

## ***Close Encounters in War Journal* – Call for articles for Issue n. 7 (2024)**

### **Close Encounters in War and Personal Narratives: Experience, Memory, and Storytelling**

**Guest Editor: Prof. Fabio Caffarena (University of Genoa)**

War has been the object of narration and storytelling since ancient times. Epics, myths, and legends transmitted the memory of heroes' deeds, thus shaping and consolidating the cultural identities of local communities and ethnic enclaves and later nation-states and empires. Mythical storytelling evolved into historical narration as wars began to be recorded and accounted for systematically by early historians like Herodotus, Thucydides, or in Rome's *Annales*. The public narration of war was an effective instrument of political and ideological cohesion as it displayed power and fuelled patriotic sentiments. However, the narration of war remained confined to the domain of public discourse despite armies consisting of individuals who contributed to the war directly and with personal sacrifice. The first personal account of war in the Western cultural tradition is Odysseus's tale of the fall of Troy, which he shares with the Phaeaces. Thucydides referred to singular episodes involving specific individuals in his narration of the Peloponnesian Wars, though his discourse excludes any form of direct and personal narration. The first case of an extensive autobiographical war narrative is Julius Caesar's *De bello gallico*. Despite being narrated in the third person, this work provides an individual-centred perspective about the military campaigns led by Caesar between 58 and 50 BC, culminating with the conquest of Gallia and Britannia. For the first time, the historian, the storyteller, and the protagonist of the tale coexist in the figure of the anonymous narrator/chronicler who accounts for Caesar's deeds in the third person.

Personal narratives about war have seldom reached the public before the nineteenth century. This caused scholars to believe that anonymous soldiers, who constituted the core of all armies in any historical period, never wrote about their experiences. Writing, on the other hand, was a skill far from being achieved by

everyone in the pre-modern era. Only a few combatants could account for their war experiences in writing, for example, through letters, diaries and memoirs, a small number of which has reached the public as books. Furthermore, while personal accounts of war mostly remained confined to military, political, and intelligence communication – and are therefore stored in archives and mostly accessible as historical sources – the first testimonies of war that became works of public interest did not appear in the form of autobiographies or memoirs. An author like Tobias Smollett transfigured his war experiences as a navy surgeon in his novel *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748). Something similar did Herman Melville in *White Jacket* (1850), an autobiographical work inspired by the author's experience as a sailor on the frigate USS *United States*. In general, it can be stated that the Napoleonic wars (1800-1815) triggered an incredible proliferation of autobiographical personal accounts since the 1820s.<sup>1</sup> This is not surprising, if one thinks that modern autobiography – as a genre and as a philosophical form of reflection on the “self” – begins in the seventeenth century with Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782),<sup>2</sup> whose “revolution” transformed the subject into a “unique and unrepeatable psychological interiority, which was accessible only through introspective writing.”<sup>3</sup>

If the nineteenth century was characterised by an increasing interest in war personal narratives, the phenomenon assumed a mass scale with the outbreak of the Great War, mainly for two reasons: the enormous mass of soldiers involved in the conflict on a global scale for over four years; and the diffusion of literacy

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/browse?type=lcsbck&key=Napoleonic%20Wars%2C%201800%2D1815%20%2D%2D%20Personal%20narratives%2C%20French> (Napoleonic wars 1800-1815), <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book//browse?type=lcsbck&key=Crimean%20War%2C%201853%2D1856%20%2D%2D%20Personal%20narratives> (Crimean war 1853-1856), and [https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/166546.First\\_hand\\_accounts\\_of\\_the\\_Napoleonic\\_Wars](https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/166546.First_hand_accounts_of_the_Napoleonic_Wars).

See also the repository of personal narratives from the American Civil War of the University of Maryland at <https://lib.guides.umd.edu/c.php?g=326774&p=2197450> (all websites last accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2024).

<sup>2</sup> James Goodwin, in “Narcissus and Autobiography”, *Genre*, 12, 1 (1979): 69-92; Andrea Battistini, *Lo specchio di Dedalo. Autobiografia e biografia*, Bologna, il Mulino, 103-104.

<sup>3</sup> Gianluca Cinelli, *Ermeneutica e scrittura autobiografica. Primo Levi, Nuto Revelli, Rosetta Loy, Mario Rigoni Stern*, Milan, Unicopli, 2008, 12.

among the mass of enlisted soldiers. Scholars claim that between 1914 and 1918, over 65 billion letters circulated between the frontlines and Italy, France, Germany, and Great Britain.<sup>4</sup> If personal narratives from the nineteenth-century wars amount to hundreds, above all distributed in Western countries, autobiographical accounts of the Great War amount to many thousands, spread all over the world. New groups of authors appear in this recent tradition, such as prisoners of war (POWs), women, and members of colonial troops. One striking phenomenon that characterised the response of some combatants to the Great War was the blooming of poetry in all countries, with remarkable achievements in the UK with the so-called “war poets” Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke, and Siegfried Sassoon, in Austria with Georg Trakl, and in Italy with the Futurists, Gabriele D’annunzio, and Giuseppe Ungaretti, only to mention a few examples. Moreover, the technological nature of the war caused all armies to create specialised corps such as pilots, tankers, submarine crews, drivers, and chemical companies, whose members published several personal narratives that enlightened the aspects of the “new” warfare. During and after the Second World War, further groups of witnesses appeared, such as the victims of political and racial persecution and deportation and the members of armed resistance (partisans) against the Nazi and the Fascist authorities in several European countries.

As wars became more and more global, during the twentieth century, so did the more and more established genre of war narratives, which eventually became a consistent section of contemporary literature (despite the debate that saw literary scholars question the literariness of personal narratives), or at least of the international book market. One can recall several personal narratives that have become classics of twentieth-century literature like Henri Barbusse’s *Le feu* (1916), Ernst Jünger’s *In Stahlgewittern* (1920), Thomas Edward Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926), Anne Frank’s *Diary* (1947), Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo* (1958), Elie Wiesel’s *La Nuit* (1958), Elechi Amadi’s *Sunset in Biafra* (1973), Eugene Sledge’s, *With the Old Breed* (1981), Eric Lomax’ *The Railway Man* (1995), Isaac Fadoyebo’s *A Stroke of Unbelievable Luck* (1999), Keiko Tamura’s *Michi’s Memoirs* (2001), and many more worldwide.

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<sup>4</sup> Carlo Staccioli, *War Letters (Italy)*, in *International Encyclopedia of the First World War* (8 January 2017): 2. [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war\\_letters\\_italy](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war_letters_italy).

As a genre, personal narratives have evolved over two centuries, passing from being almost exclusively memoirs written by high-ranking officers (mostly noble) to consisting of a much more multifaceted variety of expressive forms including letters, diaries, autobiographical sketches, poems, published or unpublished memoirs, oral histories and autobiographical fiction. After a long-lasting prejudice that banned personal narratives from the history of war and conflict, which was relegated to the disciplinary field of Military History, since the 1960s historians have begun to look at these narrations as valid and valuable sources of historical knowledge, thus giving impulse, after the so-called “cultural” and “narrative” turns after the 1970s, to the birth of sub-disciplines such as Micro-History, History of Mentality, Cultural History, Oral History and more recently the History of the Emotions. Working with personal narratives is a challenging scholarly enterprise due to the flickering and multifaceted nature of this kind of written expression, which is transversal to literary genres while including forms, styles, and registers typical of the spoken language. Personal narratives can hardly provide an overall comprehension and depiction of war, as they can inform about events that occurred on a smaller scale and the perception that human beings have of the war as a direct experience. Therefore, working with personal narratives often requires intellectual flexibility and the ability to blend different disciplinary approaches by borrowing diverse methodological, critical and analytical tools.

Issue n. 7 of the *CEIWJ* aims to investigate the theme of the close encounters in war in connection with the universe of personal narratives to study how people have accounted for their personal experience of war in ancient, pre-modern, modern and contemporary periods. To do so, we invite the submission of articles focused on the investigation of testimonies from a broad spectrum of theoretical and critical perspectives in the fields of Aesthetics, Anthropology, Classics, Comparative Literature, Cultural History, Ethics, Epistemology, Ethnology, Gender Studies, History of Art, History of Ideas, Linguistics, Memory Studies, Modern Languages, Oral History, Philosophy of Language, Postcolonial Studies, Psychology, Religion, Social Sciences, and Trauma Studies.

We invite, per the scientific purpose of the journal, contributions that focus on human dimensions and perspectives on this topic. We, therefore, seek articles that analyse the close encounters in war in diaries, letters, autobiographies, memoirs, autobiographical fiction, oral histories and other egodocuments such as juridical

testimonies and memoirs, bulletins and reports (military, medical, technical, and so on), photographic albums, drawings and paintings. The following aspects (among others) may be considered:

- Representation and perception of the “self” in the context of war;
- Language, public and private (e.g. the use of dialect or foreign languages; encrypted writing; metaphors, symbols and allegories; alternative forms of communication);
- Propaganda and ideology (e.g. political perspectives; racism; nationalism; religious fanaticism);
- Ethical and moral aspects (e.g. personal development; self-understanding; the relation with the others; justification of violence; acceptance of suffering and death);
- Censorship and self-censorship in personal narratives;
- Literary aspects of personal narratives (e.g. use of literary models and styles; editorial re-elaboration of personal narratives for publication; the relationship between fiction and autobiographical writing; personal narrative and the literary canon);
- Personal narratives as historical sources (e.g. methodological and deontological issues; epistemological value of personal narratives; rhetoric and logic);
- Anti-war attitudes (e.g. pacifism; criticism of violence; desertion and conscience objection; sabotage);
- Feelings and emotions in personal narratives;
- Personal narratives and trauma;
- Identity and diversity (e.g. gender; ethnicity; cultural heritage);
- Personal narratives in pop culture (e.g. film; TV; journalism; cultural heritage);
- Personal narratives and the culture of memory (local and collective) (e.g. archives and repositories; Public History; sites of memory; public use of personal narratives through the Internet);

CEIWJ encourages inter/multidisciplinary approaches and dialogue among different scientific fields to promote discussion and scholarly research. The blending of different approaches will be warmly welcomed. Contributions from

established scholars, early-career researchers, doctoral students, witnesses of war (e.g. veterans, journalists, reporters, etc.) and practitioners who have dealt with or used personal narratives in the course of their activities will be considered. Case studies may include different historical periods and geographic areas.

The editors of the *Close Encounters in War Journal* invite the submission of abstracts of 250 words in English by **31 March 2024** to [ceiwj@nutorevelli.org](mailto:ceiwj@nutorevelli.org). The authors invited to submit their works will be required to send articles of 8,000-10,000 words (endnotes included, bibliographical references not included in word count), in English by 14 June 2024. All articles will undergo a process of double-blind peer review. We will notify the results of the review in September 2024. Final versions of revised articles will be submitted in November 2024. Please see the submission guidelines at: <https://closeencountersinwar.org/instruction-for-authors-submissions/>.