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## The (In)Visibility of War in British Novels of the Twentieth Century

From Antiquity onwards, war has been one of the most important topics of literature – just think of Homer's and Vergil's depictions of war and its consequences in their two great works, the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. Though difficult to depict in genres like plays, war remained a popular topic in most literary genres. Of course, the degree of (in)visibility of war seems to lend itself more to a representation in the visual arts, in photography, painting, video and film. I want to argue, however, that literature can and does deal with war in very interesting ways, and that its presentation fulfils a host of various functions especially in novels, which can provide insight into our ways of treating – and avoiding – the horrors of war throughout the centuries.

In the following, I want to delineate four different ways of dealing with the two world wars in British fiction of the twentieth century. In two sections (part I and IV), I shall deal with canonical texts which show different ways of exploring the topic of war, which, nonetheless, is often not of primary importance to the novels.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly enough, though, the presentation of wars takes centre stage in two subgenres or larger bodies of texts which were very popular at the time of their publication: the novels published during the 'War Literature Boom' at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, and those stories (be they novels, biographies or autobiographies) that deal with the 'Battle of Britain' – those conflicts fought out mainly by pilots during the summer of 1940, when Hitler tried to invade Great Britain. Although both bodies of texts were (and partly still are) hugely popular, they have largely been neglected by literary critics, since they – specifically those pertaining to the Battle of Britain – do not belong to the canon. Moreover, both genres differ greatly in the presentation and interpretation of war. In the following, I deal with these different strands of literature and present four stories of the depiction of two wars in British literature.

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1 If we look at the second part of the century, and if we include the lives of civilians who become entangled in warlike actions, we encounter a few outstanding novels by authors like Ian McEwan, Michael Frayn or Rachel Seiffert; the depiction of war plays a more prominent role, however, in a number of historical novels of lesser renown, which I will not deal with here; see, for instance, Paul Scott, *The Raj Quartet* (1966–74); to which he later added *Staying On* (1977) as a 'postscript', or William Boyd, *An Ice-Cream War* (1982).

# 1. The First World War, Part I: Fragments of the Canonical Story

The First World War certainly seems to be a subject matter of outstanding importance. This war, in which more people were killed than in all the wars of the nineteenth century taken together, was a traumatic experience for many Britons, and an important catalyst for the discarding of Victorian values. Many Britons felt they were witnessing a harsh and decisive break in history; they experienced something which Samuel Hynes has called 'the sense of a gap in history' (Hynes 1990: xi), a gap which made it impossible to revert to the comparatively ordered and meaningful world of the nineteenth century. As well as other Europeans and Americans, Britons had joined this war, which was to cost 650,000 lives on the British side alone, enthusiastically, quite often harking back to medieval values of chivalry; they expected heroic fights, even duels between fighter pilots. The reality turned out to be different; and with the death of tens of thousands in the battlefields of the Somme, elation gave way to desperation. As can be witnessed in the works of the 'war poets' of the time, the first response was mainly favourable – which is embodied in those works which Rupert Brooke managed to write before his early death in 1915<sup>2</sup> – and then gave way to an increasingly critical stance, for example in poems written by soldiers like Richard Aldington, Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon. The literary reception of the war in poems thus began as early as 1915, and is still recognised in literary histories, which usually consider those canonical works.

The poems published between 1916 (the beginning of the critical reception of the war) and 1918 also influenced the later perception of the war. They established the image of the 'lost generation',<sup>3</sup> a generation of promising young men who were sacrificed for a meaningless war, a generation which died on the battlefields or came back traumatised, unable to deal with the requirements of their new civilian lives. This image also marks the presentation of the war in the writings of 'high modernism', in which the war is certainly to be found, though nearly invisible.

Key topics like propaganda, death, and traumatising are present in works like T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). The very first lines 'April is the cruellest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land' (Eliot 1988: 29) refer not only to

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2 His sonnet 'The Soldier' ('If I should die, think only this of me:/That there's some corner of a foreign field/That is for ever England') became immediately famous (cf. Brooke 1974).

3 See, for instance, Owen 1987.

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, they also point to the First World War – at the beginning of the 1920s everyone knew that most of the drawn out attacks on the Western Front were launched in spring. The depiction of war is even more pronounced in Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* (1924–28), which is set during the war and places the relationships between the main characters in front of a scenery marked by times of war. But in spite of this, the war is not put centre stage, it rather serves as a backdrop against which the experiences, deceptions, sufferings and feelings of the main characters are placed.

A different approach to the war is marked out by two novels by Virginia Woolf, which at first sight seem to have nothing at all to do with the First World War: *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). In *To the Lighthouse*, the war is all but invisible. Nonetheless, it is mentioned in a strange, but memorable way in the experimental middle section of the novel, 'Time Passes'. Whereas the first and the third part of the novel deal with the lives and experiences of the Ramsays and describe one afternoon and one morning in their summer house on the coast of Cornwall, the very short second part is concerned with the passage of roughly ten years. In contrast to Woolf's usual concentration on the perceptions, thoughts and feelings of her characters, in this passage, very few human beings are present. It mainly consists of a description of the summer house slowly falling into decay. Events in the lives of the main characters are only given in brackets, which pertains to the war as well: '[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.]' (Woolf 1927: 207).<sup>4</sup> Although the war makes itself felt even in the remote village, it is shut off by the narrating instance, which refuses to deal with the sorrow and suffering of the remaining members of the family. Even the number of the victims seems to be of no interest – though the carelessness with regard to the dead also highlights the disregard of the lives of individuals among in charge.

The war is more important, albeit at first sight nearly invisible, in Woolf's earlier novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, the social criticism of which was masterfully pointed out by Alex Zwerdling as early as 1986.<sup>5</sup> As the first critical reactions to this novel show, the importance of the war is easy to miss. After all, the plot takes place on one day in June 1923, five years after the end of the war, and it revolves around

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<sup>4</sup> See also: '[Mr. Carmichael brought out a volume of poems that spring, which had an unexpected success. The war, people said, had revived their interest in poetry.]' (208) The middle section also gives fleeting sayings and thoughts of characters like the charlady, who are invisible in the other two parts.

<sup>5</sup> I owe many of the ideas in the following passage to this path-breaking book.

the perceptions, impressions and memories of a few characters in London. Clarissa Dalloway, the protagonist, mainly thinks of her past and her earlier feelings for Peter Walsh, whom she is going to see that evening; if it is possible to make out another focus of her thoughts, it is the great party she is going to give in the evening. Nonetheless, the war is present in a number of ways, the most important of which is embodied by Clarissa's double, Septimus Warren Smith. Though she never meets Septimus or gets the chance to talk to him, she is connected to him not only through the characteristics they share – such as the love of poetry, and their ambivalent attitude to privacy and communication. Moreover, at exactly the middle of the day and the middle of the book (page 104 of the Hogarth Press edition, which has 208 pages) they are mentioned in the same sentence:

It was precisely twelve o'clock; twelve by Big Ben; whose stroke was wafted over the northern part of London [...] and died up there among the seagulls – twelve o'clock struck as Clarissa Dalloway laid her green dress on her bed, and the Warren Smiths walked down Harley Street.

The Warren Smiths have to be there in order to meet a doctor – for Septimus is, without anyone knowing it, shell-shocked. The reader has encountered his strange perceptions before, without being able to understand him or knowing why he thinks and sees things which cannot actually have happened. When he is first introduced as a pale man wearing a shabby overcoat, we are confronted with the sentence 'The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?' (17), which can in retrospect be understood as the question Septimus asks himself at that moment. His perception of a passing motor car illustrates his difficulties:

[A] curious pattern like a tree, Septimus thought, and this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him. The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. (18)

Later on it becomes clear that he is somewhat disordered – he thinks that trees and leaves are alive, is beckoned by branches, talked to by birds, and met by someone called Evans, whom nobody else seems to see. This is contrasted by the plight of his wife Lucrezia, whom he married during the war in Italy; she is worried but still unable to understand, and clings to the statement of his physician, Dr. Holmes, that there was 'nothing whatever seriously the matter with him but [that he was] a little out of sorts' (25; see also 27). It is only half-way through the book that readers realise what lies behind Septimus' troubles:

[W]hen Evans was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him. It was sublime. (96)

But by that time the reader has learned to distrust Septimus' opinion of himself. His situation is definitely not 'sublime', and he is anything but 'feeling very little and very reasonably'. His attacks of panic, which are rendered in a disturbing way, without any comments, come more and more often, and he obviously lives in a world of his own, in a world to which the laws of nature do not apply. This moving history of Septimus is given even more importance in one of the rare generalisations of the heterodiegetic narrator of the novel: 'London has swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith; thought nothing of fantastic Christian names like Septimus with which their parents have thought to distinguish them.' (94)

Moreover, the novel makes it very clear that at present there is no hope for those soldiers who have been shell-shocked. When Septimus goes to Harley Street, he is met by a thoroughly materialistic, narrow-minded physician oozing conventionality and self-complaisance. In this case, the narrator is even more explicit, reverting to the old rhetorical figure of personification in order to characterise Sir William Bradshaw's principles: 'Proportion, divine proportion, Sir William's goddess' (110), who is helped (and made worse) by her 'sister', 'Conversion' (111). Septimus' story ends with his suicide, which marks his rational attempt to get rid of the tyrannical treatment meted out to former soldiers by ignorant officials. The inadequacy and inhumanity of this is emphasised at the end of the book, in Clarissa's epiphany, in which she divines Septimus' fate, and in the tittle-tattle at the party, when people talk about a parliamentary bill in which provisions for the shell-shocked are to be included.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the war is not an actual presence, but a memory. Memories have destroyed the ability of Septimus to deal with his surroundings, and memories mar the lives of characters who are only thought of fleetingly: 'The War was over, except for someone like Mrs Foxcroft [...]; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; but it was over; thank Heaven – over' (6). This attitude of negating the continuing presence of the war is, however, undercut by the way it is presented; the war has not ended for many characters, and a sentimental attitude that is embodied by a Mr Bowley, who has tears in his eyes when he sees loyal citizens in front of Buckingham Palace, is not going to help at all: 'poor women, nice little children,

orphans, widows, the War – tut-tut’ (23).<sup>6</sup> Memories of the war, many passages of the novel show, still wield a destructive influence, and to ignore them does injustice to relatives as well as serious damage to veterans. It is therefore questionable whether Samuel Hynes is right when in his influential book on the First World War he claims that ‘one fact was accepted – that for most of the Twenties the war had not been significantly imagined, in any form’ (Hynes 1990: 424).<sup>7</sup> The war is imagined – but not in the way we are led to expect.

## 2. The First World War, Part II: The All But Forgotten Story

Hynes’ statement makes sense, however, when one compares the ‘literary’ novels of the 1920s to those works about the war that were published from the late ’20s onwards. Though this is usually not deemed worthy of consideration in most literary histories, at that time war literature began to form a subgenre of its own in several Western countries. The continuing presence of the war began to give rise to a veritable ‘War Literature Boom’, of which Erich-Maria Remarque’s *Im Westen nichts Neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front* [1929/1929]) is still quite popular; and literary texts became part of a more encompassing debate on the war.<sup>8</sup> Many works fulfilled one of the following two functions: they either reflected processes of memory or they influenced or even created them.

While the classical works of ‘high modernism’ mostly reflect, modify or criticise existing memories of the Great War, the ‘War Boom’ novels of the late 1920s and ’30s served to create new ways of remembering the traumatic experience. In the hundreds of war novels published in Europe and the United States, the war is not presented obliquely, but made visible in a very immediate way. This focus on

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6 In *Mrs. Dalloway* the war also mars the life of the governess of Clarissa’s daughter, Miss Kilman, who, because of her German background, lost her job as a teacher during the war scare and now finds it difficult to fit in.

7 The First World War continues to be a topic for ‘literary’ novels and short stories. Quite often, there are different concerns as well. Barker (1991–95), for instance, provides an account which is full of details as far as the daily life of those times is concerned; she even tells the story of the meeting between Sassoon and Owen in a hospital. However, Barker is mainly interested in the experiences of women, and in their way of dealing with (and mastering) the challenges and difficulties brought about by the war.

8 The following account is based on Erll (2005: 237–50). A more detailed account is given in Erll 2003.

the war is in tune with the life of the 'Golden Twenties', which, looked at closely, were not marked only by a rise in consumer culture. After all, most families had lost some of their own; many women mourned for sons or lovers either lost on the battlefield or traumatised beyond recognition. Wounded veterans were seen everywhere in the streets, and deprivation and suffering had scarred the lives of those who went on living after 1918.

In this atmosphere, the war – or rather, conflicting memories of the war – became the focus of a 'war books controversy', in which a host of people were concerned with the question of whether the novels presented a 'true' picture of the war. Whereas early spy novels and 'mainstream-fiction' like John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* (1906–21)<sup>9</sup> used the war as a setting and an ingredient, novels by authors like Erich-Maria Remarque and Frederic Manning centred on the war itself. They formed a subgenre that attracted a huge interest in Europe and the USA – between 1928 and 1930 hundreds of war novels were published and translated for a reading public eager for war stories. In Great Britain, these novels largely embodied a pacifist view,<sup>10</sup> which differs from the films popular at the time. What is important about these novels is that they were understood as interventions in a more general critical debate about the war. The participants in this controversy were not just novelists, but also politicians, teachers, journalists, veterans and many others whose lives were still being influenced by the war. The main issue was the degree to which particular books were able to convey an 'authentic impression' of the wartime experience. As the heated debate shows, literature was expected to fulfil a specific function and tell the 'true story' to those who had not participated in it and re-create as well as shape the memory of the war. Whatever their literary merits may have been and whatever their authors may have intended, these novels about the war came to function as media for the formation and transformation of collective memory (cf. Erll 2003). The story they tell is, roughly, the following: a young soldier arrives at the (Western) front, fights, loses some of his best comrades, is disillusioned and either dies or comes back to a society into which he does not fit any more.

One challenge was provided by the heterogeneity of the war. On the one hand it was a major historical event, an event that was part of world history. At the very

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<sup>9</sup> Though nowadays the works of Woolf, Joyce and others are deemed canonical, at the time more conventional writers like Arnold Bennett and H.G. Wells were more renowned. John Galsworthy was even awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

<sup>10</sup> This may be due to the political atmosphere; Prime Minister James Ramsay MacDonald (1929–31) even appointed a pacifist as minister of war; and important politicians like Winston Churchill (who played a quite different role in the Second World War) showed themselves not to be in favour of the war.

least, the topic of the 'lost generation' had to be considered. It did not make sense to remember the war only with reference to a personal history; the larger frame of the collective memory had to be taken into account as well. On the other hand, placing the war into a general, more abstract frame of collective memory and national history did not make sense; it had to be remembered as an individual experience as well. This challenge is met in different ways in different subgenres, but all of them are characterised by an attempt to relate individual experiences to larger frames of reference, such as a 'British tradition'.

One attempt at telling the 'truth' about the war is marked by literary memoirs of those who had been soldiers themselves, authors like Edmund Blunden (*Undertones of War*, 1928), Robert Graves (*Good-bye to All That*, 1929) and Siegfried Sassoon (*Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 1930). All of these make use of the genre of (fictionalised) autobiography, telling their lives in a very personal way, establishing themselves as individuals who want to provide insight into their lives and to account for their actions. As autobiographers they show themselves willing to be judged by the audience, and it might even be said that they need this recognition.<sup>11</sup> The communicative mode is thus a very personal one; it is marked by homodiegetic narration, that is by a character who has been part of the story he tells, allowing his audience to participate in his personal memories. The mode of narration is realist in Ian Watt's sense of 'formal realism', giving many details which serve to invoke the impression of reality, and providing insights into the daily life of the soldiers and the atmosphere pervading their lives at the front. These details pertain to the frame of the individual memory; they seem to authenticate personal experiences.

On the other hand, these stories are related to a more general, collective memory. There are a host of intertextual references to the style and genre conventions of the pastoral, and to specific works of literature which belong to that tradition, which is thought to be typically English.<sup>12</sup> Sassoon's work evokes the time-honoured ideal of the English Gentleman, thereby referring to a way of life that was felt to be particularly English. The 'gap in history', the perceived radical break with the past is bridged in these works which link the memories of the war with an old British tradition. It has to be noted, however, that Victorian ideals, particularly hero-worship and the glorification of doing one's duty for one's

<sup>11</sup> This new view of the autobiographical pact, which takes into account theories by Paul Ricoeur, Judith Butler and Jerome Bruner, is both elucidated and illustrated by Schäfer (2011).

<sup>12</sup> Often, this is not even done in a very serious mood; Graves' text in particular parodies the genre in a way which nearly turns the war into a farce. This might seem to be disrespectful, but it can also be related back to Shakespeare.



country, remain anathema; the connections with the past refer to non-military ideals and to values and genres which belong to the sixteenth and eighteenth century, which were remembered – in contrast to the seventeenth and nineteenth century – as periods of peace and stability.

The novels which fictionalise life at the front also use the conventions of memoirs: They evoke the effect of truthfulness, trying to establish an *effet de réel*, providing many details of daily life as well as using the register, dialect and even slang of the soldiers. This was done with great efficiency by Frederic Manning in his *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929), which gives the impression of providing a truthful account of soldier experiences. The main character is even called 'John Bullock', and thus reminiscent of 'John Bull', the stereotype of the typical Englishman, which was used in countless stories and caricatures lovingly poking fun at ways of thinking and behaving that were thought of as English. The use of the name harks back to the eighteenth century, which abounds with caricatures of John Bull, but in addition to that, numerous intertextual references to key texts of British literature – in particular Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – place Manning's work in a tradition which promises stability and continuity.

Probably the most striking characteristic of the 'war books controversy' was the heterogeneity of the positions that were taken. The old generation had a different stance than the younger one, the degree of involvement in the military action (front life of soldiers, military leadership, civilians) led to quite disparate views on the war, and social class, ideology and even the gender of the participants in the debate contributed to divergent perspectives on the 'truth' of the war. It was a field of hotly contested memories, and each group had their own views on who was allowed to think of themselves as belonging to the 'lost generation', and who was to be held responsible for the suffering. Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (1929), for instance, reads like an accusation not only of the older generation which had sent their children into a meaningless war; it also acidly blames those who did not take part in the suffering at the front: the civilians, women, and young men who stayed at a home that Aldington marks as 'feminine'. Aldington is probably writing against those successful modernist writers who stayed in England – such as T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, and Ezra Pound – who were mostly non-combatants. These authors are not only exempted from any claim to participating in the 'lost generation', they are even characterised as enemies.

In spite of the particular writers who probably were the targets of Aldington's novel, the work functioned as a catalyst, widening the gaps between the camps of those who wanted their suffering to be remembered by the following generations. Women tried to make their contributions known as well, as Evadne Price did (alias Helen Zenna Smith) in the novel *Not so quiet ...* (1930), which places itself in the tradition which Erich Maria Remarque had established in his internationally

best-selling novel. The many different viewpoints which were antagonistically presented – be it in favour of soldiers, civilians, women, the young or the old generation – and their involvement in the debate turned the stories of the war into sites of contest. The novels fought over and established diverse memories, thus changing the image the war had previously acquired almost beyond recognition.

### 3. The Second World War, Part I: The Omnipresent But Neglected Story

Memories of the Second World War are fraught with contradictions as well. There are innumerable perspectives on the conflict, and the remembrances of soldiers and civilians as well as of other witnesses – for instance women – do not add up to a coherent whole with regard to this war either. But in contrast to the memories of the First World War, which had been contested, but which were united in their critical attitude to the war and emphasised the suffering of those who had come into contact with it, the Second World War, which was even more destructive, costing even more lives,<sup>13</sup> has been partly idealised.

In the following, I will refer only to the memories of aerial warfare to which the positive representations are restricted. While the battles fought on the ground turned out to be very difficult to idealise, aerial combat has been cast in narratives dominated by the notion of ‘knights of the air’. The pilots appear as heroes in the traditional pattern of warlike masculinity, sporting technical competence and unwavering bravery as well as a strict code of honour. The most important event that served to permeate the myths about the pilot and aerial combat was the ‘Battle of Britain’, which took place in the summer and autumn of 1940, when the Royal Air Force successfully warded off the German bombing campaign. It was mostly fought by very young pilots who were instantly immortalised.<sup>14</sup>

The texts and genres that idealise the Battle of Britain are manifold.<sup>15</sup> Since the patterns, stereotypes, plot lines, ways of characterisation and prevailing metaphors are of a striking similarity, the following examples will draw on different

<sup>13</sup> The Second World War was, in terms of the soldiers dying in it, five times more deadly than the Great War. See Kennan (1999: 3).

<sup>14</sup> In this context, Churchill’s famous words played an important role: ‘Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few’ (Churchill 1940).

<sup>15</sup> The following passage is the revised version of a lecture that Jochen Mevius and I held at a conference about the visibility of war in Schloss Rauischholzhausen, in the summer of 2005. Mevius (2009) wrote an outstanding dissertation about this topic.

genres and include (auto)biographies and works of children's literature which appeared between the 1950s and the turn of the millennium – and quite a few of the details I discuss here pertain to popular war films as well.

An important feature of all of the idealised accounts is the invisibility of violence. Metaphors of sport and hunting are employed to gloss over the fact that human beings are the victims of combat; furthermore, the material is manipulated in such a way as to suggest that violence has only been directed against machines. In the recently reprinted biography of Douglas Bader this use of metaphors comes to the fore:

'O.K., chaps,' he called. 'Take this quietly. Don't attack until I tell you.' Rather like a huntsman who has sighted shy game, he began stalking them turning [his squadron] south [...]. Still the Germans weaved in a ragged undisciplined tangle like unwary rabbits at play.

[...]

Only McKnight was quick enough to fire; he caught one as it darted in front and the 109 did not lift its nose like the others but went tumbling down the sky like a broken thing that had lost the grace of flight (Brickhill 2001: 230, 235).

What is involved here is a double concealment: First, the act of aggression is cast in terms of sportsmanship, evoking the impression that the battle is merely a game. Secondly, the death of the pilot is erased; what is mentioned instead is the falling down of 'a broken thing that had lost the grace of flight' – and thus not worthy of preservation. The human body in the machine is invisible; the machine itself is not even cast as an animal – which would be in concord with the beginning, where the metaphors of the huntsman and of the 'rabbits' establish the field of hunting – it is just 'a thing', and a broken one at that, one that is not worth anything any more. This combination of metaphor and metonymy is typical for quite a number of idealised versions of the Battle of Britain: Metaphors of sport imply fair competition, while the broken machines stand metonymically for the wounded bodies of dead pilots.

The nature of the fight is often treated as a highly individualised affair, with opponents seeking each other out and fighting as equals. Most accounts present some basic rules of fairness; they even re-introduce the notion of the duel into modern combat. In his novel *Spitfire Parade* (1941), William E. Johns presents a typical depiction of such a fight:

His third victory that day was a straightforward duel which was won fairly and squarely by superb flying and accurate shooting, and only after the longest and most difficult combats in all his experience. The victim was a Messerschmitt 109; the pilot was cruising about, apparently looking for trouble in much the same manner as Biggles. They spotted each other at the same time and turned towards one another, so there was no question of pursuit.

The German seemed to be as anxious for conflict as Biggles [...]. Not that he minded. If the Hun were a better man than he – well, it would be just too bad (Johns 1952: 216f.).<sup>16</sup>

This depiction highlights the individual opponents, who adhere to an ethics – and aesthetics – of combat unrelated to the cruel reality. It is suggested that both men are eager for the fight; both are ‘looking for trouble’. Moreover, uneven numbers or the quality of the machine or of the weapons do not seem to play a role, it is just ‘a straightforward duel’, which is won by the one who is the ‘better man’, who is the more competent pilot and the better marksman. Wounds or death are not only invisible here; they do not come into the story at all. The possibility of death is not even mentioned, it is erased and substituted by ‘[i]f the Hun were a better man’, and this, ‘well, it would be just too bad’.

Moreover, fictional accounts use a number of devices to downplay the losses. In many narratives, only a few pilots are wounded in action – and more often than not, these events are in retrospect even given a positive interpretation. What is more, the wounds inflicted are neither disfiguring nor lasting (cf. Johns 1952: 136, 180). Certain injuries which were common to pilots – such as large scale burns – do not occur.<sup>17</sup> If the death of a fighter pilot is presented at all, it is usually depicted as quick and painless. The romanticised image of the individual pilot plunging to doom makes it possible to construct narratives that invest death with dignity and grandeur. Furthermore, according to fictional genre conventions in the kind of popular literature that is analysed here, it is highly unusual to let a character who is central to the narrative die, which provides quite a number of characters with an aura of inviolability.<sup>18</sup>

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**16** Although Richard Hillary deconstructs a number of myths of the Battle of Britain in his autobiography, he sums up this view on aerial warfare in a similar vein: ‘I realized in that moment just how lucky a fighter pilot is. He has none of the personalized emotions of the soldier, handed a rifle and told to charge. He does not even have to share the dangerous emotions of the bomber pilot who night after night must experience that childhood longing for smashing things. The fighter pilot’s emotions are those of the duellist – cool, precise, impersonal. He is privileged to kill well. For if one must either kill or be killed, as now one must, it should, I feel, be done with dignity. Death should be given the setting it deserves; it should never be a pettiness; and for the fighter pilot it can never be’ (Hillary 1998: 97).

**17** See for instance Higgins (1999), for an account that depicts heavy losses and other elements jarring with the myth – like friendly fire – but skirts the issue of injury and disfigurement.

**18** Other characters also become ‘unkillable’, as notions of genre and reader expectations prevent their demise. For the mechanisms rendering literary characters open or immune to victimisation, see Fraser (1976, 51–83).

The idealisation of the Battle of Britain also relies on the image of individual pilots. There are three aspects of this image which have to be taken into consideration: Firstly, the pilot is bestowed with many attributes of the heroes of adventure tales; secondly, he becomes a character that transcends the military hierarchy, and thirdly, the group he belongs to is presented as an ideal society of equals. The construction of the pilot as a mythical character often begins with the depiction of his appearance. Even in autobiographical accounts, many characters appear as prototypical heroes:

Another squadron of Spitfires had already arrived, their pilots sipping mugs of tea in a group nearby. Bader strolled over and asked 'the form' from a slim, handsome flight lieutenant, elegant in white overalls and with a silver name-bracelet round his wrist. 'Haven't got a clue,' said the debonair young man, who had aquiline features like a matador, a thin black moustache and a long, exciting scar down the side of his face, the type of young blade, Bader thought, who would make a young girl think of darkened corridors and turning door handles (Brickhill 2001: 169).

In (auto-)biographies as well as novels, pilots sport a traditional image of masculinity: They are courageous, fair, friendly and loyal – with the usual trappings, such as good looks and elegance thrown in. Even if they are disfigured – which is a quite unusual feature – this only adds to their attractiveness; the scar is 'exciting', and its description is followed by the sexual desire that kind of man would arouse in young 'girls'.

More important, however, is another kind of attraction: the attraction that flying has for the young pilots.<sup>19</sup> This involves a change of perspective, which shifts from the pilot as a combatant to a harmless civilian who loves flying. This effect can be enhanced by various techniques; sometimes the peace-time occupations of the pilots are stressed, and sometimes the sheer beauty of the view:

What a sight! The colour, the different shades of green of fields and woods, the bright roundels on the Spitfires; this is something very close to my idea of beauty. No doubt I would incur the derision of the self-styled intellectuals and pacifists, but I bet they have never felt as totally happy and wonderful as I do at this moment. This is what being a fighter pilot is all about. (Wellum 2002: 108)

The 'fighter pilot' is thus turned into an aesthete appreciating the beauty of the view, someone who is able to do something many young people dream of, someone who is innocuous and at ease with his surroundings. 'This is all what

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<sup>19</sup> See Deere (1999: 14f) and Wellum (2002: 4) for examples.

being a fighter pilot is all about.' War, death, and suffering have become invisible in the face of the visibility of the beauty of the British landscape seen from above.

In most narratives supporting an idealised image of the Battle of Britain, the group of pilots forms a closely knit community, while at the same time respecting each other. Problems that might cause tensions between the individual and the group are either successfully dealt with or become invisible. Cowardice, nervous breakdowns and rivalry between pilots – problems which were quite common – are treated in the same cavalier fashion as disfiguring wounds; they do not occur.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, in numerous books pilots appear as mythical characters outside the boundaries of the military structure. In order to be compatible with the ideal of Englishness, many features of which are embodied in the positive image of the Battle of Britain, the heroes have to be shown as individuals, not as members of a standardised, highly regulated air force. In keeping with the English distrust of strict hierarchies, pilots are generally depicted as 'officers that do not take kindly to discipline' (Johns 1952: 11); the conformity necessary to the military remains invisible.

While it has been frighteningly easy to find contemporary popular British responses to the Battle of Britain which are still marked by the kind of idealisation depicted above, it has been rather difficult to come up with contrasting views which deconstruct this quite obviously one-sided and untruthful account of the war. This is not to say that the idealised accounts uniformly sport all the features of the myth; they rather select some, and interpret some others in a way which is in keeping with their genre and does not seriously impair the idealisation of the Battle of Britain. The depiction of violence, for instance, may appear more drastic, and the narratives of the knightly duel may give way to representations of aerial sniping and ambush,<sup>21</sup> but heroic pilots are still at the core of most popular narratives, preserving a myth that seems to be exempt from the horrors of war.

Popular, critical responses to the Battle of Britain are rather rare. So far, I have only been able to make out Derek Robinson's long novel *Piece of Cake* (1983), which has also been turned into a successful TV series, and seems to contradict each and every facet of the idealised account of the Battle; and the Julian

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20 In mythic representations, there are no events that incapacitate a pilot or tear up a group. Especially fear and cowardice remain unrepresented, the only exception being characters who manage to get the better of their weaknesses. See Johns (1952: 162–82) for a prototypical account of such a metamorphosis.

21 This might be in keeping with a general trend towards the more blatant depiction of violence and a less pejorative attitude towards violence on the part of the (reading) public.

Barnes novel *Staring at the Sun* (1986), which, however, only deals with the war in passing. In spite of revisionist accounts like those of Barnes and Robinson, it has to be born in mind that the overwhelming majority of narratives about the Battle of Britain are still informed by the myth of a heroic fight. There is a steady output of accounts that perpetuate the idealised image and align it to the needs of a changing audience without altering its core elements. As far as popular presentations of the war are concerned – for instance in films and computer games – the myth of the heroic battle survives more or less unscathed. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that many idealised narratives of the battle are still very popular and have been reprinted dozens of times.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. The Second World War, Part II: Fragments of a Canonical Story

Since there are nearly no negative descriptions of the Battle of Britain, Barnes' revisionist stance is worth looking at, even though only short episodes of his novel deal with the Second World War. At the centre of those, however, is the deconstruction of the image of the pilot as a hero. It becomes clear quite early that Sergeant-Pilot Prosser suffers from severe psychological damage – he is unable to face combat again. Being small and non-descript, rather unfriendly and not very communicative, Prosser does not live up to the expectations of the family, into whose home he has been quartered. But Jean, the daughter, only blames herself when Prosser does not behave in the way expected of him: 'Perhaps heroes who flew Hurricanes required special questions' (21). Later on, Jean has to learn that even the most successful actions of pilots are unfair. When a German pilot once acts according to the image of the duellist, Prosser's reaction is derisive: 'Who d'you think you are? Bloody knight in armour?' (27)

When asked what bravery is, Prosser can only come up with haunting images which do not include a scrap of 'fucking dignity' (28). Only his early vision of a pilot's ideal suicide seems to conform to the idealised depiction of the 'glorious' way for a pilot to die:

When the whole thing started I used to see myself somewhere near Dover. Sunshine, seagulls, the old white cliffs gleaming away – real Vera Lynn stuff. Anyway, there I'd be, no

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<sup>22</sup> For a detailed account of those works, which analyses a huge number of novels, (auto)biographies, histories and children's books, see Mevius 2009.

ammo, not much juice left, and suddenly a whole squadron of Heinkels comes along. Like a great swarm of flies. I'd intercept, get right in among them, fuselage like a colander, then I'd pick out the leader of the battle group, fly straight at him and smash into his tail. We'd both go down together. Very romantic (Barnes 1987: 28ff).

When Jean thinks this is 'very brave', he debunks the heroic image by summarising it as both stupid and wasteful.

Prosser is eloquent, however, on the subject of fear, which does not only affect the psyche but also the body – and he makes it quite clear that there is no way to recover from it:

Then comes the bit when you start to notice it. Probably because you notice other people noticing it. [...] So you think, I'm not having them calling me windy, so what you might start doing is drift off from your formation, get into a bit of cloud and fire your guns. [...] I didn't crack – at least, not how everyone thinks of it. Things just run out after a while. The stocks are exhausted. There isn't anything left. People tell you it's just a question of having a break and recharging the batteries. But there are a lot of batteries that won't recharge. Or not any more (Barnes 1987: 48–51).

The rather rare use of the second person singular in this passage can fulfil two different functions: on the one hand, this mode directly addresses the protagonist Jean (and, at one remove, the reader), thus making it possible for her to identify with him. On the other hand, it displaces his own memories; putting a distance between himself and the 'you' of the narrative, it marks Prosser's attempt to dissociate himself from the person who experienced such humiliating fears.

Barnes' revision of the popular image of the pilot as a hero is rather exceptional. More often than not, 'literary' novels concentrate on the battles which are fought on the ground and on the experiences of soldiers as well as civilians. I would like to argue, though, that these are only rarely the most dominant topics of such novels, which are often concerned with a host of other issues as well. The Second World War is at the centre of four novels that I will discuss at least briefly. Martin Amis' *Times' Arrow* (1991), Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Michael Frayn's *Spies* (2002), and Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room* (2001).

Amis' novel has been praised as a daring and successful experiment; it deals with the horrors of the Holocaust, which are neither invisible nor belittled in this work. The impression of the war is quite different from all the other representations in contemporary narratives, because Amis turns the chronology of events upside down; 'Times' Arrow' is given a different direction, and what has happened first is narrated last. Thus the people dying in the gas chambers get their lives back during the novel, and children retreat into their mothers' wombs. The presentation of the Holocaust is achieved by a complete turn of the events, which



may arguably be an appropriate way of trying to face its horrors, which defy any description within the usual narrative frames. Above all, however, *Times' Arrow* is an experiment in the presentation of history, and an experiment in the narration of time, which raises questions which go beyond even the terror of the Second World War.

There is no 'typical' way in which the Second World War is presented in 'literary' novels, but one could argue that Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) and Michael Frayn's *Spies* (2002) deal with it in two contrasting, but, nonetheless, somewhat similar ways. In *Atonement*, the description of life during the war – both of a common soldier fighting in France and of a nurse stationed in England – takes up a large space. The atonement alluded to in the title does not refer to a war crime; on the contrary, the greatest, and, in terms of its consequences, the worst mistake the protagonist Briony makes as a child happened just before the war, when she misjudged a situation involving her sister and a young man, which she saw from the window. Due to her false, but nonetheless sincere accusations, the young man falls into disgrace and is subsequently imprisoned; he is recruited without being allowed to see the woman he wants to marry again. Slowly Briony realises that she has ruined the life of the couple, and vainly tries to atone for her mistake throughout her own life. Interestingly, the book is presented in a modernist way of narration, with Briony as the most important focalizer. Due to its multiperspectivity, however, we also get long passages from the point of view of the soldier trying to come back to England. The presentation of war, with the rather high probability of the two lovers never meeting again, certainly plays a large role. Arguably even more important, however, are the more general topics of guilt, atonement, memory and the role of art. In the last part of the novel, 'London 1999', the narrative mode changes to a homodiegetic narration, told by the old Briony, who has turned into a novelist, remembering and musing about what has happened and how she dealt with her largest problem 'these fifty-nine years': '[H]ow can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? [...] There is nothing outside her. [...] The attempt was all' (McEwan 2002: 371).<sup>23</sup> The war is thus narrated from a distance, through the lenses of several instances: the various focalizers who experience the horrors of the war at the time, the heterodiegetic narrator who largely remains covert but who nonetheless orchestrates and narrates what happens, and the old

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23 There are numerous other implicit and explicit metafictional comments in the novel. Briony also raises the question of the truth of the lovers' fate, suggesting that the reading public would not tolerate their not meeting again (cf. McEwan 2002: 370). For a very good discussion of the main features of this novel see Wolf (2001: 291–311).

Briony, who turns out to be the homodiegetic narrator and writer of the novel. What is more, the focalizer Briony turns out to be unreliable: her description of the lovers' meeting after the war never took place 'in reality', since the soldier died in France; it is just the older novelist's fantasy, who inserted this episode into her 'novel within the novel', which seems to be the only way for her to assuage her guilt.<sup>24</sup>

In many ways, Michael Frayn's novel *Spies* (2002) stands for a different approach to the war. Again, the war provides the setting for the huge bulk of the novel, and its effects on people's daily life are given in some detail. However, the protagonist of Frayn's work self-consciously tries to evoke and remember what happened during the war in retrospect. Similar to Kazuo Ishiguro's protagonist and narrator Stevens in the novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989), the narrator takes a journey and slowly finds out what he did not understand at the time itself; by trying to catch and narrate fleeting memories, he establishes 'some order in it all, some sense of the connections' (Frayn 2003: 6). Evoking the atmosphere of the time and trying to truthfully narrate what he saw as a child, the old Stephen is able to make sense of his former impressions, which, at the time, seemed to vacillate between an exciting spy novel and a bewildering experience: through the attempt of putting his memories into words, he slowly realises his part in a tragic constellation, involving a love affair and the precarious existence of a deserted soldier, who literally went underground. The daily life of civilians under the conditions of war forms the backdrop of this novel, which is presented through the distorted lens of a young and imaginative child, who deals with the rather harsh surroundings by placing the events in the frame of an adventure story. Again, the consequences of the war are visible, but they are both distorted by the perspective of Stephen as a child and by his belated conscious attempts to evoke what, he fears, no other living being may remember. Since everything is both recalled from memory and filtered by the old Stephen who wants to understand his own role in what happened, the novel seems to revolve around his reflections on the workings of memory and his ways of coming to terms with his past (and, again, his involuntary mistakes) rather than daily life in times of war.<sup>25</sup>

Rachel Seiffert's approach to the war in her novel *The Dark Room* (2001) differs rather pointedly from the works discussed so far, since she places centre stage the suffering induced as a consequence of the Second World War. Her narration is more fragmented, for she tells three different stories which are not

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of the narrative situation in *Atonement* see Phelan (2005: 322–36).

<sup>25</sup> This turn from (national) history to the (individual) memory of events seems to be a recurrent feature in contemporary British literature. See Birke (2003: 143–58) and (2008).

linked by particular characters or events, an incoherence which highlights the fragmentation of the experience of war. The first two stories narrate the lives and sufferings of children during the time of war; the first one revolves around the fate of Helmut, a partly disabled child, who helps a photographer, and, unlike his parents, survives a bombing in the dark room which provides the title of the book, and the second tells the story of Lore (who is the focalizer of this story) and her four siblings, who fend for themselves and manage to travel from the south of Germany to Hamburg, where they are finally met and – as far as is possible – cared for by their grandmother. Those two parts of the novel thus highlight the many deprivations, difficulties and extraordinary sufferings of a number of children, who, apart from their afflictions, have little in common: Helmut, who is not very capable and intelligent, stays alone in Berlin, while the lively, self-sacrificing Lore looks after her siblings during her odyssey through wartime Germany. The third story approaches the war from a different angle: here, the protagonist Micha becomes obsessed with the idea that his grandfather, whom he had always thought of as a loving and caring man, might well have been a war criminal. The importance which he attributes to that suspicion and his subsequent attempts at finding out the truth seem, on the one hand, to be the only honest way to deal with the situation and, in the end, acknowledge – and atone for? – the guilt of his grandfather. On the other hand, Micha's quest not only upsets the life of the people he visits in order to question them (who turn out to have been collaborators), he also neglects his pregnant girlfriend Mina and his own family as a result of his obsession. Thus, even the life of the second generation after the war is marred by this traumatic event.

There are three aspects of this novel that I would like to emphasise: firstly, more than the others I have discussed here, Seiffert's work centres on the bewildering, fragmented experiences of the war itself, particularly on those of children who suffered without even understanding why their lives were uprooted in such a radical way. Secondly, the novel does not point to anyone who might be made responsible for the war. It rather highlights the pains of those who cannot be blamed, at least not within the framework of the story. Interestingly, those that have to go through the most traumatising experiences could be held responsible as well – if it were not ridiculous to hold children who knew nothing of their parents' doings responsible for them. Lore and her siblings are, as the reader comes to understand, the children of leading Nazis; they are alone because their father has fled and their mother has been discovered in their hiding place in a village in the south of Germany. Even more disconcertingly, the only friendly young man who does not try to exploit the children, but instead helps them along, is Thomas, who is not only excruciatingly thin and has obviously been traumatised; he probably just pretends to have been imprisoned in Buchenwald and might just as well have

been a Nazi himself. In this novel, however, he is presented as a haunted, suffering young man – one of the few good-hearted people the children encounter.

Thirdly, the novel raises the question of the representability of the war. The fact that photographs often show something that does not correspond to the (fictional) facts and certainly are not able to capture the reality of the war is emphasised in several stories, which turns the unreliability of photography, along with the traumatising experiences of war, into leitmotifs of the novel. The photograph on Thomas' passport testifies to something that is not true. The most pronounced use of photographs is probably made in the first story, where three kinds of photographs turn out to be unable to document the fictional reality. The photographer's portraits of Helmut's family are obviously hiding the most important fact of his existence: that his arm is lame, which accounts for his being treated as a disabled simpleton. Helmut's own photographs of a station in Berlin, which might tell the truth about the thinning population and the enforced departure of men, do not bear witness to anything of the sort. And when Helmut takes some photographs of a dramatic scene, in which gypsies are badly ill-treated, these are unable to capture the movement, the injustice and the dramatic import of the whole event. The 'dark room' of the title thus refers not only to the photographer's dark room in which Helmut survives, it also refers to the darkness which inevitably surrounds the chaotic, bewildering and fragmented experiences of war, which even the best works of art can highlight only fleetingly.

## 5. Conclusion

While Seiffert's book casts a gloomy light on the question of whether the war can be made visible at all, there are significant differences between the representations of war in the four stories of the wars I have tried to sketch. With the exception of Seiffert's work, the 'literary' novels I have discussed are not concerned with the war in such a pronounced way as the popular works – there is no major subgenre in contemporary 'high literature' we might call 'war novels'. 'Literary' novels rarely focus on the war; even those novelists that choose times and places of war as a setting of the story usually concern themselves not only with the presentation of war, but also with a number of different issues. For them, it is not the particular story of this or that war that is presented, it is rather the experience of war itself. Even those that give quite precise geographical locations and dates, like Ian McEwan, are concerned with a wide spectrum of issues, ranging from the chaotic experiences of a soldier and the remorse of a nurse trying to atone for what she did as a child, to the importance of (mis)perceptions, the influence of

memory and the role of art. Quite often, the war is evoked by presenting the memories which still determine the lives of the characters, while in some cases the 'fictions' of memory, and the belated insight into what happened earlier seems to be more important than the experience of the war. Though *Spies* is set nearly exclusively in times of war, the war itself is a minor concern, compared to the experiences of the boys and the workings of memory which make it possible to achieve a new insight into one's own mind after decades.

Though 'literary' novels thus provide a whole range of different approaches to war both as far as the content and the use of genre conventions are concerned, their presentation of war does not result in a critical intervention in the larger debate about war. Let me hasten to add that they certainly present many innovative angles, forming their material in fascinating and original ways; but when one focuses on their presentation of war, they rather criticise, weigh, modify and balance existing ways of envisioning war, which they quite often put to different uses within the context of their stories. They are concerned with the particular, with individual experiences of war, which, at best, embody a general facet of human nature in the face of an ever-present conflict, as McEwan wrote in an essay: 'At its best, literature is universal, illuminating human nature at precisely the point at which it is most parochial and specific' (McEwan 2005: 6). Quite often, this involves concentration on major facets of the human condition, which are evoked by means of the presentation of experiences of war. More often than not, these works do not focus exclusively on the war itself; they rather raise a whole range of important questions, with the result that the visibility of the war is diminished by the light cast onto other issues.

The popular texts which focus on the First and the Second World War respectively, fulfil different functions. As far as the 'War Boom Literature' is concerned, the novels are not geared at presenting facets of the human character, they rather aim at a (in the view of the respective authors) true and just, or just an interesting and exciting presentation of the war, which is achieved by the story of the experiences of different characters. The heterogeneous positions embodied in the 'War Boom Novels' of the 1920s and 1930s turn them into a part of the popular debate on the First World War. Taken as a whole, these works mark a shift from the critical recollection of the war to the formation of new memories. Many of these novels do not form autonomous works of art; they do not conform to modernist aesthetics, but they try to achieve particular results. In the words of Virginia Woolf, they are not self-contained aesthetic wholes, which widen our horizons, they rather give in to preaching and make us want to 'join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque' (Woolf 1950: 99).

Even more disconcerting are the works that contribute to the popular image of the Battle of Britain. It is difficult to make out a 'higher' aim apart from present-

ing a fascinating, readable story. This is not to deny that the (auto-)biographers attempt to provide a truthful insight into the lives and experiences of the characters – but they mostly remain within the bounds of the established image. Though they sometimes consciously demystify certain aspects of the war, in the end they overwhelmingly support the idealised account of the battle. In the majority of these works, there is no general criticism of the war – all of the lessons learned at such great costs from 1916 onwards seem to have been unlearned. In these stories, the war itself, the battles are centre stage, and the whole machinery provides the dashing young heroes with their chance to prove themselves and to make their impact on the world. The visibility of the war could scarcely be more pronounced. But this effect is achieved, paradoxically, by the invisibility of that which is most characteristic of wars: wounds, suffering and death. In popular literature, the visibility the First World War attained in the ‘war books controversy’ has given way to an image of the Battle of Britain which presents a frightening blend of visibility and invisibility, and makes it possible to idealise war once more.

This pervasive ideal influences the perception of the Second World War as a whole. Especially British representations of World War II often smack of a kind of nostalgia, recalling gallant deeds by patriotic Englishmen. There may be more involved than just national pride, however, for the universal acceptance of the pilot as a hero seems to point to a general need for narrating war as a sanitised undertaking, silencing the elements that make it unbearable and creating the vision of a glorious time. The ethics of such undertakings are more than just questionable, but established genre conventions; reader expectations and the politics of the market seem to combine in an unholy alliance which continues to favour idealising narratives of the myth of the Battle of Britain in popular literature.

With regard to Great Britain, we are left with contradictory stories of the visibility of war. While the suffering of huge numbers of people during the First World War dominated the popular novels of the late 1920s and 1930s, the presentation of the Battle of Britain points into a different direction, combining a heightened visibility of heroes with the invisibility of pain and death. Almost every insight derived from the suffering caused by the First World War, which destroyed the glorification of patriotic deeds, heroism and military glory in a seemingly irreversible way, appears to have been forgotten as far as the war in the air is concerned. With regard to ‘literary’ novels, there is more continuity. Although some novels place a great emphasis on the experience of the war itself, in most works the depiction of the experiences of the war is not as pronounced as in more popular genres. Those novels that refer to the First and Second World War and have been discussed here

are multifaceted, shedding light on many questions of human existence, which rather impedes the visibility of the wars themselves.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> It may be, however, that the experience of war, the placing of man against a violent fate, is achieved in a more visible way in other genres – in poetry, or in works which are not concerned with a particular war, but with suffering, violence, and the experience of war itself. *The Seven Ages* (Figes 1987) is one of those novels which deal with war and healing without referring to any specific war.

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