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Authoring the self: media, voice and testimony in soldiers' memoirs

'I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice ... I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory ... and finally only the names of places had Dignity' (Farewell to Arms, 1929: 184-185)

'So don't bullshit me about 'Duty, Honor and Country'. ... you know what? It ain't there, man. It's just War, and War don't give a Goddamn what the fuck' ('This is Your War' blog, quoted in Burden 2006: 245)

War and the search for a meaningful self

A hundred years apart and yet our two quotes share a similar sense of disillusionment. Whilst a vocabulary of heroism spoke eloquently of earlier wars (Harari 2007), these quotes suggest that, from the First World War onwards, conflicts do not share such meanings. Indeed, as Fussell (1975) argues, even though every war is unique, the conflicts of the past hundred years have all struggled to replace the lost diction of 'glory' with new claims as to the value of war. There is a lot at stake in this struggle over representation, as International Relations and War Studies scholars remind us, and at the heart of it lies the question of the soldiering self: who those who do the fighting become as a consequence of their experiences of combat death and suffering. The link between war and the soldiering self is not simply historical or causal but, as Hutchings argues, existential, in the sense that the practice of warfare is itself constituted as meaningful and legitimate precisely through the soldiers' own performance of the self, through *'the formal, relational properties of masculinity'* (2008: 389). Even though my argument does not probe directly into questions of masculinity and war, I do nonetheless draw on the question of the performance of the soldiering self so as to focus on the struggle over self-representation that soldiers have engaged in at two key historical moments of modern Western warfare: the First World War, the first major industrialised conflict of the 20th century (1914-18), and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the so called 'War on Terror', which marked the emergence of information warfare in the 21st century (2001-14; Rasmussen 2006).

To this end, I turn to the genre of soldiers' memoirs in the form of books and, more recently, milblogs, themselves also published as books – on which more below. Despite their differences, both claim to speak the soldier's voice as he recounts some of his most poignant experiences at the front, killing or being hit (Faust 2009: 6). Written by those who have been 'there', these accounts do not only offer stories about life and death in combat but also constitute the most powerful articulations of the soldiering self – of who soldiers are, what they do, think and feel at the front. This centrality of the self in war memoirs responds, according to Shapiro and Humphreys, to *'the long-standing needs for soldiers at war to have a voice ... and to maintain familial ties, both of which can help to mitigate the loneliness and challenges of separation and horrors of war'* (2013: xx). It is precisely the 'universal' need for voice that ultimately turns 20th century memoirs into one single narrative, what Hynes calls *'the soldier's tale'* - a narrative that reflects on the horrors of war whilst sharing with our opening quotes a suspicion towards big words: *'they (soldiers' memoirs, LC) don't glorify war, or aestheticize it, or make it literary and heroic ... they make war actual without making it familiar. They bear witness'* (Hynes 1997: 30).

Despite the 'universality' of the soldier's tale as an act of bearing witness, however, there are marked contrasts in their narratives; in our opening quotes, for instance, there is a contrast between implicit and explicit language, between restrained and unchained emotionality. What these suggest is that self-representation has itself changed, in time. Soldiers' accounts of their experience are not the same today, in the age of blogging, as they were in the age of the printed book. My comparison of published memoirs, then, intends to capture significant variation in soldiers' narratives at two key moments of the past hundred years with the aim of shedding light onto broader transformations in soldierly self-representation as an ethical and political practice.

I begin with the theoretical insights (*Authoring the soldiering self: media and narrative tropes*) and analytical concepts (*Analysing the soldiering self: voice and testimony*) of my approach, before I proceed with illustrating two contrasting modes of self-representation in the narratives of the

two wars (*Articulating the soldiering self: ironic and meta-ironic modes*) and a discussion of these two modes in their historical contexts (*Reflecting on the soldiering self: From the self as other to the other as self*). The Western soldier's self-representation, I argue, has shifted from a practice of observing the battlefield as a strange place and himself as an 'other' within it, to a practice of considering the 'other', here the Iraqi local, as the self, someone who shares a Western sense of humanity. These antithetical self-representations, I conclude, point in turn to complex transformations in the technologies, philosophies and public cultures of warfare and, in so doing, throw into relief uneasy tensions in the West's 21st century interventionist conflicts; in their attempt to move away from the massacres of the 20th century wars, such conflicts are suspended between sharing humanity and misrecognizing 'others', between liberating and conquering, between saving and taking lives.

Authoring the self: Media and narrative tropes

The media of the self: Soldierly self-representation is embedded in each war's distinct media ecology: if the First World War's media ecology includes the notebook, our wars' ecology includes the blog. Even though there is no doubt that, as Hoskins and O'Loughlin's claim, the blog, unlike the diary, participates in a radically new ecology that '*renders more life matter to be recorded, disseminated and debated on near-instantaneous and deterritorialized scales*' (2010: 18), I choose to draw attention not so much to discontinuities but mainly the continuities between these two media. This is because my own interest lies in outlining how the shared properties of each medium, what I next introduce as their textuality, dialogicality and temporality, articulate 'life matter' in ways that *both* sustain practices of soldierly self-representation across time *and* contribute to variation between them.

Textuality, the material dimension of self-representational practice, refers, on the one hand, to the paper-written diary notes of the Great War subsequently turned into book-length memoirs, and, on the other, to the 'War on Terror' digital diary platforms, later also published in book form as edited collections. Even though, in their online form, milblogs can be multiply hybridized through the insertion of hyperlinks thus inviting multi-modal engagements with soldiers' war narratives, in their book form, both textualities end up blending distinct narrative styles in various combinations; for instance, they both mix realist with reflexive styles about the soldier's life at the front. Whilst both textualities are inevitably shaped by various forms of censorship (by state and army authorities, by genre conventions and by authorial self-restrictions; see Jenkins and Woodward 2014), this intertextual hybridity of styles is instrumental in turning both memoiristic genres into sites for the communication of voice as soldiers seek to tell stories of combat in their own words. In this sense, both textualities participate in the articulation of an intimate, retrospective form of soldiering self who does not only fight but also reflects on the act of fighting, on living and dying in battle (Matheson and Allan 2009).

Dialogicality, the interactive dimension of self-representational media, refers to the potential of these textualities to establish connections between the soldier and his audience. Memoirs, almost always published after the war (for instance, Robert Graves' in 1929; Siegfried Sassoon's in 1930), manage this encounter through fictionalised narratives of history, which in blending fact with invention (Lunn 2005), invite us into a relationship of imaginary identification with the soldier's reconstructed past – with what Hayden calls 'meta-history' (d'Abreu 2012: 34). Milblogs, in contrast, claim to be firmly placed within a space of actuality rather than fictionalised history and often invite their audience (open or restricted) to respond to the soldier's stories through real-time online interactivity (Matheson and Allan 2009). Despite this key difference in the nature of connectivity, however, both memoirs and blogs ultimately fulfil a crucial communicative function as sites of therapeutic discourse (Allbritton, 2003). This is because both textualities ultimately turn the soldier's private experience of suffering and death into public statement and, in so doing, position the soldiering self as a witness - a thinking and feeling agent who shares his experience with others and invites those others to give a moral response to his testimonies of loss and suffering.

Temporality refers to the chronological cycles of the production and dissemination of self-representational

media. Early memoirs inevitably involved a long-term cycle, as the gap between writing and publication could, as we just saw, be months, years or decades (Lunn 2005). Milblogs, in contrast, close this gap through their capacity for real-time dissemination, offering, what Burden calls, 'a uncensored, unmediated, intimate and immediate view of the reality of conflict' (2006:5). Even though, this real-time quality renders milblogs a form of news reporting (Wall 2006), in their status as edited volumes, milblogs function less as journalism and more as a record of past lives; they fall, in other words, into the category of memoirs (Medley 2012). In this capacity, both memoirs and milblogs are, in fact, archiving media that operate as sites of for the preservation of memory and constitute the soldiering self as a mnemonic figure engaged in acts of remembrance - for past events and for those lost in the battlefield.

What these continuities in memoiristic genres suggest is that, the importance of technological change granted, it is equally significant to recognise the relative durability of those genres, as communicative, therapeutic and archival platforms, for the production of the soldiering self: '*though there were certainly differences in style and content,*' as Shapiro and Humphreys argued in their comparison of milblogs with Civil War soldiers' narratives, '*little that was done or accomplished via the milblog was without direct precedent in the Civil War letters and diaries.*' (2013:1115). It is, in particular, the ability of these platforms to function as sites for the articulation of voice, testimony and memory that, I argue, render soldiers' memoirs such an enduring genre in our public culture - though, for reasons of space, I will here focus on voice and testimony only. For, in the absence of direct experience, then and now, I argue, it is by being invited to listen to the soldier's voice about what war was like for those who fought it, that we may also come to reflect upon and feel for those involved in battle (though today it is increasingly citizen witnessing that fulfils this role, too; eg Mortensen 2011). Which narrative tropes are employed in the self-representational practices of the memoiristic genres of our two wars? How do these tropes employ voice so as to speak of soldiers' death in combat? And what does variation between the two tell us about changing conceptions of the soldiering self? Let me briefly discuss the analytical concepts of this study before addressing these questions.

Narrative tropes of the soldiering self: Just like each memoiristic genre is associated with its own media ecology, so is each also distinguished by its own narrative tropes - a claim grounded on Harari's comparative study of 19th century memoirs as a site for the production of the heroic self and 20th century ones as the site of, what I earlier referred to as, the disillusioned self (Harari 2005; and the political implications of which, I discuss in the conclusion). This major shift, Harari claims, is due to the emergence of industrialised warfare and its mass death toll, which eclipsed narratives on soldierly fighting as virtuous sacrifice in favour of narratives that spoke of the soldiers' bare need to survive slaughter. Such post-heroic narratives consequently undermined the capacity of earlier registers, the epic or the tragic, to stage combat death in ways that invest such death with a universal value, and they privileged, instead, irony as their preferred trope for authoring the soldiering self (Fussell 1975). Sharing with tragedy an awareness of the despair of the individual in the face of mass death, irony differs from heroic registers in that it stoically accepts its inevitability yet empties it from meaning. This lack of meaning characterizes the ironic position as a particular form of modernist reflexivity - a reflexivity of knowing scepticism towards the certainties of the past, as if the soldier speaks from a future anterior position that looks back at his war through the bitter wisdom of the present. Irony, in this sense, is understood as a 'dynamics of hope abridged' that, as Fussell explains, 'originates in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War' and today, rather than just a narrative trope, 'stands as a virtual allegory of the political and social cognition of our time' (1975: 41; 1989).

Indeed, despite challenges to the thesis of irony (eg Campbell 1999), the paradigm of ironic reflexivity has remained dominant in interpretations of the language of wars of the 20th and 21st century, reproducing the thesis of disillusionment from Hiroshima to Vietnam and from the Falklands to Iraq (Harari 2005). Are however all post-1914 soldierly narratives ironic? Do contemporary soldiers still represent themselves as subjects of a '*hope bridged*', applying to their testimonies of war the sensibility of disillusionment? Despite the large body of

literature on war memoirs, particularly the Vietnam War (for an overview Hynes 1997), there is, in fact, little exploration of historical change in the centennial development of the genre. Far from an all-encompassing study, this one modestly aspires to sketch out a trajectory of narrative change, by systematically analysing how soldiers' testimonies of death produce distinct modes of self-representation at two moments of our centennial history.

Analysing the self: voices of witnessing

Reflexivity and the self: To this end, I extend Harari's (2007) historical methodology, which, as mentioned, explored war memoirs from the Renaissance to early 20th century, in order to argue that the 20th and 21st centuries continue the Enlightenment tradition of memoiristic genres as technologies of the self. Diary-based and digital memoirs, I claim, mobilise their communicative, testimonial and archiving platforms so as to perform the same existential practice: to constitute soldierly subjectivity as a coherent and sovereign self. If war, as Leed (1979) argues, is so discontinuous with soldiers' out-of-war lives that it makes it hard for them to hold together a sense of themselves as enduring and developing through life, then memoirs offer the resources through which they can place these fragments into a pattern and produce a sense of self that invests their war experience with meaning. The 'meaninglessness' of irony is, from this perspective, a profoundly significant act of meaning-making, of reflexively re-constituting the soldiers' testimony of combat death, in ways that make sense of this liminal existence as a legitimate possibility of their lives.

Crucial, then, to my analytical discussion of memoirs is the distinction between the two voices inherent in the narrative structure of testimony: *eye-witnessing*, the soldiers' descriptions of actual experiences of battlefield death, and *bearing witness*, their reflexive evaluations of this death (Oliver 2004) – what Harari, albeit focusing on the memoirists' authorial power rather than moral judgment, theorises as *flesh witnessing* (2009). The duality of testimony is in turn manifested in, what I earlier referred to as, the *hybridity* of the memoirs genre, which mixes discourses of sensory perception on battlefield action, the 'Battlefield Gothic' (Hynes 1997: 12), with reflexive discourses that seek to render death intelligible. Whilst, then, questions of factual accuracy are not central to memoirs, as both eye-witnessing and bearing witness voices are subjective accounts that cannot be seen to faithfully represent reality, the hybridity of the genres offers powerful insights into the ways the two voices are drawn together to shape the soldiers' stories about themselves and others who perish around them. By the same token, however, irony should not be seen as a coherent argumentative structure that fully defines the content of the genre but, given the predominance of action in soldiers' memoirs, it should be grasped as textual 'moments' that randomly punctuate the Battlefield Gothic so as to fleetingly articulate the author's own voice on the death he witnesses and feels threatened by.

Voice and testimony: Rather than focusing on the eye-witnessing voice, I therefore turn to the marginal voice of *bearing witness*, those fleeting instances where the soldier's voice reverts from description to reflection, as he seeks to make sense of the loss around him. The management of this hybridity, I argue, is accomplished through specific linguistic techniques that shift from battlefield drama (*eye-witnessing*) to passing and oblique attempts to give meaning to it (*bearing witness*) and, in so doing, open up the narrative space in which combat death is contemplated as a moral fact. Whilst part of this narrative space is about seriously contemplating comrades suffering, much of it, across wars as we shall see, is about refracting traumatic experience through humorous affectivity – a marginalised focus of study that deserves further scholarly attention: 'the jokes, satire, and all-encompassing irony', as Cook puts it in relation to the First World War, 'were one method by which soldiers dealt with death, constructed new concepts of masculinity, and embraced antiheroic sentiments; they are an indication of the wider, every day practices and behaviors of men coping in their surroundings' (2015: 61).

I specifically emphasize three linguistic techniques that interrupt the narrative flow of memoirs and, by way of narrative discontinuity, highlight the significance of death without explicitly commenting on it. These are *ellipsis*, the omission of information regarded as self-evident or superfluous, *juxtaposition*, the structure of contrasts between incompatible elements, and *chronotope*, the mobility between present, past and future temporalities

(Bakhtin 1981) – Fussell’s future anterior being one of these. Each of these techniques punctuate the narrative of memoirs with a series of tensions between what is known and what is not (ellipsis), what can be expected and what not (juxtaposition) or what has happened and what will happen (chronotope), thereby rupturing the flow of Battlefield Gothic so as to enact a posture of contemplative distance in the face of death. Let us see how our two major moments of war differ in their use of the ironic trope.

Memoirs of the First World War

The memoirs of the First World War, in the Anglo-American world, constitute an enormous body of testimonial texts that offer unique insights into the human consequences of industrialised warfare. My selection of two canonical texts from this body of work follows the triple criteria of literary acclaim, popularity and endurance. Indeed, according to Moorcroft Wilson (2003), both texts stand out as the two established literary classics of the Western Front, still figuring in best-selling lists around the world: Robert Graves’ *‘Goodbye to All That’* (1929/1999) and Siegfried Sassoon’s *‘Memoirs of an Infantry Officer’* (1930/1997)iii. Written by two public school educated men, admitted to Oxford and Cambridge respectively, they are indicative of the classist elitism that informed the authoring practices of soldiers’ memoirs in the early 20th century (Lunn 2006)iv.

Recounting an attack at the Western Front, Robert Graves speaks of an officer who, upon whistling to his men, temporarily lying down, to move forward again, nobody moved and, at his angry order not to be *‘bloody cowards’*, he heard his sergeant gasping in agony: *‘Not cowards, sir. Willing enough. But they are all f- dead.’* Graves then adds *‘The Pope’s Nose machinegun, traversing, had caught them as they rose to the whistle’* (1929/1999: 131). This last sentence, in past perfect sense (*‘had caught them’*), breaks with the use of the present in direct speech (*‘Not cowards sir...’*) so as to release information that preceded the speech, and so to throw into relief the futility of the officer’s order (the men were already dead when he swore at them) and his ultimately misplaced anger (*‘willing enough’*, they had actually *‘risen’ ‘to the whistle’*). The story concludes at this moment of bitter discomfort, when the course of events takes an unexpected turn at its last-minute twist – *‘not cowards, sir. Just f- dead’*. Irony inheres, here, in the chronotopic mobility of the narrative, moving from a present to a past position, but also in the elliptical structure of the clause, gesturing at, rather than spelling out, emotion – in the suppressed *‘f- dead’*. This laconic and impassionate posture defamiliarises death by avoiding to address it directly, whilst it powerfully evokes the singularity of those few individual lives, who, killed at the peak of a legendary battle, were only a drop in the ocean of the million perishing at the Somme in 1916.

This ironic effacement of sentiment also occurs in first-person accounts of possible death. Here is Graves before going *‘over the top’*, in another of the Somme attacks: *‘We were waiting at the fire step from four to nine o’clock with fixed bayonets, for the order to go over. My mind was a blank except for the recurrence of ‘S’nice, s’pie, s’nice, s’mince, s’pie ... I don’t like ham, lamb or jam and I don’t like roley-poley...’* (1929/1999: 137). It is the juxtaposition between the soldier’s intense anxiety in anticipation of his exposure to enemy fire and the lyrics of a 1914 music hall tune that works ironically. With no place for emotion or reflection, *‘my mind was a blank’*, psychological intensity is signified elliptically, through suggestive references to the manner of attack: the dreaded *‘going over’*, the prolonged wait, *‘from four to nine’*, and the state of full alertness, *‘at the fire step...with fixed bayonets’*. Irony emerges through a process of defamiliarisation that frames this liminal moment in a discourse of light entertainment, *‘S’nice, s’pie, s’nice, ...’*. To a soldier’s protest, *‘this is murder, sir’*, Graves responds by spelling out the grounds for his irony: *‘of course it’s murder you bloody fool. But there is nothing else for it, is there?’*. Irony, in the form of suppressed emotion that obliquely surfaces through an irrelevance, seems the only appropriate response to *‘murder’*.

Siegfried Sassoon remembers his own Somme attack, in a remarkably similar manner: *‘during the cannonading cataclysm the following refrain was running in my head: “They come as a boon and a blessing to man, the Something, the Own and the Waverley Plan”. For the life of me I couldn’t remember what the first one was called. Was it Shakespeare? Was it Dickens? Anyhow, it was an advertisement which I’d often seen in smokey railway stations’* (1930/1997: 46). The threat of imminent death is here formulated through the juxtaposition between *‘the cannonading of the bombardment and*

Sassoon's struggle to remember the lines of an advertisement – "for the life of me, I couldn't...". The extract works ironically insofar as the intensity of Sassoon's emotions under bombardment, formulated as nothing less than a 'cannonading cataclysm', is fully displaced by his focus on remembering some irrelevant lyrics, 'Was it Shakespeare? Was it Dickens?'. Death is, again, momentarily displaced as a marginal affair compared to the importance of remembering 'what the first one was called', thereby elliptically gesturing at, rather than openly denouncing, the reduction of human life into insignificance in the battlefields of the Western Front.

Juxtaposition is further evident in Sassoon's account of receiving a letter on the decimation of his battalion, whilst on leave in England: *'Just a line to let you know what rotten bad luck we had yesterday...only two officers got back without being hit. The Batt. is not now over strength for rations!...' I walked about the room whistling and putting the pictures straight. Then the gong rang for luncheon. Aunt Evelyn drew my attention to the figs, which were the best we've had off the old tree that autumn.'* (1930/1997: 90-1). Sassoon's physical distance from the site of action is coupled with psychological distancing, as the details of 'whistling', 'putting the pictures straight' or 'drawing attention to the figs' move textual focus away from the author's despair and towards the trivial details of domestic comfort. Such juxtaposition evacuates all emotional intensity from his, already mediated, witnessing of the massacre, yet allows some space for registering the extremity of his experience in the verbatim quoting of the letter. Despite differences in their literary styles, Graves and Sassoon share an ironic sensibility that uses juxtaposition and ellipsis so as to displace the intense emotions of witnessing death at war onto insignificant detail, with a view to investing their testimony of death with meaning without attaching to it any affective charge or moral justification.

These instances suggest that, if irony is a means of making sense of the war, then First World War memoirists use it to articulate a particular relationship between themselves and the world. By employing the linguistic techniques of juxtaposition, chronotope and ellipsis, they displace the moment of death onto a random and trivial detail now endowed with a new and disproportionate significance - be this a music tune or the taste of figs. In this manner, these techniques set in motion a mechanism of, what we may call, *estrangement* – of inserting distance between the soldier's action and his perception of it and so de-familiarising his taken-for-granted assumptions about life and death: 'by making things strange', Boym, speaking of estrangement, says, 'the artist (cf soldier, LC) does not simply displace them from an everyday context into an artistic framework' but '... also helps to 'return sensation' to life itself, to reinvent the world, to experience it anew' (2005: 586). It is through de-familiarisation, therefore, that Graves and Sassoon 'reinvent' their war as ironic, that is they take a distance from it and, rather than articulating judgment or emotion, invite us to 'experience it anew' by highlighting, what Hynes calls, 'the greatest constant in remembered war': its 'strangeness' (1997: 19).

It is this reticent intensity of irony, 'the trope of a person who knows too much but refuses to take reality seriously' (Illouz 2010: 31) that enables those First World War memoirists to represent themselves as sovereign and coherent selves in the face of the war's 'vast randomness and anonymity of death' (Hynes 1997: 56). Compatible with the rupture that this war brought about in modern consciousness (Winter 1995), irony captures indeed the soldiers' disillusionment with a war that challenged the heroic self with new and unfamiliar experiences of death: 'at such moments', as major German memoirist, Ernst Junger, explains, speaking of the 'heavy bombardments' at the trenches, 'there crept over me a mood that I hadn't known before. A profound reorientation, a reaction to so much time spent so intensely on the edge. ... I felt I got tired and got used to that aspect of war, but it was from this familiarity that I observed what was in front of me in a new and subdued light. Things were less dazzling and distinct. And I felt that the purpose with which I had gone to fight had been used up and no longer held. The war posed new deeper puzzles. It was a strange time altogether' (1920/2003: 260).

Memoirs of the 'War on Terror'

The 'War on Terror', an instance of 'diffused' warfare firmly embedded within a culture of advanced mediatisation (Hoskins and o'Loughlin 2010), is, at least partly, defined by the

proliferation of military blogs. Saluted for democratizing the soldiers' voice, this digital platform has not completely eclipsed the genre of published memoirs but has come as a correction to the elitist exclusivity of earlier memoirs (Carpentier et al 2006). In so doing, it has also offered 'a new way to view the military' (Burden 2006: 5) and fresh insights into the self-representational practices of soldiers. In order to capture the novelty of the new medium and keep my empirical focus on published memoirs constant, I draw on two most popular milblog collections (Braender 2009) that reproduce soldiers' accounts in book form and, in so doing, 'give the ephemeral Internet bits and bytes a permanent place to live' (Burden 2006: 5). These are Matthew Currier Burden's *'The Blog of War'* (2006) and Garry B. Turdeau's *'Doonesbury. Com: The Sandbox'* (2009).

The distinctive feature of milblogs is their abandonment of the suppressed emotion of earlier memoirs and their reliance on new, more explicit forms of affectivity. First, there is an explicit articulation of irony as irony, as in the following 'Doonesbury.com' entries: *'War and faith, it seems to me, must always have had a close relationship. Ironic, since many mainline forms of religion would consider war antithetical to their charters'* (August 7th, 2007) or *'This was his third deployment, and this time he became a "fobbit" and doesn't have to leave the FOB. How ironic that on this deployment he gets shot'* (August 6th, 2007), or *'Ironic, considering the primarily Christian (if not Catholic) make-up of this region of Iraq, the only like it almost anywhere'* (December 6th, 2007)— this latter referring to the banning of the Pope's visit in Iraq. And a more recent example from the same blog: *'Fear had distorted the logic of my psyche as to whom the actual enemy was. And, at that moment, ironically, my fear was admittedly the most dangerous enemy I truly had'* (February 16th, 2013).

Second, explicit affectivity is signalled through paralinguistic graphics, as in this veteran's account of his post-traumatic stress disorder: after mentioning his *'panic attacks'* and *'really bizarre and very intense nightmares'*, he concludes that *'Roy Batty ain't dead yet, he's just down at Tyrell Corporation for some maintenance. :-)'* (August 14th, 2007). The juxtaposition between suffering (*'panic attacks'*, *'nightmares'*) and its euphemism (*'just under Tyrell Corporation for some maintenance'*), which estranges the veteran's distress through humorous defiance, is here flagged through a smiling emoticon, :-). Similarly, in referring to a mortar attack in Baghdad, which resulted in some soldiers' reprimand for not evacuating the attack zone, the blogger writes: *'Wow. I would love to get arrested for that. There's no way I would get in any trouble, and it would be hilarious for my chain to have to come bail me out for "Failure to run during a mortar attack". HAHHAH!'* (August 20th, 2007). The real risk of the attack is juxtaposed to the hypothetical accusation of martial authorities, *"Failure to run during a mortar attack"*, which estranges death by foregrounding humour, *'it would be hilarious...'* and by using emotional markers, *'wow'* and *'HAHHAH'*. Finally, the following instance is reminiscent of Graves' *'S' nice, s' pie, s' nice, s' mince, ...'* incident, in that it also estranges risk through reference to music - *'Metallica'*: *'Another great moment in ETT coping is when another Captain here on the team says to me, as we hide behind a rock waiting for an IED to detonate, "Sir, you know what the problem is with real life?" "No, what's the problem?" I'm wondering what could be so pressing at this moment. He responds, "There's no soundtrack. Wouldn't some Metallica be great right now!"'* (December 29th, 2008). It differs from Graves', however, in that, rather than suppressing emotion, it renders emotion not only all too explicit, *'another great moment in... coping'*, but the very point of the blog entry, entitled *'Laugh or you will go insane'*. Even though laughter as a coping strategy for the release of tension under fire is, thus, evident in both First World War and contemporary war memoirs, there is a significant shift in the status and practice of humour. This affective turn, manifested in the 'explicitation' of irony and the use of emotional language and emoticons, should be associated with a broader discursive move that today works to personalise the death of soldiers and civilians alike, rendering them the object of public reflection (King 2010). Let me discuss these two aspects of personalisation.

The *personalisation of soldiers* is evident in the extended blog entry on a US Marine's death: *'Kylan didn't quite fit in an Annapolis. He was a nerdy kid from Aptos ...Kylan had an intellectual curiosity that bordered on true geekdom... Kylan's major field of study of history and he was quite a gifted student...Always gifted at languages, he had learned to speak ... Kylan had returned to*

Annapolis to teach history for a couple of years ... he had plans to earn a Doctorate in Turkish Studies at John Hopkins University... On August 21st....Lieutenant Kylan Jones-Huffman was shot and killed while riding an SUV ... His unit was stationed in Bahrain and he was only supposed to visit Iraq for one week (Burden 2006: 214). Irony is present in the chronotopic tension of the last clause, where the soldier's death is de-familiarised by reference to its unlikely circumstances, *'while riding an SUV', 'deployed in Bahrain', in 'Iraq only for a week'*, and their juxtaposition with his long-term life aspirations, *'to teach History for a couple of years', 'to earn a Doctorate'*, rendering his loss of life poignantly absurd. The celebration of the soldier's life, however, is further coupled with references to the author's personal relationship to him, *'Kyle is indirectly responsible for much of the happiness in my life, and for that he has my eternal gratitude'* or *'two days before I boarded my flight home from Kuwait, Lieutenant Kylan Jones-Huffman was shot ...'*, which replace the elliptical formulations of earlier memoirs to highlight, instead, the author's own emotional connection with his dead friend.

The *personalisation of civilians* is manifested in the fusion of Iraqi life stories with soldiers' reflections on them: *'A boy walked into my life for a brief moment this past Easter Sunday, and I am better because of it...'* (Burden 2006: 134-9). The soldier's encounter with a terminally ill Iraqi boy is narrated from the perspective of a wishful *'if only'*, reflecting the soldier's distress for the boy's imminent death: *'I wanted to give this kid something, anything that would make him happy. I wish I'd give him a ride in the tank... I wish they'd saved the liver of one of the Iraqi soldiers that had been killed by another boy Ahmed's age and given it to him'*. Irony is involved in the last clause of this extract, where the juxtaposition between Ahmed, who needs a liver donor, and *'another boy Ahmed's age'*, who might have killed an American soldier, not only de-familiarises soldierly death as an act of organ donation for an Iraqi civilian but further estranges the act of killing by setting a relationship of equivalence between the Iraqi victim, the sick boy, and the Iraqi perpetrator, a killer boy *'Ahmed's age'*. Military death becomes thus ironic, in that the author's benevolence towards the Iraqi boy appears to emerge not from his clear-cut perceptions of enemy or friend but rather through the blurring of this divide, as the figure of the Iraqi boy occupies both positions. Simultaneously, the voice of bearing witness locates the emotional centre of the story away from the boy's misfortune and onto the author, as the latter's encounter with suffering ultimately serves as a lesson of moral education – notice the formulations *'His message had been delivered'* and *'Ahmed reminded me'* in the concluding sentence: *'His message had been delivered. Ahmed reminded me that I should be eternally grateful for all that has been given to me. At this point, guard duty didn't seem like that bad any more'*. Civilian suffering is here embedded in a therapeutic discourse of self-development, which endows the soldier with emotional depth and construes military practice, his *'guard duty'*, not as a matter of external obligation but personal attitude.

Testimony in milblogs, I argue, no longer operates as a practice of self-representation through an estrangement of the world and of the place of the self in it, as in the First World War memoirs, but through a positive and compassionate affirmation of the self and his relationship to others. Irony, in this context, I argue, seems to be giving way to meta-irony, a narrative trope that, whilst echoing earlier ironic sensibilities, does not suppress emotion towards death but openly reflects upon its meaning. By using overt references to *'irony'*, where irony is talked about as irony (hence the term *'meta-ironic'*), emotional language and the personalisation of soldiers and civilians, milblogs break with the disillusioned self, characteristic of the global conflicts of the 20th century, and seem to turn reflexively towards an empathetic self– be this in relation to a fallen fellow soldier or an ambivalent connectivity to suffering locals.

This break with irony in favour of meta-ironic self-representation could perhaps be associated with radical changes in the practice of dying in combat, as the well-defined battlefields of the two World Wars have now given way to the murky waters of asymmetrical warfare (Stephenson 2012). Rather than grappling with the insignificance of individual life in the context of industrialised death, as the First World War memoirists did, today's testimonies of death engage instead with different emotional and moral challenges

in the face of new, less intensive but equally terrifying patterns of dying: *'We did not die by the hundreds in pitched battles. We died a man at a time, at a pace almost casual. You could sometimes begin to feel safe, and then you caught yourself and looked around, and you saw that of the people you'd known at the beginning of your tour a number were dead....And you did some nervous arithmetic'* (Wolff 1994 in Stephenson 2012: 371)^{vi}. By way of conclusion, it is to these challenges that I now turn.

Change in soldierly self-representations: from the self as other to the other as self

Self-representation is not an a-historical constant but a dynamic narrative practice subject to variation. Drawing on memoirs and milblogs, two distinct media platforms that enable the articulation of voice, testimony and memory, I explored how soldiers' testimonies of combat death catalyzed processes of self-representation, at two crucial military moments: the industrialized warfare of early 20th century and the information warfare of early 21st. I took my point of departure on the influential thesis of the modern soldiering self as ironic, informed by a disposition of scepticism and disillusionment, so as to explore how irony as a set of linguistic techniques (ellipsis, juxtaposition and chronotope) participates in soldiers' narratives of death. My contrasting analysis of examples from the Western Front as well as from Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated that irony articulates two historically distinct modes of self-representation. Whilst the early, ironic mode suppresses emotion and refrains from moral evaluation in the face of death, the contemporary, meta-ironic mode combines the testimony of death with explicit formulations of emotion and moral stance. I discuss each in the light of the challenges it responds to, under the themes: 'The self as 'other': the testimony of the civilian soldier' and the 'The 'other' as self: the testimony of the professional soldier'.

The self as 'other': the testimony of the civilian soldier. What conception of soldierly self emerged out of the devastating experience of the first industrialized war? This, I claim, was the subjectivity of the ordinary person, who joined the frontline of the wars, together with millions of others like him, as a civilian conscript. Unlike previous conflicts, as Hynes claims, *'this time the middle classes sent their own civilian sons, and so both families and sons, whose lives until then had been innocent of war, learned what war meant'* (1997: 106). Innocent of war, those sons' experience of battle was largely that of bearing witness to the death of others like them and imagining themselves as potential victims in the same battlefield – their experience, thus, *'blurring'*, for the first time, *'the line between the fighting man and the helpless victim of war'* (Hynes 1997: 128). Coupled with the enduring, albeit unrecognized, trauma of war suffering, this middle-class disposition of the victimized conscript replaced the romantic spirit of earlier, born-to-fight military elites with the new subjectivity of the civilian – a subjectivity that managed its disillusionment with the enormity of combat deaths in the only way it could: by employing the standpoint of the ordinary witness. This is the standpoint of the reflexive, educated youth who, as Hynes puts it, *'acts as a soldier but also stands back and observes and judges (and sometimes mocks) his soldier's acts'* (1997: 107).

This duality of standpoints was enacted, as we saw, through the mechanism of estrangement, which, by establishing a narrative gap between the voices of eye-witnessing and bearing witness, allowed the self to reflect on death without explicitly committing to an emotional response or moral argument – be this establishment critique or anti-war scepticism. Rather than protesting against or lamenting the loss of human life, this hybrid standpoint construed a dispassionate conception of the self, the self as an 'other', who simply observed and stoically accepted the inevitability of human loss yet, at the same time, used a low key emotionality to gesture towards his own despair. Resonant with a model of masculinity that suppressed emotion and vilified the expression of fear in combat (Winter 1995), the techniques of ellipsis, juxtaposition and the chronotope were instrumental to this construction of dispassionate self. As soldiers struggled to put into words an experience so alien to them, it is the textual discontinuities of irony, rather than the assertions of the Battlefield Gothic, that ultimately invested those memoirs with their reticent quality of civilianness and, in so doing, introduced into these texts *'a note of scepticism that made their war ironic in their telling'* (Hynes 1997:146).

The other as self: the testimony of the professional soldier. What function does meta-irony serve, however, in the self-representational practices of the contemporary soldier? Meta-irony, I argue, is an inherent dimension of the digitalization of soldiers' memoirs, where testimonial narratives cease to be the literary accomplishment of the few and become the business of the many. By the same token, meta-irony is also part of a broader cultural move towards digital self-representation, which '*valoris(es) the public sharing of the self and its emotional experience*' (Thumim 2011: 9). Manifest in an introspective digital aesthetic, in soldiers' intimate and emotional stories, their emoticons and playful references to 'being ironic', meta-irony shares little with the early 20th century reticent, stoic testimony, and seems to constitute, instead, a new testimonial position that subordinates irony to, what Illouz (2007) has theorised as, the emotionalization of the self. Closely linked to the mediatization of Western public culture, emotionalization refers to the process by which private feelings, including soldiers' warrelated traumas and PTSD pathologies, cease to be restricted to the domestic sphere and have become visible, legitimate and, in fact, constitutive dimensions of public discourse and contemporary subjectivities.

Both digitalized memoirs and emotionalized selves, however, are embedded within the 21st century paradigm shift towards 'diffused' war, where the practice of warfare itself has become fully mediatized - constituted and conducted through networks of information and communication technologies (Rasmussen 2007). Meta-irony functions, in this context, as a narrative response to the new status of soldierly subjectivity, which has moved away from conscript civilians to highly specialised forces, primarily trained into managing ICTs. Rather than the civilian subjectivity of earlier 20th century wars, then, meta-irony articulates, instead, a new professional military subjectivity that places high precision technologies to the service of minimizing war victims, whilst simultaneously operating in a digital culture that encourages the professionals' emotive expression of voice.

Far from the subjectivity of the ordinary witness, with its affective charge of suppressed emotion, then, this is the subjectivity of the professional witness, with an affective charge of compassionate emotion – of '*knowing too much and, because of this, insisting on taking things seriously*', to paraphrase Illouz's earlier definition of irony. Central to this conception of the soldierly self is the empathetic ethos of contemporary Western armies, which derive their legitimacy not from the defence of the nation but from their collaboration with aid and humanitarian forces so as to protect human life (Coker 2001). Consequently, the soldiering self, rather than disillusioned towards the expendability of human life, articulates now a new subjectivity that seeks to resonate with the new, civilian-populated battlefields of insurgency warfare and, therefore, explicitly adheres to the principle of sparing pain: '*The liberal experience of war*', as Coker puts it, '*should be liberal too. We should fight it for a material cause, to spare others pain or to terminate oppression*' (2001: 453).

The rise of the empathetic self can be associated with the Western effort to minimize the savagery of earlier mass conflicts not only by reducing the number of 'our' combat forces but, importantly, by cultivating a military subjectivity that sees the 'other' as the self and is committed to protecting her/him as one of 'our own' – thereby, paradoxically perhaps, effecting a new 'civilianisation' of the military. Infused by this spirit of benevolence, the professional witness of death in combat abandons the outwards movement of estrangement and turns inwards, to the self, so as to reflect on his own personal trauma – the new visibility of PTSD being just one manifestation of this turn. In so doing, he replaces the eloquent reticence of Graves and Sassoon with his emotive meta-ironic narratives of '*empathy and caring, caution, protection, apology and sentiment*' (Coker 2001: 453). Given the 20th century's catastrophic conflicts, it is hard to challenge the rise of the empathetic self that meta-irony articulates. Yet, the paradox of this self-representational practice, suspended as it is between new affectivities and new risks, points to a compelling tension of contemporary warfare between its sentimental humanity and its cumulative death toll: 354.000 war deaths in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan 2001-2014, including 220.000 civilians and 35.000 Allied troops and police – excluding indirect civilian deaths that add up to many hundreds of thousands more^{vii}.

In light of this messy death toll, let me end with a note of caution: meta-irony, spoken as it is by the professional witnesses of liberal warfare yet felt mostly by vulnerable civilians on the ground, should not be seen as a triumphant posture, undisputedly celebrating the most 'humane' war of the past hundred years. It should rather be seen as an ambivalent construction with precarious and unstable representations of the 'other' as self (for instance, Maltby and Thornham 2012) and always already undermined by the persistent presence of its competing mode of soldierly subjectivity, our familiar disillusioned self. Disillusionment may be relatively marginal today but is far from over; indeed, as my opening quotes remind us, disillusionment continues to powerfully inform the narratives of contemporary bloggers, throwing into relief the agonizing dark side of the empathetic self: 'So don't bullshit me about 'Duty, Honor and Country'. ... you know what? It ain't there, man. It's just War, and War don't give a Goddamn what the fuck'.

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i I use the pronoun 'he' throughout because all my empirical material is produced by and refers to masculine subjectivities but also, in line with Hutchings' argument, I would like to emphasize the fact that the conceptions of war I engage with are constituted through masculine, albeit partially 'feminized', rationalities (as in the case of contemporary 'benevolent' wars and their empathetic subjectivities; Coker 2001).

ii The eye-witnessing of action, through the register of Battlefield Gothic, is the dominant narrative style of war memoirs. It is manifested in short, affirmative clauses, the use of 1st person singular or plural (*I/ We*), action verbs (*leaped, plunged...*), past tense and direct speech as well as the lack of modality, all of which express urgent action-in-process: *'I leaped into the nearest trench; plunging round the traverse, I ran into an English officer in an open jacket and loose tie: I grabbed him and hurled him against a pile of sandbags. An old white-haired major behind me shouted: 'Kill the swine!'* (Junger 1920/2003: 236). This focus on intense action resonates with accounts of warfare experience that, whilst accepting (some) soldiers' need for reflexivity, strongly emphasise the high adrenaline pleasure that this experience entails (Hynes 1997; Winter 1995).

iii Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon were both officers at the Royal Welch Fusiliers, one of the best-reputed infantry regiments of the British Army (for a discussion of what, in the main text, I refer to as the classist prejudice of officer memories of the First World War, see Watson 2004; for a discussion of the civilian experience communicated in officer memoirs of this war see Leed 1981; Hynes 2007). Graves and Sassoon met at the Western Front in 1915 and their experience of trench warfare, particularly the Battle of the Somme in 1916, defined their attitudes towards the war and figured prominently in their early poetry. They authored their memoirs ten years after the armistice as a way to overcome the harrowing impact of the war on them. Both pieces of prose were immediately highly acclaimed and remain, to this day, two of the most important testimonies of the First World War (Moorcroft Wilson 2003).

iv Because of the sheer volume of text in each book, it is impossible to include here all their instances of irony nor, given the elusive and shifting properties of irony, is it possible to quantify its properties in a content analysis. The extracts selected below, therefore, are not meant to offer an exhaustive account of the linguistic techniques of irony. They are meant to simply illustrate the workings of these techniques and exemplify change in the enactment of the ironic trope.

v Available at: http://gocomics.typepad.com/the_sandbox/html Last access: January 16th, 2015. The blog closed to new contributions in April 2014.

vi Even though this is a claim about the Vietnam War, Stephenson argues that Wolff's description of American soldiers' experience of death, there, is characteristic of all subsequent insurgency wars, including Iraq and Afghanistan. It is these challenges that I return to next, in my concluding section.

vii See www.costsofwar.org, and <http://www.costsofwar.org/sites/default/files/Direct%20War%20Death%20Toll%20in%20Iraq,%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan%20since%202001%20to%20April%202014%206%2026.pdf>
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