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AMERICAN WAR FICTION: MODERNIST HEROES AND POSTMODERNIST ANTI-HEROES

SUMMARY

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Introduction:

Linking a number of modernist and postmodernist literary texts and the attending cultural contexts in which they were produced, the present thesis has started from the assumption that one can still find heroes in modernist texts featuring crisis, conflicts and war situations, while in postmodernist literary works, the tendency is for the hero to disappear or to be endowed with non-heroic features.

While trying to draw a distinct, historical line between modernism and postmodernism one would find some sort of watershed between them, a situation further complicated by a special relationship each has with the conventions of realism. Therefore, one such possible dividing line between the cultural paradigms of the two is the Second World War itself.

It should be mentioned the fact that during an attempt at reconsidering the modernist text, doubts have begun to appear as to the status of the protagonist as hero and to the war or anti-war messages associated with Hemingway's famous anti-war book, *A Farewell to Arms*. As far as character types, narrative structures and ideological discursive practices are concerned, it seems simplistic and inaccurate to generalize about possible clear-cut distinctions between war and anti-war fiction, between heroes and anti-heroes, between distinct modernist and postmodernist paradigms.

Postmodernist anti-heroes may be discussed in the context of Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as "incredulity towards grand narratives" (Lyotard), where dubious heroes are set in action against a background of cultural uncertainties, even if these uncertainties are accompanied by puzzling, although sometimes dramatic situations. In addition to this definition, a good starting point for the discussion of the postmodernist anti-heroes, which we tried to be critical of to a certain extent, is David Simmons' *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel*. The well-documented volume connects a certain "tradition of the anti-hero" in American literature with the *zeitgeist* of the countercultural years of the 1960s and early 1970s.

As already stated above, the primarily focus will be on a particular type of narrative literary texts, the war novel, which displays special types of characters in

keeping with the prevailing discourses of the cultures in which they were produced and received.

Therefore, we will critically examine the various concepts that are useful in such an undertaking, relating, for instance modernism and Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and the absurd postmodernist hero or anti-hero in such texts as Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Mother Night*. As suggested a little bit later in this introduction, the literary dimension of the comparison will be supplemented by recourse to a number of theoretical and broadly cultural standards. How do Hemingway's and Vonnegut's characters relate to the 'reality' of war or to the validity of one particular theory, such as Campbell's grand narrative of the hero's journey (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1949)? The investigation of the war discourse and character types will be set against the background of theories of subjectivity and identity provided by contemporary social psychology.

A further challenge for war fiction in post-World War II America represented events which were so horrifying and traumatic that they made no sense. World War I had also had its considerable share of horror, fictionally represented by Hemingway, while Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut were writing their war fiction at times when the technological atrocities of World War II were indeed relevant. Heller's *Catch-22* was published around the time when the world came close to the nuclear apocalypse (the Cuban missile crisis), while Vonnegut wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five* during the Vietnam War, in which the technological superiority of the American army was used to spread death and destruction on a scale that reminded one of some of the worst atrocities of World War II, particularly the firebombing of Dresden, which Vonnegut had witnessed as a prisoner of war.

The novels this dissertation focuses on include Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, while references and connections with other novels, especially by the same authors, will be made. These books, ranking among the most visible representations of war, will be analyzed as context-specific cultural products and as narratives which offer frameworks for the understanding of the manner in which types of characters – which represented human behavior – are constructed.

It is worth stressing that, faced with the dilemma of choosing between a comprehensive, panoramic perspective on American war fiction from the Civil War to the Vietnam War and a considerably narrower scope of the field of investigation, I chose the latter option, since it was likely to help us avoid risky generalization covering dozens of works. By means of a limited number of texts, what we find worth investigating in the present paper is not so much how war has changed the outlook of a number of people – authors of fiction about war – as how literary war narratives encode and influence human behaviour, for the better or for the worse, by their privileged position in ideologies.

The present dissertation also deals with significant manifestations of war discourse in 20th century American literature, as well as important shifts and developments in the discursive construction of war. These manifestations are novels that tackle in special ways the reality of warfare from World War I to the Vietnam War. They will be naturally placed here within their cultural, historical and political context, with which they interact, and from which they gain relevance and meaning.

The first chapter of the thesis, *The Modernist – Postmodernist Divide*, especially its first part deals with the theoretical context which the subsequent discussion of heroes and anti-heroes needs, aiming at discovering the elements of continuity and rupture between modernism and postmodernism, which, in their turn, are far from unproblematic terms, used differently by some important theorists (Lyotard, Baudrillard, Jameson, Eagleton, Hutcheon, Habermas, Huyssen, Berman, McHale) whose views will be taken into account. The relatively positive (modernism as progress) and negative (modernism as wasteland) connotations of modernism and modernization, as well as the bases of modernism and postmodernism are considered.

As a reaction to war, but also to modernism, the main characteristic of the postmodern era seemed to be based even less than modernism on the scientific and rational thinking or on the hierarchical, organized and determinate nature of art and knowledge. Postmodernism tended to rely on anarchical, non-totalized and indeterminate knowledge, or tried to create artistic expressions to illustrate that, and war fiction of the kind to be explored in this dissertation will be a good case in point. Postmodernist engagements with the hero will continue the modernist strategy of referring, often

parodically, to the archetypes and taxonomies of mythical characters transcending history, forever living in a timeless world. However, for the postmodernists, some of the historical developments that changed the world in the 20th century, the Second World War being the most important one, dramatically changed the terms under which the fictional text deals with possible mythical coordinates, and its engagement with history and contemporary culture is, despite its playfulness and apparent superficiality, despite its relativism and dismissal of such concepts as truth and reality, much more substantial.

According to Lawrence Cahoone, the fact that modernist thinking was considered to be searching for an abstract truth of life, while the postmodernist one dealt with the concept of no universal truth, abstract or otherwise, was the fundamental difference between Modernism and Postmodernism. (Cahoone 6) Starting from this statement, we can have, as a basis of discussion, two distinct frames of reference for two types of discourse fictionally representing war, even if, from the very beginning, the general impression we might have is that both modernist and postmodernist texts in question are clear condemnations of war and its accompanying chaos.

The discussion of the usefulness of the concepts we need, as well as of their relative distinction, is made more problematic by such important thinkers as the Marxist Fredric Jameson. He explores the problem of postmodernism – how its defining features are to be seen, whether postmodernism even exists in the first place, whether the very *concept* is of any use, or is just a mystification – and he wonders if postmodernism bridges the gap between the aesthetic and political more than modernism did. He argues that the different perspectives that can be taken on it, whatever terms used to describe it, can always be shown to articulate visions of history, in which the evaluation of the social moment in which we live today is the object of an essentially political affirmation or rejection.

To grant some historic originality to a postmodernist culture, he claims, is also implicitly to assert some radical structural difference between what is sometimes called consumer society and the earlier moments of capitalism from which it emerged. (Jameson in Lodge, 2000: 349) His position might clarify one aspect of the distinction between the different modernist and postmodernist war texts, between two different types of heroes/ antiheroes / protagonists / characters in terms not of inherent features, but in terms of

different cultural contexts in which these texts are received and interpreted, in terms of the *interpretive communities* (to borrow Stanley Fish's phrase coming from his reader-response theory) in which they are actuated.

Postmodern art cannot help being political, in the sense that its representations – in the particular case of this dissertation, its war texts and characters, heroes or otherwise – are far from neutral, however 'aestheticized' they may appear to be in the parodic self-reflexivity of such works as Heller's *Catch-22* or Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. While postmodernism has no effective theory of agency (especially as a result of the poststructuralist anti-humanist view of the subject, not as an active player, but as a subjected subject) that enables a move into political *action,* it does work to add to its relativist, antifoundational critical spirit a clear ideological basis.

Terry Eagleton thinks that, from modernism proper, postmodernism inherits the fragmentary or schizoid self, but eradicates all critical distance from it, countering this with a pokerfaced presentation of 'bizarre' experiences which resembles certain avant-garde gestures. From the avant-garde, postmodernism takes the dissolution of art into social life, the rejection of tradition, an opposition to 'high' culture as such, but crosses this with the unpolitical impulses of modernism. It thus exposes the formalism of any radical art form which identifies the de-institutionalization of art, and its reintegration with other social practices, as an intrinsically revolutionary move. (Eagleton in Lodge, 371-372) The question is under what conditions and with what effects such a reintegration may be achieved.

What has changed between the relative boundaries of modernism and postmodernism is the general perception that ever larger audiences of war and anti-war fiction have. A very good illustration of this can be seen even in the way in which, within a relatively short space of time in the development of one particular novelist, Vonnegut – the author of the war novel *Mother Night* (1961), seen by a part of audience as more interesting and more artistically sophisticated – enjoyed far less acclaim than another remarkable novel, but far more acclaimed, less than a decade later (*Slaughterhouse-Five*). If the former novel was initially received when the grand narrative of American exceptionalism was strong, the latter enjoyed huge success when the anti-war discourse of the end of the 1960s constituted an important part of the prevailing spirit of the time,

the political climate and the political agenda of a large segment of the American population having changed beyond recognition.

If we were to choose now a suitable definition of Postmodernism, we would consider Linda Hutcheon's attempt to define the concept, seen as a set of phenomena whose mode is contradictory as well as unavoidably political, any attempt to define the word necessarily and simultaneously having both positive and negative dimensions (Hutcheon 2002: 1) One of the intentions of what is to follow is to test Hutcheon's statement in relation to the postmodernist war fiction under analysis here. What about modernist complicity with the values it seeks to be critical of, even reject, in such texts as Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*?

Postmodernity as the general and comprehensive definition of a social and philosophical period or 'condition' (see Lyotard's 1979 essay, "The Postmodern Condition") has been variously defined as a condition determined by universal, diffuse cynicism, with systematic references to the hyperreal and the simulacrum (Baudrillard). The apparent contradictions between some of these designations of postmodernity will not surprise anyone who makes generalizations about the present age, Linda Hutcheon says in her investigation of the politics of postmodernism, the heart of the problematic of postmodernity. However, an important number of critics, Hutcheon believes, see postmodernity as involving a critique of humanism and positivism, and an investigation of the relation of both to our notions of subjectivity. (Hutcheon 2002: 3) Will the postmodernist war/anti-war novels involve a critique of humanism? In what ways, one might ask. The very title of this dissertation suggests something that the text which follows will try to show in its sometimes contradictory complexity: the critique of humanism as belief in rationality and confidence in the ability of the individual to make significant choice (agency or free will) can be seen in relation to the development of a fictional construction that one can associate with the emergence of the anti-hero. The problematic of the anti-hero will be important both in the interpretation of what was traditionally considered a "heroic" genre, war fiction, and, even more visibly, in the discussion of the theatre of the absurd (which goes beyond the scope of this dissertation).

While war fiction as a set of narratives of heroic deeds and characters is obviously to be seen as logocentric, involving certainty and authority, postmodernist challenges to it

have reopened the discussion of what texts and characters mean in an age of uncertainty. Postmodernity has been the concept employed to place theoretical positions as different as Derrida's challenges to logocentrism as the western 'metaphysics of presence' and Foucault's investigations of the complex and subtle combination of discourse, knowledge, and power.

In the second part of this chapter the theoretical discussion also concerns the complex relationship between an unmistakable realist dimension of representation in historical accounts and in the wildest innovative modernist and postmodernist war texts. Aspects such as the connection between actual war experience (all the authors dealt with in this dissertation had it) and the artistic experimentation that turns metafictional in both modernist and postmodernist texts will be emphasized.

Starting from the assumption that each cultural paradigm, each age codifies heroism and deals with it in a manner that makes sense to it, **the second chapter, Heroes as Characters, Characters as Heroes** discusses the relative meanings given to the concepts of *hero* and *anti-hero*, the latter term, in particular, lending itself to a variety of interpretations. Although Joseph Campbell's taxonomy of the hero (in his monumental *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*) will be taken very seriously, the definition of the anti-hero by various critics will be challenged. While considering Ihab Hassan's definition of the postmodernist anti-hero, which is very useful in the interpretation of such characters as those featured by the theatre of the absurd, the present dissertation, in one of the subsequent chapters (the one devoted to Vonnegut's fiction) will promote a more complex, more "respectable" type of postmodern anti-hero, in whose cultural construction the audiences of the 1960s and early 1970s had a very important word to say.

The second section of Chapter 2 draws attention to the fact that America and its culture have been based upon a belief in the importance of individuals and their personal freedom. However, especially after the Second World War, a very strong perception that capitalism has subverted a "traditional" American individualism into something negative begins to emerge not only in a number of important sociological works – C. Wright Mills' *The Power Elite* (1956), J.K. Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958), Vance Packard's *The Status Seekers* (1959), Herbert Marcuse *One Dimensional Man* (1984) –

but also in some of the war fiction that this dissertation is concerned with. Distinct positive and negative kinds of individualism will be explored in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22,* where two interpretations of Yossarian's apparent erratic behavior will be considered.

The last part of this chapter seems to deal with something unexpected in the cultural wasteland deplored by the modernists or in the postmodernist field in which the rejection of grand narratives makes the characters, as well as some readers, suspicious of the religious dimension of human experience. However, although Hemingway and his heroes appear to live in a world in which God has become indifferent to the horror of war, the characters' consistent endeavour to find a code and something to believe in will be discussed, with references to the author's war fiction (*A Farewell to Arms,* but also *For Whom the Bell Tolls*). Vonnegut himself, as well as his Billy Pilgrim, experienced the horrors of an apparently Godless World War II. Nevertheless, Vonnegut offers a reinterpretation of Christ's story from a humanist perspective. The postmodernist author creates special situations and associates Billy Pilgrim with a very thorough discussion of religious fundamental issues in ways that will be explored at the end of this chapter.

The third chapter, **Hemingway's Wars**: **Fictional Representations** presents Hemingway's outlook on war as it appears in his war fiction and which is based on his war experience from WWI, on a certain artistic environment, as well as on some distinct ideological constraints. War is, in a sense, the adequate pattern of narrative, usually based on dramatic conflict, and both the protagonist and the reader are supposed to be aware of that.

"Everyone dies" is the fatalist close of a war narrative like the one used by Hemingway in *For Whom the Bell Tolls.* The message of the title seems to permeate the narrative, and the answer to that question turns out to be, "Everybody". This is a strange embodiment of a narrative which seems to create the impression that there is no characterization, no atmosphere and no individual style. From a point of view, war narrative has entirely degenerated. Writing a war narrative following this model is difficult. Allowing the "decaying" narrative to do what it wants to do without any resistance to its blind determinism – everyone dies – leads to something that seems to be a perfect anti-novel. Everyone, according to Hemingway's war narrative, is alike; the

world has reached a moment of stasis that is emblematic of death. Hemingway's style is the sign of his attitude toward this somber realization.

What Hemingway in effect narrates in his *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is the deterioration of narrative, the decline and fall of the narrative is an analogy for dying. The artistic challenge of the book is to create a story out of the breakdown of the narrative. Death finally makes nonsense of any discriminating skills that may keep the reader's interest in deliberate and meaningful action. For *Whom the Bell Tolls* ends just before the protagonist's death. Had it gone on unfolding, the narrative would have reached the absurd, only completing the story of the death of indiscriminate nobodies, irrespective of which side they may be on, groping, through the terrible and the absurd, into the realm of the anti-hero and of the 'anti-war anti-book'. Jordan, like Hemingway himself at the end of his Spanish civil war experience, is confused, overwhelmed, unable to rise above the chaos.

In *The Sun Also Rises,* which is not a war novel, Hemingway's bellicose attitude acquires an aesthetic dimension. Bullfighting may be "pure or false aesthetics": Romero's "purity of line" as opposed to the "false aesthetics of the bullfighters of the decadent period." (*SAR* 168, 215) Whenever there is a duel, there is the temptation of a metaphorical connection of war with style itself: violence is performative for Romero, and personality emerges in his actions. Hemingway's firmly believed that war and bullfighting are similar. To go a step further on the macho road of what we might call Hemingwayan war discourse, bullfighting, war and boxing are alike.

Earl Rovit states that one could not believe the multiple masks which Hemingway offered to the world, the bewildering combination of the images of Hemingway the man, the artist, the public personality, and the legend. He was the wounded twenty-one-year-old ex *Tenente* Ernesto Hemingway, recipient of the *Medaglia d'Argento al Valore* and the *Croce ad Merito di Guerra*, who hundreds of pieces of shell fragment taken from his leg. He was also the shy young man who studied the craft of writing with Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound and the other Lost Generation Americans self-exiled to Paris in the inter-war period. Hemingway became the spokesman of The Lost Generation, his two volumes of short stories (*In Our Time* and *Men Without Women*) and two novels (*The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*) expressing artistic guidelines for two generations, creating

a prose instrument which would later earn a Nobel Prize. Even if Hemingway's heroes are, in a sense, winners who take nothing, they are winners and the manner of their problematic achievement is individually self-generated, assessing their agency within situations largely of their own choosing, and under circumstances in which their native resources for physical action and courage are given opportunities to be expressed.

The fourth chapter, **Heller's Three Distinct Wars and His *Catch-22,*** deals with the links between Heller's *Catch-22* and Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, novels which have become important cultural products. Written by authors who had experienced war at a young age, set in war-torn Italy, with charismatic main characters who consider drinking and women preferable to the actual business of war, and who finally say a farewell to war by rowing their respective, individual boats to neutral country. In both cases, Frederic Henry's and Yossarian's "farewells" are not acts of cowardice, but of integrity and, paradoxically, heroism. Both characters make their "separate peace" as a statement of defiance; they escape the dehumanizing mechanisms of war and their heroic status is given not by a fight against "enemy" countries, but against what they see as "the real enemy," the oppressive forces in society. (A. Vlad 21)

Although war is the central theme in both novels, the description of the books simply as straight-forward war novels may not be entirely accurate, in addition to them being linked to two distinct cultural and literary paradigms, modernism and postmodernism. Both are special kinds of war fiction. In Hemingway's book war turns out to be the complete opposite of the traditional view of armed conflict as a test for manly virtues; true bravery is achieved by confronting the human condition, not an enemy on the battlefield, and Catherine, as already said, may be seen as the central code hero. In *Catch-22*, war is a metaphor of bureaucratic society in general, which, Yossarian realizes, can only be resisted by getting out of the vicious circles it creates. His position within the fictional framework of the novel as a war text or as a more comprehensive satire against more than war remains to be examined, while his status as a hero or anti-hero may depend both on that framework and on the cultural context in which the book is received, at the time of its initial publication or at significant moments afterwards.

In the context of the patriotic war rhetoric, the tough, hard-drinking, assertive hero of *A Farewell to Arms* appears to be the embodiment of the masculine ideal young

Hemingway aspired to and a projection of an idealised image of himself: macho, self-possessed and knowledgeable, rather than young, inexperienced and only fit for the Red Cross, unfit for proper military service. Frederic Henry, despite his assumed machismo, is often perceived as immature by those who are close to him. Frederic's development as a hero should be seen in a context in which other factors will give him opportunities to develop as a Hemingway hero. Rinaldi and Catherine seem to have escaped Frederic's and Hemingway's heroic poses in the same way in which Vonnegut's war buddy's wife discusses representations of heroism in war narratives, and their negative effects in the autobiographical, first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Images of soldiers as children or "babies" are particularly powerful in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a novel advertised by the author himself, in a countercultural age which needs another type of heroes, as depicting a 'children's crusade.'

Joseph Heller also had first-hand experience of the "raw material" used in *Catch-22* at a very young age. Born in 1923, one year after graduating from high school and one year after Pearl Harbor, Heller enlisted and went to cadet school in the Army Air Force. He became a combat bombardier, was based in Corsica and North Africa (Pianosa, the setting of the novel, is somewhere between Italy and Corsica), and flew in sixty missions before being discharged as an Air Force lieutenant.

Although at first he claims to have had no objections to flying combat missions, after forty missions he had thought he had had enough, just like Yossarian, the protagonist of *Catch-22*. His changed attitude was largely caused by his thirty-seventh mission, when the co-pilot panicked and grabbed the controls away from the pilot. Located in the nose of the aircraft, unaware of what had happened, Heller believed that the plane had lost a wing and was catastrophically going down. He had just seen the plane just in front of him blow an engine and watched as it fell, with no parachutes coming out.

A Farewell to Arms is thought to share the disillusionment of Hemingway's generation with the war that was, in Wooden Wilson's famous words, supposed to "make the world safe for democracy," but not in a political sense. Frederic Henry dismisses the empty rhetoric that supplied the justification for the war and rejects "abstract words such as glory, honour, courage, or hallow [which] were obscene beside the concrete names of

villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates." (*FA* 191)

In the case of *Catch-22*, even though the novel is set towards the end of World War II, it has more meaning in regard to the postwar period: the reaction to McCarthyism, the military engagements in Korea and Vietnam, the students' revolution of 1968 and the accompanying anti-war movement. Whissen considers *Catch-22* one of the cult novels of the postwar decades, describing the book as conveying a special message to a large mass of readers, "...the ultimate pacifist tract, the best reason yet presented for turning one's back on war of any kind and lighting out for neutral ground." (Whissen 55)

Mailer's Two Wars in *The Naked and the Dead*, the fifth chapter, familiarizes its readers with Norman Mailer's novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, published in the aftermath of World War II, but right at the beginning of another major confrontation, the Cold War. There will be two attempts to follow two different attitudes to heroism and war in this important 1948 novel that can shed light both on modernist Hemingway and postmodernist Vonnegut and Heller. This light has to do with the difficulty of assuming clear-cut distinctions to define characters along modernist and postmodernist lines, and according to a distinct hero – antihero standard.

When it was published in 1948, *The Naked and the Dead* received considerable popular and critical acclaim, many critics considering the novel to be one of the best war narratives ever written, appreciating Mailer's realistic depiction of men at war. In fact, the author seems to have more to do with naturalist fiction, as his major characters, like Staff Sergeant Croft, although bravely dealing with extreme danger and death, reveal the dark side of their inflated egos, their obsession with power at all costs, in defiance of any code of honour.

In this narrative of an author whose political views associate him with the pacifist, left-wing attitudes of a number of postwar activist and intellectual circles, there are, as in Hemingway, some complications arising from the clash, like that of the level of the characters themselves, between their luminous and dark sides, between the tendency to condemn war as horrible and meaningless, and the challenge to test one's endurance and manhood, one's heroic capabilities.

The real enemies that the soldiers face, as far as Mailer is concerned, are the racism, anti-Semitism and inhumanity of fellow soldiers, including the Staff Sergeant, just as much as the orders of superiors which appear to announce the possibility of the totalitarian systems which characters like General Cummings would create in America.

There are reasons to argue that *The Naked and the Dead* is informed by pro-war rather than pacifist ideology, and that the attitude towards war is mixed, especially at times when, while fully aware of the forces warring within them, as well as outside them, the characters are trying to test their endurance (in discussing Hemingway, the phrase used was 'grace under pressure'), to renew themselves through violence, by accepting the grim fact that 'tough guys don't dance'(the title of a later book by Mailer), but get even with their system by their own display of aggressivity.

Like the other war novels mentioned above, *The Naked and the Dead* challenges the concept of "just war" by narrowing the focus to a very concrete, individualized social context, in which war-enhardened individuals test themselves in their competition with the others, while at the same time acknowledging their internal conflicts, which have to be considered. This might lead to a perception of a necessary, just war, not only as a violent continuation of economic and political objective, but also as a testing ground for the men's assertive and violent egos in their quest for their endangered masculinity.

Two major themes that permeate *The Naked and the Dead* are the interrelated issues of the nature of power and the conflict between the individual and hierarchical social mechanisms (as typified by the Army). Bearing in mind Mailer's outspoken left-wing convictions, one might expect a straightforward and unequivocal treatment of these issues: power to be exposed as downright brutal and dehumanizing, and the social "machine" that sets war in action as a threat to the individual, both in times of war and in peacetime.

Hemingway, perceived as Mailer's inspiration and hero, had created a powerful picture in *A Farewell to Arms* of the strong individual showing "grace under pressure" and choosing an independent course of action, defying the expectations of regimented society. While there is a definite trace of Hemingway in *The Naked and the Dead*, things are not as clear as one might expect, as far as the overall vision is concerned.

The power and the mechanisms that are activated do indeed come under serious attack, but it gradually becomes obvious that it has to do with human nature, and even the socialist Hearn and the working-class rebel Red Valsen come to realize that they are subjected to the same power urges as the superiors that they so bitterly resent. Mailer the individualist, not Mailer the socialist, tends to show that while the Army does indeed try to crush the individual, there are also glimpses of how camaraderie and team spirit bring out unexpected qualities in his characters, heroes of a very special nature in their epic confrontation, not with the enemy specifically, but with the dehumanizing war machine of their own military establishment.

The last chapter of the thesis, **Vonnegut: from Campbell to the Green Berets**, introduces the tragic hero with two faces, Vonnegut's main character in his war novel, *Mother Night*.

Kurt Vonnegut had started his more obvious engagement with World War II with *Mother Night*, published in 1961, eight years before his much more successful representation of that particular war and of his own personal experience was shaped in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). In the introductory chapter of the 1969 novel, the author explains why it took him so long to finish his fictional confrontation with his life experience in a very critical moment in world history, as well as in his personal story. The absurdity of his own war experience, as well as the meaninglessness of what he witnessed, were, more than for Ernest Hemingway or for Norman Mailer, more than an invitation to write a non-narrative featuring anti-heroes about something most people called a war, something he called, in the novel's subtitle, "a children's crusade," while he refers to himself not as a writer, an author, but "as a pillar of salt". That story had to wait for a quarter of a century, or, better said, it had to go through a number of transformations and a lot of artistic experimentation, one of the major stages being his *Mother Night*.

Mother Night, unlike the other World War II book that would become his ultimate artistic reaction to the meaninglessness of his Dresden experience, created the coordinates within which the author could go closest to what a postmodernist novelist might come up with in the form of fictional protagonists worthy of their name, not puppets, not figures of fun or very artificial creations announcing the death of the hero, of the author, of war

fiction itself. One might even wonder if Howard W. Campbell, in this postmodern, anti-heroic time and age, after the collapse of the grand narratives, cannot be interpreted as one of the last tragic heroes in what has become a very unheroic genre (war fiction as anti-war art).

Mother Night turns out to be a war novel at more levels than the one that will follow, *Slaughterhouse-Five.* In the latter text Billy Pilgrim is not a warrior and a hero, just an innocent witness in what some call a war or an anti-war novel. If, as a result of his terrible war experience, Billy Pilgrim comes unstuck in time, loses any form of human agency and appears to have become reconciled with fate ("things are as they should be, there is nothing I can do about it", he is likely to think), Howard Campbell in *Mother Night* fights on several fronts during his World War II experience, as a publicly known Nazi propagandist, as an anonymous agent for the Allies, but he is also waging a painful inner war, as a result of his double identity.

The structure of the book enables suggestions about themes, the frame of the "autobiography" and a clarification of the novel's title, as well as Vonnegut's position as an American of German descent. It contributes to the overall pattern of a book where honesty and dishonesty, certainty and relativism, light and darkness are interwoven in puzzling ways. This framing of the central story is further complicated by further framing within the central story, in a bewildering play of reflecting and distorting mirrors, which contributes to the complexity of the problems raised in the novel.

The autobiography attributed to Campbell, his "heroic journey of initiation", to borrow the words of the other Campbell (Joseph Campbell) in his theory in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* is then completed in the postwar years up to the protagonist's final rest in the Israeli prison. Howard Campbell's wife, who had disappeared towards the end of the war, miraculously turns up after more than ten years, looking incredibly young. For a former writer of romantic plays, this should come as no surprise, one might think. Romantic complications appear, as now Campbell lives in America and he moves in a world of spies in disguise, where resurrected Helga has her part to play. Like Campbell himself during the war, the other characters have double identities.

The postmodern author has used his fictional design to create a puzzling, dizzying world in which genres such as autobiography and documentary realism, war fiction, war

thriller, as well as the interplay of truth and falsehood, various simulacra, good and evil, hero and villain, as well as the relativity of historical accounts, work together to challenge what the readers apparently take for granted.

The autography form which frames the body of the text, much in the same way as the same technique works in the other war novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, creates an impression of realism and authenticity at first, to be reconsidered by what is to follow. The main character is introduced as a war criminal ushered in by a "real" writer and a "real" editor. The true confession of a criminal's war crimes is what one first expects. The perception that slowly takes shape is that the main character is not guilty, and what the reader is prompted to expect next is the fact that there will be a happy-ending: the American secret services will intervene, Howard Campbell will be proved innocent. Eventually, he is not exonerated, but not sentenced to death by the Israelis, either. He finds himself guilty and sentences himself to death for crimes committed…against himself, or against his true self, for being what he "only" assumed to be, in a terribly public display of a false persona.

The years – less than a decade – separating the publication of Vonnegut's war novels, *Mother Night* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, with the attending cultural shifts that occurred in the 1960s, explain the different reception that the two novels had. Vonnegut was still to wait for the right moment to successfully convey some of his messages, but some of them were already coming across in a world where war and heroes no longer had the mythical significance they used to have in earlier societies. Vonnegut resorted to them as forms that defied meaning and got the audiences to take over, rather than being manipulated by pro-war heroic discourses.

The latter part of the sixth chapter introduces the anti-hero with two faces, Billy Pilgrim. If Howard Campbell was seen as a tragic hero struggling not with an external enemy as much as with the public persona that he accepted to assume and the catastrophic consequences that this acceptance led to, in this section of the chapter a similar approach will be followed, but focusing on a completely different type of central character. Billy Pilgrim is not aware of his predicament, so he is not a tragic hero. He is not a war hero, either, although he survives one of World War II's most destructive episodes. However, he becomes the right kind of hero as far as his special attitude to war

and violence is concerned when it comes to relating him to the anti-war movement of the 1960s when the novel was first published and achieved remarkable success.

Billy's easy circumstances, but boringly conventional life in Ilium with a rich and plain wife and a son that would support American military involvement abroad, by joining the Green Berets and going to Vietnam to become a hero and make his parents proud, the banal and conformist existence he occasionally leaves in order to engage in his science fiction adventures on Tralfamadore, everything contributes to an ironic version of the American Dream.

Billy, like Kurt Vonnegut himself, survived the fire-bombing of Dresden. The catastrophic bombing seems to have horribly affected not only Dresden's inhabitants and beautiful architecture, but also the narrative architecture of Vonnegut's novel. The text of *Slaughterhouse-Five* will appear to be pulverized as a result of the fact that what is supposed to be a narrative turns into a non- or anti-narrative, which, nevertheless, is highly readable and wholly justified in the rhetoric of the book, meant to reach a wide contemporary audience rather than a select circle of sophisticated critics. Vonnegut's populist strategy worked, although, largely as a result of the novel's tremendous success, the critics followed the large audience as the novel's collateral damage victims, to use military vocabulary. Now it is obvious for everyone, critics and general readers alike, that the apparent looseness and rambling character of the narrative gives a deliberately deceptive impression about a novel which is carefully plotted, as if Private Vonnegut were a very shrewd army general.

The theorists and the war/anti-war novelists dealt with in this dissertation, **American War Fiction: Modernist Heroes and Postmodernist Anti-Heroes**, modernist and postmodernist alike, whether apparently very bellicose or very pacifist, have been found to struggle for meaning in chaotic circumstances. This makes them relevant to contemporary audiences, whether they feel lost or not in the relativism and plurality of viewpoints, the diversity of the 21st century world. This struggle has proved to continually drive both modernist and postmodernist texts, war fiction or otherwise, towards traditional modes of sense-making, traditional patterns of meaning which may have become empty, but which nevertheless continue to exert their considerable impact, under the influence and in the shadow of the realist tradition, whether the artists are

aware of that or not. This artistic sense-making is meant to be considered in discussions affecting the audiences in specific circumstances (during or after a war), which have proved to contain, whether the texts themselves, modernist or postmodernist, explicitly show it or not, considerable political dimensions (Hemingway's war fiction – *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, or *A Farewell to Arms* – in inter-war and post-war Europe, for example, or Vonnegut's account of his involvement in World War II, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, at the time of the Vietnam War, and in the context of other war narratives, such as Robin Moore's *The Green Berets* or its film version, starring John Wayne).

War fiction at the time of the terrible seriousness prompted by two world wars and associated military conflicts of the same 20th century seems as a rule constrained by the standards of severe realism; war has to be dealt with very seriously. However, both modernism and postmodernism engage with war in a complex manner, combining formal innovation, self-reflexivity with documentary precision, having, in terms of both truthfulness and artifice, a lot to do with other very serious "fictions" about past conflicts, which specialists in the field call "history" or "History".

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