The Storm of Steel)*. Arriving at the frontline, Jünger’s unit is for the first time exposed to artillery fire:

Das war so rätselhaft, so unpersönlich. Kaum, dass man dabei an den Feind dachte, dieses geheimnisvolle, tückische Wesen irgendwo dahinten. Das völlig außerhalb der Erfahrung liegende Ereignis machte einen so starken Eindruck, dass es Mühe kostete, die Zusammenhänge zu begreifen. (9)

This was so enigmatic, so impersonal. One hardly thought about the enemy in connection with it, this mysterious, insidious being somewhere back there. The occurrence, which was so completely beyond our experience, created such a strong impression that one was at pains to comprehend the connections. (trans. M.L.)

The spatial deictics in this passage (“irgendwo dahinten,” “außerhalb”) signify that which is beyond reach, physically and cognitively: the unknown or even uncanny. The inability to locate phenomena, literally and figuratively, as expressed in this passage, creates uncertainty and fear.

In a similar manner, yet with a different tone and emphasis, Edmund Blunden, in his *Undertones of War*, refers to the spatial fragmentation and resulting lack of a wider knowledge that characterised the soldiers’ experience. Like Jünger, however, Blunden makes it clear that it was difficult or even impossible for soldiers to ‘get a larger picture,’ literally and in the sense of a contextualised understanding of their situation: “What the infantryman in France knew about the war as a whole was seldom worth knowing, and we had little time or taste for studying the probable effect upon us of events beyond the skyline of immediate orders” (149).

The scarcity of visual points of orientation along the frontline, its spatial fragmentation and the corresponding disorientation of the soldiers, especially also in a figurative sense, was counterbalanced by an equally disorienting intensification of acoustic stimuli, an “uproar [that] seldom ceased,” as Leon Wolff has it (34). When asked to describe the acoustic sensorium of the frontline, Robert Graves famously replied: “[Y]ou can’t communicate noise. Noise never stopped for one moment – ever” (qtd. in Fussell 170). During protracted bombardments in particular, this continual exposure to acoustic shocks, together with the enforced passivity of the trench fighter, was liable to create extreme mental strain, as is underlined by Aldington, whose attempt to render the pandemonium of intensive shelling must needs take recourse, it seems, to onomatopoeia:

ZWiiiNG, CRASH, CLAAANG!

Minute after minute, hour after hour, day and night, week after week, those merciless heavies pounded the groaning town.

ZWIING, CRASH! CRAASH! CLAAANG!

It was too violent a thing to get accustomed to. The mere physical shock, the slap in the chest, of the great shells exploding close at hand, forbade that. They became a torment, an obsession, an exasperation, a nervous nightmare. (343)

During these situations, the spatial experience of the soldier wavered between extreme concentration, as he was doomed to immobility, and indeterminacy, as vision was largely precluded and the intensity of acoustic perceptions made it impossible to locate their origin. Since the First World War, the growing mechanization of battle and increasing spatial and quantitative delimitation of warfare have further heightened this fragmentary character of the individual war experience. Literary renderings of the spaces of modern battles therefore tend to be characterised by extremely disproportionate relations between the components of Elisabeth Ströker’s tripartite model of narrative spaces, “gestimmter Raum” (emotionally determined space), “Aktionsraum” (action space) and “Anschauungsraum” (perception space) as constituted by the feeling, acting and perceiving

subject. In the excerpts quoted above, emotionally charged ‘space’ is heavily dominant, while perception and action are severely limited. The fragmentation of spatial unity into multiple, disconnected (and disproportionate) spaces resists the narrative rendering of “embodied space” (de Certeau 115), that is, of space as a location where human experience and consciousness take on material form, as topographical places acquire meaning according to the actions of those who inhabit them. In terms of Michel de Certeau’s theory of lived space, spaces are “practised places,” since “space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, [and] temporalize it” (117). Orientation and situation (in the sense of a meaningful positioning through action) were hindered by the phenomenology of trench warfare, and the same applies to the temporalizing of inhabited spaces.

Even more so than the fragmentation of space, it was the disruption of a sense of time which worked against narrativising the frontline experience in terms of conventional realist narrative. Human experience is time-bound and, according to Paul Ricoeur’s model of mimetic levels as described in *Time and Narrative*, experience itself is narratively (pre-) structured (cf. Ricoeur 105–162: “Temps et récit: la triple mimesis”). In autobiographical discourse in particular, this time-boundedness correlates with the temporality of narrative. Modern warfare disrupts this nexus. It does so by imposing ‘machine time’ on human action and reaction, eradicating an individual sense of time. Mechanised warfare on the Western Front represented a negative version of the industrial process, as it were, with soldiers functioning as ‘workers of destruction.’ Analogically, the regulated machine-time of industrialised warfare, symbolised by the synchronization of watches among officers, eliminated ‘individual timing,’ thus constituting a monumental intrusion into human experience.

Typically along the Western Front, long ‘empty’ stretches of time spent in waiting or routine, alternated with extremely compressed moments of combat. The latter is rendered for instance in Blunden’s *Undertones* (“Time went by, but no-one felt the passage of it, for the shadow of death lay over the dial,” 169) and Aldington’s *Death of a Hero*: “For Winterbourne the battle was a timeless confusion, a chaos of noise, fatigue, anxiety, and horror. He did not know how many days and nights it lasted, lost completely the sequence of events, found great gaps in his conscious memory” (376). At another point in Aldington’s novel, however, George Winterbourne comes to feel that “[t]ime, like a torture, seemed infinitely prolonged” (303). The abstract, discontinuous time-structure of the battlefields prevented meaningful chronological orientation, causing soldiers to lose hold of their own sense of time and space. As a result, it also tended to deprive them of a sense of individuality and of their own significance:

He had forgotten the element of waiting, the deliberation necessary in moving vast masses of men about, which made the slow, ruthless movement of the huge war machine so inexorable. You hung about, but inevitably you moved, your tiny little cog



was brought into action. And this, too, was strangely impersonal, confirmed the feeling of fatalism. It seemed insane to think that you had any individual importance. (294)

Similarly, in *A Man Could Stand Up*, the fourth part of Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* tetralogy, Tietjens muses on the

[...] process of the eternal waiting that is War. You hung about and you hung about, and you kicked your heels and you kicked your heels: waiting for Mills bombs to come, or for jam, or for generals, or for the tanks, or transport, or the clearance of the road ahead. You waited in offices under the eyes of somnolent orderlies, under fire on the banks of canals, you waited in hotels, dug-outs, tin sheds, ruined houses. There will be no man who survives of His Majesty's Armed Forces that shall not remember those eternal hours when Time itself stayed still as the true image of bloody War. (569)

The specific time structures of trench warfare resisted the chronological structuring required in order to express experience in a narrative form (cf. Hüppauf, esp. 209, 219–221). In many First World War narratives, therefore, we find attempts at rendering the fragmented chronotope of the front through syntactic fragmentation, ellipsis and onomatopoeia on the one hand, and a characteristic form of the iterative on the other.

According to David Williams, many literary representations of the First World War are “governed largely by the implicit epistemology of film” (30), rendering a “cinematic form of memory” (6) which causes the past and the present to collapse in a “cinematic telescoping of time” (29). This modern technique characterises for instance the Canadian Charles Yale Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed* (1930). Harrison's novel disintegrates ‘realist’ chronology by using the present tense in a manner that emphasises an iterative rendering of events:

Endlessly in and out. Different sectors, different names of trenches, different trenches, but always the same trenches, the same yellow, infested earth, the same screaming shells, the same comet-tailed ‘minnies’ with their splintering roar. The same rats, fat and sleek with their corpse-filled bodies, the same gimlet eyes. The same lice which we carry with us wherever we go. In and out, in and out, endlessly, sweating, endlessly, endlessly [...]. (27)

Similarly, Ernst Jünger's fictionalised war diary *In Stahlgewittern* focuses on typical military actions of limited scope. There is no consistent chronological structuring, even if the chapter headings (mostly referring to the scenes of Jünger's deployment) provide a rough chronology, and individual events are often precisely dated. Instead, recurring situations are thematically summarised as typical battle action sequences (cf. Müller 222) or trench routine: “Das Leben im Graben war streng geregelt; ich zeichne hier den Verlauf eines Tages auf, wie achtzehn Monate

hindurch einer dem anderen folgte [...]” (45) [“Life in the trenches was strictly regulated; I here record the events of a day much like those which followed it, one upon another, during eighteen months [...]”; trans. M.L.]. In turn, the chaos of battle is rendered through a clipped, cinematic style. This also applies to the following description of an attack in Edlef Köppen’s novel *Heeresbericht* (1930):

Wie der letzte Rauch sich vom Boden gelöst hat, steht und liegt und kniet und kriecht und läuft und springt, graue lebendige Masse; der Feind. Und stürmt, Handgranaten hochgeschwungen, das Bajonett gereckt, gegen den Graben vor.

Da kläfft das Maschinengewehr neben Reisiger los. Da prasselt neben ihm Schnellfeuer aller Gewehre.

Herrgott, was geschieht! Dutzende von Franzosen werfen die Arme hoch und fallen rücklings zur Erde. Aber andere Dutzende dicht geballt drängen weiter vorwärts.

Die Feuer der Handgranaten zischen. Die Flammen der Artillerie rasen. Und: Franzosen, immer wieder neu: Franzosen: vorwärts.

Am Maschinengewehr schreit man durcheinander. Reisiger begreift kein Wort. (79–80)

As soon as the last of the smoke has lifted from the ground there stands and lies and kneels and creeps and runs and jumps, grey living mass; the enemy. And storms, hand-grenades wielded high, bayonets pointing, against our trench.

Then the machine-gun beside Reisiger starts barking. Then beside him rapid fire from all rifles is pattering.

Good God, what’s happening! Dozens of Frenchmen throw up their arms and fall backwards onto the ground. Yet dozens of others continue to press forward, tightly clustered.

The blasts of the hand-grenades are hissing. The flames of the artillery are racing. And: Frenchmen, always new Frenchmen: advance.

At the machine-gun there is confused shouting. Reisiger does not understand a single word. (trans. M.L.)

Koepen achieves immediacy through the use of the present tense, and extreme concentration through the paratactic style, parallelism and the use of polysyndeton that characterise the passage. Similar passages abound in the novel, as well as in Jünger and Renn. In the following example from Renn’s *Krieg*, the added use of onomatopoeia to render the noise of battle emphasises the bewildering simultaneity of sensory impressions:

S! S! Ss! führen die Gewehrkugeln immer näher.

Sch-pramm! Granaten hinter uns. Wir mußten gleich auf der Höhe sein und duckten uns. Rechts stand ein Geschütz auf der Höhe. Kanoniere schleppten Munition, schossen. Bramm! Bramm! Schwarze Wolken rings darum. Ein Mann wurde wie aufrecht nach hinten verschoben.

Vor uns schrie jemand: “Nicht einschieben! Wir liegen schon in drei Reihen hintereinander!”

S! S! Sch! – Preng, pamm! Rammss! krachte, zischte, zirpte es. Die Franzosen lagen wahrscheinlich dicht hinter der Höhe. (64)

S! S! Ss! The bullets swished by closer and closer.  
 Sch-pramm! Shells behind us. We were surely close to the top and crouched down.  
 On the right, there was a gun positioned at the top. Gunners dragged ammunition, fired.  
 Bramm! Bramm! Black clouds around it. A man was shifted backwards as if upright.  
 In front of us, someone shouted: “Don’t press forward! There are three rows of us already, one behind the other!”  
 S! S! Sch! – Preng, pamm! Rammss! it cracked, hissed, zinged. The French were probably right behind the ridge. (trans. M.L.)

In the following passage, narrative sequentiality and coherence seem to have been abandoned altogether in favour of a fragmented and quasi-simultaneous rendering of loosely connected associations and sense perceptions. Largely eliminating the mediating voice of realist narrative, the passage instead approaches an immediate rendering of events as reflected by an experiencing consciousness. This impression is further enhanced by the line breaks, which produce a staccato reminiscent of some of the German expressionist poetry, notably that of August Stramm, that was written during the war (cf. Löschnigg 116–123), while the plastic rendering of sense impressions and the ‘explosive’ dynamics of the scene evoke Ludwig Meidner’s foreshadowing of wartime destruction in his paintings of *Apocalyptic Landscapes* (1912). In any case, we are far removed here from the sequential order of realist narrative:

Ramm! App! Ramms! Karr!  
 Der Angriff mußte mißglückt sein!  
 Steinstückchen flogen umher.  
 Ich duckte mich tiefer ins Loch.  
 Was tut nur Hänsel noch draußen?  
 Es krachte und krachte, bald näher, bald ferner.  
 Graue Wolken von Einschlägen trieben über uns weg.  
 Es roch immer stärker nach Pulver. (216)

Ramm! App! Ramms! Karr!  
 The attack must have failed!  
 Chips of rock whizzed about.  
 I crouched deeper into the hole.  
 What is Hänsel still doing out there?  
 There was cracking and booming, now nearer, now more distant.  
 Grey clouds from impacts floated above us.  
 The smell of powder grew stronger and stronger. (trans. M.L.)

What needs to be emphasised about this passage is the fact that the narrating subject has largely been eclipsed by the object world, the ‘I’ being reduced –

except for one sentence reporting external action – to sense impressions and disconnected fragments of consciousness. The passage thus renders the loss of individual agency in face of the impersonal dynamics of the war machine. As Santanu Das has stated, “[t]he conjunction of underground trench warfare and industrial weaponry severed the link between space, vision, and danger which had been used to structure perception in conventional warfare: life now depended on the arbitrary direction of a shell, robbing the soldiers of any sense of agency or purpose” (75). The ‘soundscape’ produced by the massive deployment of high explosives and the ‘emptiness’ of the battlefield created the impression that the war had acquired a dynamic of its own. Due to its overwhelming scale, soldiers had very little or no knowledge of the larger connections of their actions, feeling like cogs in a giant machine: “Es war seltsam, zu erfahren, daß unser scheinbar wirres Tun in finsterner Nacht [...] dazu beigetragen [hatte], den mit so mächtigen Kräften begonnenen Angriff zum Stillstand zu bringen” [“It was curious to learn that our seemingly chaotic action in the dark of the night had contributed to stopping an enemy advance that had begun with such great force”; trans. M.L.], is what Jünger writes about his participation in the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917 (179). According to the testimony of memoirs, novels and other literature, soldiers in the Great War often seem to have felt that they were confronted (and killed) by powers they did not understand or, in Orwell’s words, did not “even pretend to understand” at all.

Depriving the soldiers of agency, the disorientation and enforced passivity of the war experience undermined the position of the narrating subject, counteracting the causal and teleological structuring of narrative. Edmund Blunden, for instance, explicitly states that “the experience to be sketched in [*Undertones of War*] is very local, limited, [and] incoherent” (“Preliminary,” xli). Accordingly, the structuring of the book opposes conventions of realism. There is, of course, the typical sequence from arrival at the front and initiation into the realities of trench fighting to the first major battle, yet beyond this, there is no configuration of events, i.e. no ‘plot’ or arc of suspense, no central conflict, no recognizable chain of causal connections. Instead, many of the episodes appear ‘randomly’ placed and exchangeable, ‘pictures’ or ‘vignettes’ rather than sequentialised elements in the trajectory of a chronologically structured narrative.<sup>3</sup> However, this lack of a plot carries within itself its own meaning, reflecting as it does the incoherence of the war experience itself, and of its memories. Indeed, Blunden may have felt that *emplotment* would have signified a retrospective attribution of meaning which the experience itself seemed to deny (cf. Erll 197). The characteristic lyricism of Blunden’s memoir (and also, at times, of Sassoon’s *Sherston* trilogy) thus serves not only the creation of strongly ironic contrasts with the author’s subject matter, but must also be seen, under different auspices, as an implicit rejection of a conventionally realistic narrativizing of the war experience.<sup>4</sup>

My last point is language: the realist paradigm includes, as one of its fundamental elements, the assumption of the referential function and transparency of language with regard to extra-linguistic reality. This element, too, was called in doubt by the war, as it seemed that “[t]raditional language and vocabulary were grossly inadequate [...] to describe the trench experience” (Eksteins 218). Remembering the frontline, Ford Madox Ford noted how he sometimes found it impossible to render his memories in words:

Today [...] simply to read ‘Ploegsteert’ or ‘Armentières’ seems to bring up extraordinarily coloured and exact pictures behind my eyeballs [...] of men, burst into mere showers of blood and dissolving into muddy ooze [...]. But, as for putting them – into words! No: the mind stops dead, and something in the brain stops and shuts down. (1999, 37)

Herbert Read wrote in his memoir of the war, significantly entitled *The Contrary Experience*, that there seemed to be between combatants and civilians “a dark screen of horror and violation: the knowledge of the reality of the war. Across that screen I could not communicate. Nor could any of my friends, who had had the same experience” (217). On the other side of the screen, too, it was felt that soldiers were undergoing what non-combatants could not comprehend. Thus, Vera Brittain noted in her *Testament of Youth* that the war placed “a barrier of indescribable experience between men and the women whom they loved. [...] Quite early I realized [the] possibility of a permanent impediment to understanding” (143). In war novels, too, the feeling that the war experience could not be communicated through words became a pervasive *topos*. In Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues*, Paul Bäumer comes to realise that the war experience cannot really be told (“[kann] nicht erzählt werden”) (119). Similarly, the protagonist in Köppen's *Heeresbericht* has to break off when asked by civilians to “tell them a little about the war” (“mal ein bißchen aus dem Krieg [zu erzählen]”): “[...] schon abgebrochen die Erzählung. Was wissen sie, was Krieg heißt! Was wissen sie, was schießen heißt. [...] was wissen sie, was eine Granate ist?” (51) “[...] the account broken off already. What do they know what war means! What do they know what shooting means! [...] what do they know what a shell is?”; trans. M.L.]. Trying to find words for unprecedented experience, writers often took recourse to metaphor, i.e. ‘non-transparent’ figurative language. This is illustrated by Blunden's description, with an added comment on the time gap and difficulty involved, of heavy guns as “tremendous iron engines, with gaping mouths; standing behind, if you could keep your eyes unblurred at the titanic sound of their speaking, you could see their mortal monosyllables of inferno climbing dead straight into the sky. But these metaphors occurred later” (151).<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Theatricality, Fragmentation and Montage: Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* and Edlef Köppen's *Heeresbericht*

In the following, I want to look briefly at two First World War narratives that illustrate very memorably the impact of the war experience on narrative discourse: Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* and the already quoted *Heeresbericht* by Edlef Köppen, published in 1929 and 1930 respectively. *Goodbye*, surely one of the best-known English accounts of the war, is a stylized, literary memoir that has been referred to as a "semi-fictional autobiography" (cf. Broich), while *Heeresbericht* is a novel with strong autobiographical elements, firmly rooted in the author's autoptic experience of the front line. It is perhaps one of the most remarkable novels of the war, even if still relatively little known.<sup>6</sup> An English translation, now practically impossible to come by, appeared in 1931 under the title *Higher Command* (literally, the title means 'Military Communiqué').

At the beginning of *Goodbye*, Graves assures the reader of the authenticity of his account when he points to his "readiness to accept autobiographical convention" (9) and thus to fulfil the "autobiographical pact" (Lejeune). However, we learn about the war sections of the book that they were originally conceived of as a novel: "In 1916, when on leave in England after being wounded, I began an account of my first few months in France. Having stupidly [!] written it as a novel, I have now to re-translate it into history" (79). This is not Graves's final say on the generic status of his text, though. Later in the book we read: "I made several attempts [...] to rid myself of the poison of war memories by finishing my novel, but had to abandon it – ashamed at having distorted my material with a plot, and yet not sure enough of myself to turn it back into undisguised history" (262). Graves's discomfort with a plot is noteworthy: structure, chronology and causality must have appeared inadequate to rendering 'authentically' the fragmentary and chaotic nature of the war. As a result, the war part of *Goodbye* consists of a sequence of loosely connected episodes, many of them anecdotal and intensively dramatized. The short, theatrically 'staged' episodes introduce stereotypical figures like sadistic drill sergeants or dotty colonels. Martin Seymour-Smith, Graves's first biographer, notes that the book is not "composed" (192), and that the lack of composition is an indication of straightforward factual accuracy. In contrast, Paul Fussell (203–220) regards the book as very consciously constructed, even contrived, yet not in the sense of the plotting of realist novels. Rather, Fussell speaks of "The Caricature Scenes of Robert Graves" and points to their indebtedness to the comedy of humours.<sup>7</sup> As it seems, *Goodbye* is characterised by a profound ambivalence. On the one hand, Graves's theatricality and recourse to literary models subtly relativise the non-fictional status of his narrative. On the other hand, it appears as if he avoided giving narrative structure to the chaotic, feeling that the *mise en scène* of the fragmentary and exaggerated was the only way of maintaining a claim towards a 'truthful' account of the war.

To tell the ‘truth’ about the war is the expressed aim of Köppen’s *Heeresbericht*. The novel portrays its protagonist’s progress from an enthusiastic volunteer to a conscientious objector locked up in a mental institution. Adolf Reisiger’s name echoes the late medieval word for a ‘rider’ or mounted warrior, but is also reminiscent of Karl Philipp Moritz’s *Anton Reiser*, a prototypical novel of development and estrangement from the late eighteenth century. For Köppen’s protagonist, in many ways the author’s *alter ego*, the war becomes an “education in disgust” (Trotter 40), typical of the anti-war novels of the late 1920s and early 1930s, and to pacifism. *Heeresbericht* thus represents a ‘negative Bildungsroman,’ a story about social alienation through the war experience as it is also expressed in the title of Graves’s *Goodbye to All That*.

In a detached tone, and through narrative fragmentation and montage, Köppen confronts episodes from the war experience of his protagonist with excerpts from documents like communiqués and reports, statistics, newspaper articles and political speeches. He thus explores the discrepancy between the realities of the frontline and the media images, between ‘authentic,’ individual experience and the totalizing and abstracting views of politicians and generals; above all, however, he underlines the necessity of seeing through the manipulation of attitudes in the public discourse. Köppen’s anti-war novel critiques the ‘monopoly of interpretation’ exercised by those in power, correcting the propaganda by means of an individual account, a ‘private’ military communiqué. The juxtaposition and interaction of the fiction and the documentary sources create a paradoxical effect: as Reisiger’s story unmasks the ideological distortions of the ‘truth’ in many of the documents, the reader comes to accept that story as the deeper ‘truth’ about the war. The authentic sources thus support in the negative, as it were, the fiction’s claim to authenticity.

While Graves is theatrical, Köppen is filmic. In addition to the cinematic effects of montage, the present tense in the narrative parts creates ‘filmic’ immediacy; also, the narrative renders multiple perspectives, which function as different ‘lenses’ on the events (cf. Schwering). Filmic analogies become explicit in an episode dealing with Reisiger’s leave, which brings home the gulf between civilians and the front. Back to the war, memories of home unwind before his eyes like a film, “zu schnell gedreht, ungeschickt geschnitten, [...] zu Bildchen, zu Fetzen zerrissen” (148) [“too hastily shot, clumsily cut. [...] torn to stills, to fragments”]; trans. M.L.]. As the narrative re-enacts a film tear, the significance of the cinematic style for the novel’s themes is drastically emphasised: like a film collapsing, meaning-creating structures break down in the war: “Nur Verstehen gibt es nicht mehr, gibt es nicht mehr. [...] Der Motor hakt, röchelt, spuckt, setzt aus” (52) [“There is no more understanding, just no more understanding. [...] The engine jolts, gasps, spits, stalls”]; trans. M.L.]. Köppen’s novel resembles the kind of ‘flash fiction’ also represented by William March’s *Company K* (1933), with its short testimonies by 113 narrators presented in chronological order. Both novels are

deliberately ‘modernist’ and metafictional. In any case, Köppen’s novel is more modern in style and technique than my other examples, yet these too clearly indicate the challenges mechanised warfare presented to traditional modes of narrative.

Emphasizing the modernity of these narratives, I am of course not ignoring that modernism in literature and the arts was well under way beyond the scene of war, too. However, it seems that here as in other respects the war functioned as a catalyst accelerating developments already existing before 1914 (cf. for instance Rabaté) – notably in the case of writers like Aldington or Köppen, who saw themselves as part of a literary avant-garde anyway. The exact nature of the relationship between the Great War and modernity has remained contested. There is consent, however, that the war embodied, in the words of Dan Todman, “a host of tensions inherent in the modern world – between technology and humanity, between state and individual, and between tradition and progress” (436). These tensions are manifested in literature, and literary (and other cultural) representations at the time and since have shaped paradigmatic views of the war as a force of modernity, illustrating, in the words of Randall Stevenson, “the extent to which later decades continued to live, and write, in ways the war shaped, remaining troubled by stresses in the modern world it first made inescapably evident” (225).

## Conclusion

The challenges that trench fighting presented to narrative produced in First World War memoirs and novels a dialogic (and sometimes dialectic) interaction between different elements of the realist paradigm. On the one hand, there were those that still functioned as authentication devices, like specificity, the emphasis on first-hand experience and a ‘plain style,’ on the other hand there were those that tended to be undermined by the sensory experience of trench warfare, first and foremost among them the realist chronotope. Ultimately, the disintegration of the latter in many war narratives may be said to have produced a hyper-realism which made narrative fragmentation appear as the adequate form for narrativizing the disruptive experience of war. Byron Good has argued that normally “[n]arrative succeeds” in deflecting the full impact of crisis “by ‘subjunctivising’ reality, by exploring the indeterminacy of reality” (153). There is some evidence in the writings of World War I combatants that this mechanism seems to have failed in the case of the war experience. As the narrative means of structuring the contiguity of experience, and of thus relegating experience to a ‘past reality’ that could be grasped became dysfunctional, the war was enshrouded in myth, and the front-line assumed the status of a hyper-reality that made the relevance of all other experience dwindle. As Siegfried Sassoon’s fictional *alter ego*, George Sherston, observes from an English war hospital, “[r]eality was on the other side of the Channel, surely” (525). Rendering the ‘reliving’ of experience through the



quasi-dramatic or filmic re-presentation of events, the war narratives here dealt with indicate that experience cannot be relegated to the past, as the narrator's capacity for giving structure and meaning to that experience has been defeated, as it were, by the chaotic nature and overwhelming scale of events. The texts I have discussed thus reflect the struggle for a new aesthetics adequate to a 'mother of all battles' (in the popular phrase) rather than a 'father of all things,' indicating a turning from 'war art' to a war against (the wrong) art and the traditional aesthetics underlying it.

## Notes

- 1 For W. B. Yeats (xxxiv), "*not a theme for poetry*" (original emphasis), and thus the reason to exclude Wilfred Owen from his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*.
- 2 This restriction of vision, incidentally, greatly added to the fascination with the fighter pilots, besides their anachronistic aura of chivalry and single-handed combat: theirs was the panoramic vision which the infantry in particular lacked (cf. Löschnigg 164–202).
- 3 It is significant, in this connection, that Blunden's book contains frequent references to painting, as for instance in the description of battalion headquarters as "a group of huts Rembrandtesque enough in their rustic structure" (50).
- 4 In the preface to the second edition of *Undertones*, he accordingly explains retaining the poems included in the first edition: "if they are of no other quality, they supply details and happenings which would have strengthened the prose had I not already been impelled to express them, and are among such keys as I can provide to the fuller memory" (xlili).
- 5 However, Blunden's example also reminds one of the linguistic vitality that was also created by the war, especially in soldiers' slang.
- 6 On Köppen, see Schafnitzel, Murdoch, and Vinzent, the only monograph so far.
- 7 According to P. E. Mitchell, however, the view that *Goodbye* is entirely farcical ignores echoes and correspondences between the pre-war sections and the war-passages, as "scenes are being reiterated in progressively darker contexts" (348).

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