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The Literature and Memory of World War I. Remarque, Aldington and Myrvilis: Fictionalizing the Great War.

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Charles L. Briggs, speaking about narratives of conflict, claims that “narratives constitute a crucial means of generating, sustaining, mediating, and representing conflict at all levels of social organization.”¹ Specifically, literary prose narratives about World War I mediate the war experience to inexperienced audiences and represent a unique net of conflicts that go beyond the traditional veteran’s description of hostilities with an enemy army. However, one should keep in mind that the war created two traditions of representation: one conservative, the authors of which hail the war for its maturing impact on the soldier and the nation, and feel proud to have partaken in it; another pacifist one, the authors of which consider the war a frightening experience and the death of all these people aimless. Of course elements of conservatism can be found in narratives officially known as pacifist, and the contrary. But the main point is that, as Ann P. Linder illustrates that the “tendency of the reading public to accept war narratives as true confers on such narratives an air of unimpeachable authenticity, an authenticity bolstered by the frequent use of first person narration and by realistic, even gruesome, description.”² It will be interesting to see how the authors use that in order to put their message about war across to the reading public.

This paper examines the basic characteristics of representation of conflict of those European prose authors whose novels about World War I are directly connected – but not identified – with personal ex-

periences of waging trench warfare. It would be impossible to examine all the author- soldiers' fictional accounts of World War I, but in order to give as rounded an image as possible I will be examining authors that come from different parts of Europe. The one is from Germany, Erich Maria Remarque, whose influential novel *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (translated as *All Quiet on the Western Front*) is fiction and personal testimony, and has influenced greatly the image of World War I in film and popular imagination in Europe and abroad.

The other novel examined in comparison comes from across No Man's Land; it's the novel *Death of a Hero* by an English poet and writer, Richard Aldington. To these two voices I would like to add another one, not from the Western front, but from the Balkan front, but one that engages with the same problems using similar narrative techniques; that is Stratis Myrivilis' novel *Life in the Tomb*.

One would expect narratives of war to deal with descriptions of hostilities between two enemy armies and two enemy peoples. However, the novels mentioned above describe indeed two sides engaging in hostilities but at the same time they point out that the soldiers are devoid of hatred for the ones fighting them from the other side; on the contrary, they insist that the real threat for the soldier lies elsewhere. The authors use the description of the hostilities among the armies as a means to unveil the real enemy of the peoples on both sides of the front. The real conflict is presented to take place between the soldier and the military establishment he fights for, as well as the ideologues responsible for the war. The authors convey that the war experience opened an abyss between the soldiers and all those at the front and back at home who keep the war going.

The conflict is an internal one; it never comes to the point of revolt or explicit indiscipline. Additionally, it never reaches the point of *catharsis*, of resolution; it is left as an open question. The authors' real purpose is to give a meaning to an extreme experience. "If their experience – and experience of the front is the defining element of their lives – was to have any significance, individually or collectively, they had to create that meaning themselves."³ And this process is performed through fiction. As Brian Murdoch points out: "History *has* happened, and there is no changing it. But a reflective literary

presentation of broad human events in a literary context can often be a valid way of interpreting those events."⁴

Thus, following Murdoch's claim, I will attempt to show how the pacifist author-soldier uses the literary context in order to widen the experience of World War I into an interpretation that carries broad human significance. I will now look at how the authors on the one hand represent the enemy soldiers, and on the other hand their own military establishment and officials. These are the key elements to the description of their idea of conflict.

In order to illustrate that the real conflict lies outside the battlefield, the narrative mode used is that of describing all close encounters with the enemy as warm and unthreatening. The descriptions of killing do not involve hatred, but the fear of being killed. The soldiers are shown acting out predefined roles, as pieces thrown on a chessboard. In that context the enemy soldiers are not to be loathed, but to be pitied, as people caught up in the same inescapable circumstances.

For example, in Myrivilis' case the official enemy is the Bulgarian army. Myrivilis describes an encounter with Bulgarian deserters: "Early this morning a group of Bulgarian deserters was delivered to us – one sergeant-major and seven men: an entire patrol."⁵

One would expect the Greek soldiers to be hostile against the soldiers fighting them from the other side. Of course there is a quick mention of interrogation from the army officials. But most of the narration is devoted to the discussion of the Greek with the Bulgarian soldiers, a discussion that is held in a friendly atmosphere:

After the initial interrogation the prisoners were apportioned to the various dugouts, for hospitality as well as surveillance. [...] The one brought to my dugout was the sergeant-major, Antony Petrov by name. [...] We gave him something from our rations; we brewed him some tea. For dunking we offered him half a loaf of our own bread: oven fresh, and ever so light and fluffy. He devoured it to the last crumb, the joy of eating spread across the whole of his broad face. Our ministrations touched him deeply and he strove to demonstrate his gratitude in every way possible.⁶

Myrivilis makes the soldiers speak with the Bulgarians about anything but war: their family; how they used to make a living before the war. And he describes that the Greeks making fun of the Bulgarians when the latter say that they used to grow roses for a living, the way friends would tease each other. When the conversation reaches the Balkan wars, in which Greeks and Bulgarian were also fighting each other, instead of expression of hatred and bitterness, both sides remember the hostilities, as if they are old comrades that fought on the same side:

He'd been in the Balkan Wars too; from 1912 until now his family had known him only as a visitor. He possessed two wounds from Greek Mannlichers. Received at Kilkish. One in the shoulder and one in the chest.

"İşte!"

"You see? That was a war, a really bad war."

"But that means we've met previously," I said to him. "I have two Bulgarian machine gun bullets in my leg." (I showed him the wounds.) "İşte!"

"They weren't from me," he replied with a thunderous guffaw. "I was never a machine-gunner." (Life 288)

Together, we reminisced about that terrible battle, recalling all the events as though they had happened just an hour ago. Three days and nights of uninterrupted massacre and struggle. [...]

Antony Petrov remembered all this extremely well. He kept clapping his hands upon his knees every few moments and exclaiming "Allah! Allah!" with relief.

He said that he would prefer to lay down his head and have his throat cut like a lamb, rather than have to go out again and fight. It is clear that this Bulgarian veteran "has seen war."⁷

The narrator points out in this quote that what these soldiers share as veterans is far greater than what divides them as enemies. That creates a feeling of comradeship beyond national borders and officially designated labels.

Remarque, for his part, makes his hero Paul Bäumer actually call a soldier of the foreign army *camarade* (= comrade). He describes that during an offensive he stabbed a French soldier when he jumped into the shell-hole he was hiding. As the soldier dies slowly by his side, Bäumer has to struggle with guilt.

The silence spreads. I talk, I have to talk. So I talk to him and tell him directly, 'I didn't mean to kill you, mate. If you were to jump in here again, I wouldn't do it, not so long as you were sensible too. But earlier on you were just an idea to me, a concept in my mind that called up an automatic response – it was the concept that I stabbed. It is only now that I can see that you are a human being like me. I just thought about your hand-grenades, your bayonet and your weapons – now I see your wife, and you face, and what we have in common. Forgive me, *camarade!* We always realize too late.⁸

Myrivilis also describes a scene where his hero stabs an enemy; but the description is more like a confession, rather an opportunity for self-glorification. He is trying to justify why he did it and how improper he finds that he was rewarded with a medal for his deed. The conflict here is between the hero's conscience and what is expected of him on the battlefield.

Aldington takes his narration a step further by not describing any close encounter of his protagonist with the enemy at all. He only mentions an instant during August 1914, before the outbreak of the war. His hero, George Winterbourne was dining at the private suite of a wealthy American and discussing about the rumors of an impending war. During dinner and conversation George notices the foreign waiters.

The white-gloved, immaculate Austrian waiters were silently handing and removing plates. George noticed one of them, a white man with close-cropped golden hair and a sensitive face. Probably a student of from Vienna or Prague, a poor man who had chosen waiting as a means of earning his liv-

ing while studying English. They both were about the same age and height. George suddenly realized that he and the waiter were potential enemies! How absurd, how utterly absurd! ⁹

Thus, if the soldiers on both sides are presented as not willing to fight with each other, where does the conflict lie? If the soldiers don't hate those across no man's land where is all their anger and frustration directed? The authors use their prose in order to convey that if one is looking for the ones they loathed will have to look in the opposite direction. The ones that plunged innocent people into slaughter are the ones that will benefit from it. Those people are every soldier's enemies. There is a feeling in all the novels that the fight should be against those starting and maintaining the war.

Myrivilis and Remarque present their protagonists' volunteering as the result of malicious propaganda. Their protagonists are portrayed as victims of their good intentions. Aldington on the other hand portrays a hero always aware of the intentions of the political leadership, who is not fooled for a minute from patriotic rhetoric. Nevertheless, George Winterbourne cannot escape the fate of his generation. It is an inevitable fate, the result of his ancestors' deeds and values.

Therefore, Aldington, throughout the whole novel, presents as his hero's enemy the society he comes from and the military establishment he serves in. His narrator illustrates: "As Winterbourne once remarked, one of the horrors of the War was not fighting the Germans, but living under the British."¹⁰ Richard Aldington deliberately begins his novel by describing his protagonist's family. This family is used as a type; it serves to show the Victorian society's hypocrisy and materialism. It would be appropriate here to apply George Parfitt's remark that "there are a number of novels of the war which use the memoir's convention of offering a life as an account of literal truth."¹¹ In *Death of a Hero* Aldington is not so much interested in shaping a rounded work of art; his main aim is to articulate a loud accusation against British society, and present his view as "an account of literal truth." Therefore, one doesn't come across the philosophic

despair of Remarque, or the quiet reflexion of Myrivilis, but one can definitely taste the angry feelings of a generation that felt cheated by its predecessors and its leaders:

On our coming of age the Victorians generously handed us a charming little cheque for fifty guineas – fifty one months of hell, and the results. [...] But it wasn't their fault? They didn't make the war? It was Prussia, and Prussian militarism? Right you are, right ho! [...] But never mind this domestic squabble of mine – put it that I mean the "Victorians" of all nations.¹²

In this quote Aldington includes all European youth in the victims and all their seniors in the victimizers. Or, as John Morris points out: "Such naked emotion has point and justification against a background of European betrayal. ... It is a vision of an international collusion of those who rule to destroy by total war all that is humane."¹³

The same idea of an international betrayal emerges when the protagonist of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Paul Bäumer reflects upon the Russian prisoners of war:

An order has turned these silent figures into our enemies; an order could turn them into friends again. On some table, a document is signed by some people that none of us knows, and for years our main aim in life is the one thing that usually draws the condemnation of the whole world and incurs its severest punishment in law. [...] Any drill-corporal is a worse enemy to the recruits, any schoolmaster a worse enemy to his pupils than they are to us.¹⁴

In this abstract Remarque explicitly says that the most crucial battle takes place not against the enemy army, but against the people who have power over him. Furthermore, to use Peter Hagbolt's words, "there is regret for the hatred between nations, anger at the use of dum-dum bullets, indignation over spiteful and false propaganda..."¹⁵

Indeed, as historians inform us, during the war

...newspaper illustrations captured key moments of battle, even under conditions of censorship; advertising campaigns appealed to war themes to sell products; and atrocity propaganda depicting sadistic, murderous, and shocking themes dehumanized and brutalized the enemy even as it simultaneously attracted and repelled its audience.¹⁶

Remarque on the contrary points out that the enemy soldiers are just as wretched as he and his comrades are, and the fact that they are fighting each other is because the people in power have decided that it will be so. The same people that would punish the murderer in time of peace turn the simple man into a criminal, by signing a piece of paper. In this context “age is no longer equated with wisdom or respect, the older generation are now regarded as ignorant, corrupt and both incapable of and unwilling to understand the real nature of this war.”¹⁷

Aldington states that explicitly through his protagonists’ mouth:

Now, either the various governments are all despicable intriguers ready to stoop to any crime and duplicity to attain their ends, in which case we shall certainly have a war, if they want it; or they’re more or less decent and human men like ourselves, in which case they’ll do anything to avert it.¹⁸

For the reader of 1929 this question has already been answered.

Similarly, Myrivilis makes the soldiers in *Life in the Tomb* to point out that: “We’re fighting because we have to; we have no choice. The Bulgarians aren’t after us; neither are the Germans. But behind our lines the court-martial is in session. That’s why we’re fighting.”¹⁹

There is hardly a chapter of *Life in the Tomb*, in which Myrivilis does not bitterly attack military authority. He describes how military superiors treat those below them. There are constant descriptions of how the soldiers are being humiliated, mistreated and exposed to unnecessary danger by the military officials. Their whims, need for distinction and broken nerves wreak the simple soldier. The author devotes two chapters to describing the trial for treason of three soldiers, obviously suffering from shell shock, and their consequent ex-

ecution. Myrivilis portrays the incompetence, conceit and harshness of those in charge. He especially gives an account of his protagonist’s General as a completely stupid and hollow man, only able to do anything right because of “the chief of staff and the adjutant at his side.” His protagonist exclaims: “When from time to time I reflect that this man holds in his hands the fate of twelve thousand souls, I break out in a cold sweat.”²⁰

Eri Stavropoulou points out that Myrivilis in *Life in the Tomb*, as in all his war novels “demystifies the ‘heroic’ war revealing its cruelty and insists on descriptions of horror; at the same time he points out the element of a personal tragic heroism of his small and insignificant characters. Their lives are sacrificed for a reason that, as is revealed in the novels, does not justify such a sacrifice.”²¹

Ultimately, the real enemy is War in all its industrial horror. The authors speak with fear and hatred against the impersonal machine that is killing them, while they are hidden in holes in the ground. As Eric J. Leed points out:

More than anything else, the common soldier in the First World War felt that the war increasingly was separate and distinct from his own purpose and motives. Even a brief encounter with combat made the “war” seem a sequence of events that was so much larger than the human beings who prosecuted it that it defeated any personalized perspective. Many who fought felt the detachment of the meaning and significance of their actions from themselves as a personal bereavement. It is this autonomy of events of war that most often lies behind the description of the war as a machine, an automaton.²²

The very nature of this war and its aimlessness is what the author-soldiers speak against. The military establishment, those in power back at home, they are all servants of this War which is another expression of “mass industrial age voraciously devouring men and materials in a self-perpetuating system.”²³

Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that the authors under examination are not revolutionaries. A.F Bance’s comments on *All*

Quiet on the Western Front could be applied to all of them : they present “a very generalized pacifism, not a detailed programme but something akin to a pious wish for international amity ...”²⁴ Their aim isn’t to encourage revolution or indiscipline; their protagonists stick to their positions on the front until they die. In my opinion, this is where the meaning lies; in the death of the protagonists. It serves to symbolize a “meaningless and irreparable loss of an ideal past and a hopeful future.”²⁵ Death is the only outcome; it is an invisible, inner death that kills first idealism, respect for society, and any confidence in the achievements of civilized man. It leaves man an empty shell before killing his body.

Concluding, I would like to point out that the novels mentioned in this presentation are the way Richard Aldington, Stratis Myrivilis and Erich Maria Remarque chose to handle and come to grips with their close experience of the Great War. Narrative functions as a ground on which to elaborate ideas about conflict and to come to terms with the traumas that the war has left behind. The novels become a place on which to expose conflict, but also to come to terms with it.

Maybe there is an ultimate aim behind the They are not an attempt to write History; however they are an endeavor to influence History. As Donald Brenneis comments: “Narration is not solely referential [...]; it does more than help us make sense of conflict. In the telling, that is, in narrative events, it also engenders and transforms social experience.”²⁶ Under this light, one ventures to say that the authors under examination give a specific account of World War I in order to influence the image of war for the generations to come. Their aim is to create those intellectual circumstances that would prevent the European nations from plunging again with happy innocence into a senseless slaughter. The Great War experience is presented as an archetype for the conflicts of the twentieth century, not only on the battlefield, but also on the social and on the personal arena. It is illustrated that the real enemy is not always an obvious one. And if one keeps in mind that the pacifist tradition of Great War’s representation is the one prevalent in our time, this would be the most important indication of the authors’ continuing relevance.

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Notes

- 1 Charles L. Briggs, (ed.), *Disorderly Discourse. Narrative, Conflict and Inequality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p 3
- 2 Ann P. Linder, *Princes of the Trenches: Narrating the German experience of the First World War*, (Columbia: Camden House, 1996), p 47
- 3 *Ibid.*, p 19
- 4 Brian Murdoch, 'Paul Bäumer's Diary: Im Westen Nichts Neues, The War Diary and the Fictionality of the War Novel', in Brian Murdoch, Mark Ward, Maggie Sargeant (eds), *Remarque Against War: Essays for the Centenary of Erich Maria Remarque 1898 – 1970*, (Glasgow: Scottish Papers in Germanic Studies, 1998), pp. 3 – 23 (p 23)
- 5 Stratis Myrivilis, *Life in the Tomb*, (London: University Press of New England, 1987), p 285
- 6 *Ibid.*, p 286 – 287
- 7 *Ibid.*, p 288-289
- 8 Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, (London: Vintage, 1996), p 157-8
- 9 Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero*, (Ottawa: The Golden Dog Press, 1998), p 173
- 10 *Ibid.*, p 193
- 11 George Parfitt, *Fiction of the First World War: A Study*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p 7
- 12 Richard Aldington, *Death*, p 177-8
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- 14 Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet*, 137
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- 17 Caroline Martin, 'The Conflict of Education: Soldiers, Civilians, a Child and

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- 18 Richard Aldington, *Death*, p. 173
- 19 Stratis Myrivilis, *Life*, p 299
- 20 *Ibid.*, 127
- 21“... απομυθοποιεί τον «ηρωικό» πόλεμο, αποκαλύπτοντας την σκληρότητά του και υπερβάλλοντας στην περιγραφή της φρίκης, τονίζει όμως παράλληλα το στοιχείο ενός ατομικού τραγικού ηρωισμού των μικρών και ασήμαντων ηρώων του. Η ζωή τους θυσιάζεται για ένα σκοπό, έστω κι αν αυτός, όπως παρουσιάζεται στα σχετικά πεζογραφήματα, δεν δικαιώνει μια τέτοια προσφορά.” Στο Έρη Σταυροπούλου, *Οι Βαλκανικοί Πόλεμοι στην Πεζογραφία του Στράτη Μυριβίλη*, (Αθήνα: Εταιρεία Ελληνικού Λογοτεχνικού και Ιστορικού Αρχείου, 1993), σ. 373. Eri Stavropoulou, *The Balkan Wars in Stratis Myrivilis' Prose*, p 373
- 22 Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land. Combat & Identity in World War I*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p 34
- 23 A. F. Bance, 'Im Westen Nichts Neues': A Bestseller in Context, *Modern Language Review* 72(1977) 359-73, p 364
- 24 *Ibid.*, p 365
- 25 Ann P. Linder, 'Landscape and Symbol in the British and German Literature of World War I', *Comparative Literature Studies* 31:4 (1994): 351-369, p 358
- 26 Donald Brenneis, 'Telling Troubles. Narrative, Conflict and Experience', in Charles L. Briggs (ed.) *Disorderly Discourse. Narrative, Conflict and Inequality*, (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 41–52 (p. 49)