

# From the gates of Troy to the trenches of the Western front: the representation of war in *The Iliad* and in novels of the Great War

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## Abstract:

This paper aims at comparing war narratives. Whereas in the *Iliad* we are provided with powerful, necessarily named warriors, in the Great War novels *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Paths of Glory*, and *Company K*, we encounter powerless soldiers. The principal feature these narratives share is war's inherent unpredictability.

Keywords: War narrative, *The Iliad*, Great War.

The paper herein presented briefly investigates differences and similarities between narratives of war. The analyzed corpus comprises Homer's epic the *Iliad* and examples of the literature that stem from the Great War of 1914-18. My contention is that although in the *Iliad* the individual is portrayed as playing a key and decisive role in warfare, in the novels *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928), *Company K* (1933), and *Paths of Glory* (1935), which are set in the Western Front of the Great War, the individual is shown as powerless. At the same time, both Homer's work and the Great War novels show that wars are inherently uncontrollable events whose outcome is unexpected.

The *Iliad* is the archetype of war narrative; it is the first narrative of war in the tradition of Western Literature. In the plot of the epic, single individuals can make a difference to the result of war. These individuals, warriors who can make a difference, belong to the aristocracy and are called *héros*, hero. A hero is revered by his community and they share a reciprocal relation of dependence and recognition: the hero must be willing to sacrifice his life in combat to protect the community; in reward, the community bestows on him glory and wealth – he becomes a leading figure amongst his fellow men. The glory that a warrior struggles to achieve is called *kléos*, literally, "to listen," "that which is listened to," "what is sung". A hero wishes his deeds for the community to be turned into songs that will glorify his name. It then becomes clear that names are very important in this narrative of heroes: how can a hero be revered and sung if his name is unknown?

On the other hand, the armies that face each other before the city of Troy, the troops, are anonymous and ultimately irrelevant for the result of the conflict. Only once, throughout the whole epic, does a member of the common troops speak:

Thersites in Book 2. Moreover, Thersites is the only member of the troops to be named. Revealingly, Thersites cannot speak properly and is described as "ugly" and "lame" (II.212-17). The heroes, warriors such as Achilles, Hector, and Odysseus, are capable of singing and of debating in assemblies; they are also physically beautiful, strong men.

In the Trojan War, as it is represented in the *Iliad*, the action and inaction (if we take into account Achilles withdrawal) of a single man change the course of war. While Achilles fights, the Trojans are held inside their walled city. When Achilles withdraws, Hector is able to break into the Greek defenses and to set fire to one of the ships. In this sense, the war is represented almost as if it were a duel between two individuals: Achilles single-handedly holds the Trojans; when he is away, Hector drives the Greeks back against their own ships. Similarly, it is widely known, by all those involved in the war, that, once Hector dies, Troy is doomed (VI.403, XII.10-12, XIV.144-146) – the death of an individual seals the fate of the city. As soon as Achilles resumes fighting, he repels the entire Trojan army and kills Hector – therefore settling the result of war. Achilles is, in Donald Lateiner's formulation, "the indispensable superwarrior" (283).

In the Great War narrative, there are no indispensable superwarriors. In Bernard Bergonzi's assessment, the literature of the Great War proceeded to perform "the supersession of the hero as a tangible ideal" (176). In the selected novels, men are overwhelmed by the technology applied in warfare and there are no heroes in the epic sense. The narratives analyzed are examples of what Samuel Hynes has called "the myth of the war": "the received, accepted version of what happened in the First World War, and what it meant in human terms" (439). These novels are then examples of the way we today imagine the Great War, the story that "has come to be accepted as true" (Hynes xi). The features we usually associate with the Great War – the line of trenches, the continuous shelling, no man's land, ceaseless rain, mud, voracious rats feeding on decaying corpses, dirty men feeling helpless, incompetent leaders – are all present in the selected novels.

In Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, arguably the greatest classic of the Great War literature, the first person narrator Paul Baumer constantly reiterates his feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness before the murderous technology of modern wars. The plot follows the seemingly inexorable series of deaths of all Baumer's comrades that culminates with his own one month before the end of the conflict. Baumer even acknowledges that he cannot even grieve the death of his comrades lest he becomes more vulnerable: "terror can be endured if a man simply ducks – but it kills if a man thinks about it" (138). This is utterly different from the *Iliad*: Achilles not only grieves the death of Patroclus but also avenges it.

*Paths of Glory* tells the story of a failed French attack and of the court-martial, and subsequent execution, of soldiers for supposed cowardice in the attack. *Paths of Glory* illustrates the Great War's constant "anonymity of death" (Burns 46): in modern wars anyone can be killed regardless of courage, skill, training, traces of personality, or nationality. In the novel, competent and brave soldiers die horribly while incompetent and cowardly soldiers live and are rewarded. Dying or being awarded a medal becomes a matter of chance in the environment of the Western Front. The fate of Private Langlois well illustrates this feature: in the beginning of the novel, he tells a recruit that winning a medal is nothing but a lottery (Cobb 15); at the end, he is

chosen to be executed by drawing the lots (181-91). Unlike the *Iliad*, in which the heroes are not fully subjected to fate or to the gods, in *Paths of Glory*, men exert no power over their destinies.

The third novel, William March's *Company K*, has, as one of its characters and narrators, the figure that has come to symbolize the Great War's anonymity of death: the Unknown Soldier. This nameless, faceless soldier narrates his own death and rebels against the meaningless rhetoric of war that leads men to death. He throws all his identification away in an attempt at not being used as a symbol.

*The Iliad* conveys what might be considered a hierarchy of prowess: Achilles cannot be defeated, Hector can only be defeated by Achilles, and so on. This is explicitly stated in the Catalogue of Ships of Book 2 (II.760-80) and reinforced throughout the narrative. In the Great War narrative such hierarchy is unimaginable: the murderous technology of warfare equals all individuals. There is nothing a man can do against machine guns, gas, tanks, barbed wire and shells weighing over a ton. The hero becomes a passive, suffering victim.

By using the epic concepts of *areté* (excellence), *kléos* (glory) and *nóstos* (homecoming), the comparison between the named hero and the Unknown Soldier becomes clearer. Achilles, possessing *areté*, is provided with a choice: he can either go back home (*nóstos*) or fight and win glory (*kléos*). By staying at Troy and performing heroic deeds, Achilles's name is revered and preserved. The soldier of the Great War, and of the modern technological wars, is denied the opportunity to display *areté* and thus cannot choose. He cannot decide to go back home. Neither can he win glory because he cannot make a difference in the battlefield – his name is then forgotten and he becomes unknown. The Unknown Soldier replaces Achilles in the narrative of war.

In spite of providing a different role for the individuals in warfare, both sets of narratives – *The Iliad* and the Great War novels – share what I term the inherent unpredictability of war. This feature is better formulated by Paul Fussell: "[e]very war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends" (7). That is, wars are always worse than expected because it is almost impossible to foresee everything that will take place once a war breaks out – wars, as they progress, seem to escape men's control. Once a war begins, it tends to escalate and to become grimmer and more brutal than initially conceived – the means applied to win a war eventually seem to outweigh, and to cloud, the reasons for fighting it.

In the *Iliad*, the presumed end of the Trojan War is to rescue Helen. The fact that a ten-year war is waged for a single woman already signals toward the disproportion between means and ends. However, as the conflict progresses, Helen is even forgotten by some of the participants and Greeks and Trojans alike only care for killing the enemy. Hector, at the beginning a caring husband and father, a thoughtful son, and respectful of the warrior code, begins to act cruelly and to disregard any advice as his side gets the upper hand. Even Achilles, invincible on the battlefield, experiences the unpredictability of war: he settles the war, is vindicated, wins glory but mourns because he knows this has only come at the cost of Patroclus' life.

In the Great War novels, not once is the reason for fighting stated and all characters display profound disappointment in view of the gap between what they

expected of war and what they actually encountered – the gap between the idealization of war and the actualization of war. These novels show this gap by placing eager recruits against seasoned veterans and exposing how their visions of war profoundly differ.

The word “end” has been used in two senses when it comes to dealing with the unpredictability of war: it means both a goal or an objective (as discussed above) and a final resolution or termination point. In *The Iliad*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *Paths of Glory*, the narratives start and stop but the war neither begins nor ends. In *Company K*, there are certain passages after the war but all characters are still gripped by the conflict and cannot move on with their lives. In the four works the characters inhabit something like a war-world – a world where war is the only reality.

The practice of war seems to be as old as man himself, and the urge to tell of war seems to be equally as old. Whenever a war takes place, a story of it sooner or later emerges. Such a chaotic and murderous event, in which men kill, are killed and maimed amidst shouts, confusion, dust and blood – and, nowadays, amidst shells, machine gun fire, and hovering airplanes and helicopters – such an event must be put into a framed, coherent format, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, so that one may understand and make sense out of it. Besides, wars affect the lives of many people – today they affect the lives of millions – and their results have consequences on the future of entire nations – such important events must be somehow registered and represented. Narrating the experience of war is an attempt at both making sense of it and remembering it, keeping the memory of it alive. Wars, after they are fought, and sometimes even during the fight, must be told. The study of war narratives is but an attempt at understanding and analyzing how this mortal, and unfortunately, recurrent event has been registered and remembered.

#### Resumo:

Esta pesquisa visa a comparar narrativas de guerra. Embora na *Ilíada* tenhamos guerreiros poderosos e nomeados, nas obras da Grande Guerra *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Paths of Glory* e *Company K*, encontramos soldados indefesos e anônimos. Essas narrativas compartilham a inerente imprevisibilidade da guerra.

Palavras-chave: narrativa de guerra, *Ilíada*, Grande Guerra

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