Languages of war: how Italian combat officers wrote about the Great War, 1915-1918

A Dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

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Summary

Built around the idea that 'language went to war', this thesis investigates the impact of the experience of World War I (WWI) on language and mindsets through the analysis of Italian combat officers' war writings. The sources investigated are fifteen war writings: seven letter collections and seven private records (diaries, notebooks, a memoir). Focusing on officers who shared a similar social background and level of culture and literacy enabled a comparative and contrastive analysis of the communicative aspects presented by war writings. Of the private records, five were written by officers who went on to become important literary authors (Carlo Emilio Gadda, Giani Stuparich, Paolo Monelli, Piero Jahier and Emilio Lussu); the last is a novel based on an existing war notebook. The direct experience of combat is central to all the sources considered, as the thesis explores war's impact on writing activity, narrative attitudes and stylistic features. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which the huge transformation caused by war is recorded not solely in the content of these writings, but also signalled by their frequency, form, style, and narrative strategies (both conscious and unconscious). In spite of the focus on language, the present thesis is not a study of linguistics but rather aims to provide further insights for historical observation. The concept of 'family lexicon' as formulated by Natalia Ginzburg in her novel *Family Lexicon* is adopted as a lens through which to re-analyze the war experience as deeply connected with the encounter between old and new languages, both private and collective, civilian and military and with the set of values and mentalities to which they are attached. The disruptive impact of war on language is considered in connection with the influence

on the individual and collective mindsets, and with the redefinition of relationships, bonds and a sense of belonging to the local milieu, to the nation, the army, the religious community and to the family of origin throughout the conflict. The relationship between experience and language lies at the core of this research work.

This research borrows insights arising, first and foremost, from the transnational historiography on WWI and situates itself within the framework of cultural history. The work on German atrocities (Kramer, Horne) provided a compass with which to reassess the boundaries between the collective and individual experience of war, between actual traumatic events and the subjective perspective on them, and, ultimately, between experience, witnessing, collective memories and legacies throughout the conflict. Through this lens, the Rout of Caporetto in 1917 is dedicated particular attention and considered as an epitomizing moment in which all the contradictions of war surface and their disruptive impact is investigated through the private writings accomplished in its aftermath and in retrospect. The resonances of Risorgimento with its narratives, myths and emotional burden are considered with an eye to the latest works on the topic (Arisi Rota, Banti, Pinto, Riall). Borrowing terms, perspectives and approaches from different disciplines, this thesis aims to provide a new exploration on the multifaceted experience of WWI. Particularly insightful while dealing with war writing and the evolution of a new language was the discussion on temporalities and on the obsolescence of concepts and values (Koselleck, Kerne, Benigno, Horne). The theme of objective and subjective time (Ricoeur) and its influence on narrative

and self-projection (Len V. Smith) have been examined in order to investigate officers' writing attitudes. The methodological approach to private writings is informed by the historiography on ordinary people's writings (Antonelli, Caffarena, Gibelli) and the work on ego-documents (Ulrich). Some methodological insights were derived from the field of oral history (Contini, Casellato). A few methodological approaches have been borrowed from other disciplines (Saussure from linguistics, Barthes and Eco from semiotics, Venuti from translation studies, Genette, Raimondi from hermeneutics) and adapted to the investigation of proper primary sources. Notions coming from the fields of psychology and psychiatry have proved particularly insightful while dealing with self-projection through writing.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....10

Introduction.....14

The subject.....14

The sources.....19

Representativeness of selected sources.....26

Between doctrine and belief: between *langue* and *parole*.....32

Beyond the divide between written and oral sources.....37

Methodology.....39

In dialogue with Omodeo: Historiography or war memorial?..... .43

A work of cultural history with a few multidisciplinary crossings.....46

Thesis structure.....49

'Domesticating' and 'foreignizing' war.....52

Chapter 1: War as a family lexicon.....56

Introduction.....56

Letters as family epiphanies at the front.....61

The two family lexicons of front and home.....65

Conveying difference in letters home.....72

Two communicative universes.....80

Family lexicon and mourning in war.....84

Conclusion.....95

Chapter 2: Literary anchors.....97

Introduction.....97

What a transtextual war!.....104

Recurrent literary references.....111

'Thirst for printed paper'.....124

Shared reading: a common ground at the frontline.....134

Conclusion.....140

Chapter 3: Family communication..... 142

Introduction..... 142

War in words and war in facts..... 144

The reassuring and prescriptive nature of shared readings.....152

Religion as a shared background 161

Anachronism and misunderstanding in Vivanti's collection.....171

Language as a source of misunderstanding in war writings.....179

Conclusion.....186

Chapter 4: Military hierarchy and the sense of justice..... 187

Introduction.....187

The sense of justice in war.....189

Between military and civilian identities.....197

The denial of recognition.....203

Legal mindset and language.....213

Italy: between ambivalence and 'double bind'.....226

Conclusion……236

Chapter 5: Landscapes of war……240

Introduction……240

Encountering the front: men, landscape and writing…… 244

In between: moving to and from the front……257

The impact of war on natural and civilian space……266

Sharing landscapes……274

Sharing home front landscapes with sons……287

Transcending trench landscapes……292

Conclusion……302

Chapter 6: Combat……304

Introduction……304

Between traditional imagery and actual warfare…… 308

Combat writing and subjectivity…… 312

Delayed accounts: hyperbole and combat……324

The practice of everyday war in Vitelli's notebook……331

Conclusion……340

Chapter 7: **Breakdown: The trauma of Caporetto**…… 342

Introduction……342

Preconceptions and expectations…… 349

Elements of continuity……353

Rumours and chaos…… 361

Writing retreat……371

Explaining retreat to home……386

Silence and distance……390

The Rout in retrospect…… 398

Conclusion…… 407

Conclusion……411

Sources and Bibliography…… 431

Appendix……vol.II

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Introduction

The subject

World War I (WWI) has been defined as an 'enigma', as an unprecedented event emerging from long-term transformations and engendering itself unexpected transformations at a military, socio-political, economic and cultural level.[1] The war experience revealed its paradoxical nature from the outset, allowing a great discrepancy between expectations and outcomes to emerge.[2] The highly technological nature of war impacted on warfare and changed the very meaning of combat as well as the role, status and image previously connected to soldiers' identity.[3] Paradox appears as a particularly appropriate notion to frame the First World War in general, but even more to describe the Italian experience of the conflict.[4] WWI represented, for Italy, an unprecedented and unexpected challenge in both military effort and human cost, one which was neither longed for nor embraced enthusiastically by the scarcely literate masses from both countryside and urban areas.[5] The mobilization of the upper-middle classes and intellectuals for

[1] John Horne, 'Introduction' in John Horne, ed., *A Companion to WWI* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012; 2010) pp. xvi-xxviii, here p. xvi.

[2] Ibid., pp. xvii-xviii.

[3] Eric J. Leed, *Terra di nessuno, esperienza bellica e identità personale nella prima guerra mondiale*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1985) p. 33.

[4] Marco Mondini, 'Introduzione. Una guerra differente' in *La Guerra Italiana. Partire, raccontare, tornare 1914-1918*, (Bologna, Il Mulino, 2014) pp. 7-13, here p. 7.

[5] For an insightful discussion on ordinary soldiers' emotions and on elements of continuity throughout war, see Vanda Wilcox "'Weeping tears of blood': Exploring Italian soldiers' emotions in the First World War" in *Modern Italy* vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 171-184 and Ute Frevert, 'Wartime Emotions: Honour, Shame, and the Ecstasy of Sacrifice', in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War,

intervention, mirrored the growing value increasingly attributed to patriotism and political commitment within these circles that came to see war as an inevitable and necessary mission.[6]

The subject of this doctoral thesis is war as experienced and recorded, by literate Italian junior combat officers in their writings. The research undertaken is based on the comparative analysis of four unpublished manuscripts and eleven published, including epistolary collections, diaries and a memoir.[7]

Junior officers were crucial for the command structure and combat capacity of all WWI armies. In Italy, however, due to the exceptional war effort and losses among combat officers, the Army organised accelerated courses providing basic instruction.[8] These led to the promotion of new reserve junior officers to be sent mainly to the front.[9] This is witnessed by language as recorded in his *Dizionario Moderno* by Alfredo Panzini. The term 'aspirante ufficiale'/ 'candidate officer' entered Italian at the beginning of war. However, due to the high number of fallen

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Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, eds., issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI**: 10.15463/ie1418.10409.

[6] Antonio Gibelli, *La Grande Guerra degli italiani 1915-1918*, (Milano: BUR, 1998) p. 75 and p. 32.

[7] Colonel Pasquale Gagliani and Lieutenant Sebastiano Spina's notebooks have been published: these publications were considered and then ignored due to their distance from the original manuscripts. Lieutenant Vitelli's notebook and Lieutenant Zanivolti's letter collection remain unpublished.

[8] Giorgio Rochat, 'The Italian front, 1915-1918' in John Horne ed., *A companion to WWI*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012; 2010) pp. 82-96 here p. 93.

[9] Giorgio Rochat, 'Gli ufficiali italiani nella prima Guerra mondiale' in Giorgio Rochat *L' esercito italiano in pace e in guerra* (Milano: RARA, 1991) pp. 113-130.

among second lieutenants and lieutenants, by 1918 the term was changed in soldiers' argot into 'aspirante cadavere'/ 'candidate corpse.[10]

The high level of ambition and of self-mobilization infused of the legacies of the Risorgimento and the direct experience of a war fought at 'the sharp end' makes junior officers a particularly insightful group of witnesses to explore. War imposed a process of re-elaboration of what had been presented as a fulfilment of the *Risorgimento*, but which, in fact, with its highly technological and dehumanizing warfare, provoked and revealed the loss of the glorious 'aura' normally ascribed to those battles.[11] Shaking to the roots the images and narratives of their family and school education, war represented a traumatic experience that provoked a series of complex emotional responses that are detectable in officers' writings.[12] Old conceptions of war were, even at an international level, the main lens through which the new war was envisaged, promoted, described, and interpreted in the public arena.[13] However, Italian junior officers' writings offer a particularly

[10] Alfredo Panzini *Dizionario Moderno delle Parole che non si trovano negli altri dizionari* (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1935).

[11] On emotional witness and on the interplay between realism and fictionalization, see Joanna Bourke, *An intimate history of killing: Face to face killing in Twentieth-century warfare* (London: 1999) and Michael Roper, 'Re-remembering the soldier hero: the psychic and social construction of memory in personal narratives of the Great War', in *History Workshop Journal*, No. 50, pp. 181-204.

[12] Annette Becker speaks of 'double investment' in 'Faith, Ideology and the "cultures of war"' in John Horne, ed., Idem, pp. 234-247, here p. 235.

[13] On the connection between memory of past war and experience see Philip Dwyer, 'Making sense of the muddle War memoirs and the culture of remembering', in *War stories the war memoir in history and literature*, (Oxford: Berghahn, 2017), pp. 1-25, here, p. 12.

insightful perspective on the clash existing not only between imagined and actual war, but also between imagined and actual Italy.[14]

The notion of 'L'italia che non c'è' / 'Italy that is not', formulated by Arianna Arisi Rota in her brilliant work on the Risorgimento to designate how Italy was perceived before and throughout the Risorgimento as a project to long for, is re-proposed here to frame the discrepancy between the 'Italy that is not', optimistically wished for and adopted as a powerful mobilizing notion, with the actual Italy (Italy that is) encountered throughout the conflict.[15]

Language is considered as a lens through which to observe the complex connection between the experience of war and war writings and to explore uncovered aspects pertaining to combat officers' emotions and mentalities but also to shed further light on the history of Italy.

In line with the insightful thoughts proposed by John Horne in his contribution on the achievements of cultural history and on its present and future potential, this research seeks to open up the timeframes of war in order to propose a broader perspective on it.[16] It undertakes this task through the analysis of the evolution of officers' language and writing that are explored with an eye to both past legacies

[14] John Keegan, *Il volto della battaglia* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2010) (1976).

[15] Arianna Arisi Rota, *Risorgimento un viaggio politico e sentimentale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2019), p. 9.

[16] John Horne, 'End of a paradigm? the cultural history of the Great War' in *Past and Present* No. 242, pp. 155-192.

and future projections along with the actual experience of war in order to detect aspects of continuity and disruption.[17]

This study examines the emotions ingrained in certain local memories of the officers' self-mobilization in 1915 that 'haunt' their vision of war, and their role in it, throughout the conflict.[18] The influence of past legacies is also considered in connection with the ways in which faith is covered in officers' writings depending on the background of the officer, on the audience addressed and on the circumstances of writing. The divisive narratives, memories, post-unification conflicts and the renegotiated myths of the Risorgimento are thus considered as a crucial framework.[19] They are placed in dialogue with post-war narratives, rituals and paramilitary violence as investigated, among others, by Gerwarth and Horne, Gentile and Mondini.[20]

The following research questions are asked in the course of this thesis:

What is the role of writing in war and of war and what are the forms, content and writing attitudes that characterize it?

[17] Lucy Riall, 'Fashioning Garibaldi' and 'Making Italian heroes' in *Garibaldi Invention of a Hero* (London: Yale University Press, 2007) pp. 185-206 and pp. 226-269; Lucy Riall, *Risorgimento the history of Italy from Napoleon to nation state*, (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Alberto Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento. Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell'Italia unita* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000).

[18] On the patriotic commitment of families and on the role of family commemoration for the construction of local memories see Arianna Arisi Rota, *Risorgimento*, p. 160.

[19] Carmine Pinto, *La guerra per il Mezzogiorno, Italiani, borbonici e briganti, 1860-1870* (Laterza: Bari, 2019).

[20] Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, *Guerra in Pace Violenza paramilitare in Europa dopo la Grande Guerra* (Milano: Mondadori, 2013), Emilio Gentile, *Le Origini dell'ideologia fascista (1918-1925)*, (Bologna: il Mulino, 2001), Marco Mondini, *Fiume* (Roma: Aculei, 2019).

Is it the experience of war that inevitably impacts on writing or is it possible to refer to a mutual influence between war experience and writing in war?

What language and what mentalities do the junior officers bring to war and what do they develop at the front?

In what ways are language and war cultures reflected in war writings?

What role does language play in the retrospective projection and written fixation of the war experience and in the construction of individual and collective war memories?

What binds language, writing, memory and experience over time? What legacies can be detected in war writings throughout the conflict and what is their origin? What are the reasons and the outcomes ascribable to either their persistence or their obsolescence? How can a close-reading and detailed analysis of them prove prolific for historiography?

The sources

The decision to focus on Italian war writings poses a series of problems. One involves all kinds of documents, both letters and private records, and it arises from the fact that Italy did not embrace any institutional project of collection and preservation as those traditionally characterizing Great Britain.[21] The main research centres contrasting this oblivion and preserving the memories of different social

[21] Gaynor Kavanagh, 'Museum as Memorial: The Origins of the Imperial War Museum', in *Journal of Contemporary History*, No. 23 , pp. 77-97.

categories in connection with local communities are the archives of Genoa, Rovereto and Pieve Santo Stefano, which have a specific interest in ordinary people's writings. A few digital projects such as *Europeana*, *I diari raccontano* have also worked at the collection and digitization of sources with the merit of preserving parts of the sources but, as sometimes is the case with digital platforms, with the risk of flattening their representation.[22]

Before presenting the sources, it is necessary to report a few figures to position letter writing in Italy compared to other countries. The numbers and statistical evaluation proposed by Carlo Stiaccini in 'Scrivere dal Fronte' appear of the utmost interest to introduce the theme of quantity and quality of these writings.[23] Stiaccini argues that in spite of the significantly inferior number of Italian missives - 4 billion versus the 10 billion in France and 30 billion in Germany - exchanged throughout the conflict, the number is surprising if one considers the much lower rate of alphabetization of Italy, with its 40% illiteracy rate (ranging from 10 % in the cities to 45% in rural areas) compared to the 5% in France.[24] These figures however, as with all estimates, need to be considered with caution. The first reason is the chronology of war: Italy entered almost one year later; the other is that not all missives were sent through official posts and thus do not feature in these estimates.

[22] See *I diari raccontano* av. at <https://www.idiariraccontano.org/estratti/la-grande-guerra/> and Europeana av. at https://www.europeana.eu/portal/it/collections/world-war-I>.

[23] Carlo Stiaccini, 'Scrivere dal fronte', in Nicola Labanca, ed., *Dizionario storico della prima guerra mondiale* (Bari: Laterza, 2014) pp. 301-310.

[24] Stiaccini, 'Scrivere', p. 302.

This latter reason introduces another crucial theme connected to the writing and reading of letters and to the strategies adopted to exchange them. War, in fact, saw the birth of a massive censorship machine that had its headquarters in Boulogne. Later, with the growth and increasing attention devoted by the army to performing checks, even in Bari, Naples, Taranto and Treviso. Censorship would become a crucial aspect after the Rout because of *the fears* and of the need to remobilize for war and to construct a functional narrative to explain the collapse of Caporetto.[25] The strategies adopted by literate officers to elude postal controls might range from the practice of asking a comrade going on leave to deliver a letter to the family in the home village, to that of asking an orderly to send a missive from outside the war zone in order to elude the military post's censorial eye.[26] Of further interest for this work, however, especially considering the focus on language, are also all those elusive strategies ingrained in the chosen language and style of writing.[27]

Primary sources were selected on the basis of certain crucial criteria – socio-cultural status, experience of war, age and military rank of officers - and thus enable an effective investigation of junior combat officers' writings from the front**.** While the combat officers considered share a common socio-cultural background as

[25] Ibid., 'Scrivere', p. 303.

[26] Giuseppe Bellosi and Marcello Savini, eds. *Verificato per censura, lettere e cartoline di soldati romagnoli nella prima guerra mondiale*, (Cesena: Il Ponte Vecchio, 2012).

[27] Epitomizing this is second lieutenant Angelo Rognoni's brilliantly mispellt 'Kriegsgefangenlager' becoming a Pavese dialectal swear word 'Kristchefamdelader', literally 'Christ what a thief's hunger' in order to avoid the censorial eye and inform his family of the hunger suffered in the prison camp. See Angelo Rognoni, *Gefangenen* (Pavia: Comune, 2008).

they are all upper-middle class, literate and educated, heterogeneity has been privileged as far as regional provenance, political or religious faith, and military unit are concerned.[28]

The homogeneous level of literacy and education enables the comparison of these war writings as, in spite of their different regional origin, officers borrow images, references, and ideas from a shared repertoire.[29]

In total, fifteen sources were investigated, including seven letter collections. These collections include one which is unpublished, i.e. simple soldier, candidate officer, then promoted to second lieutenant and then lieutenant, Giuseppe Zanivolti. He was born in 1895 in Magherno in the province of Pavia and was educated in a Catholic seminary to become a priest.[30] The published letter collections are those of the infantry lieutenant Augusto Vivanti (an active interventionist law student born in 1893 in Pavia/Lombardy);[31] class '99 infantry and then Alpini second lieutenant Franco Michelini Tocci (Cagli/Marche);[32] infantry volunteer soldier Enzo Valentini (born in 1896 and from an aristocratic family from

[28] For a thorough study on the structure of the Italian army, see Vanda Wilcox, 'Leadership, Command Culture and organization', in *Morale and the Italian Army during the First World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) pp. 21-43.

[29] On the connection between discipline and literary culture which is reported by Wilcox in connection with the work and thoughts of Tancredi Fogliani *Letteratura e milizia*, see also Giuseppe Pennella (Colonnello di fanteria Stato Maggiore), *Il Vademecum dell'allievo ufficiale di complemento*, (Roma: Tipografia del Senato, 1915).

[30] Zanivolti unpublished private collection.

[31] Augusto Vivanti,*'Scrivimi più che puoi' L'epistolario famigliare di Augusto Vivanti in guerra (1915-1918)* Cristina Guani, ed., (Milano: Unicopli, 2011).

[32] Franco Michelini Tocci, *Fede il dovere la patria amore, lettere ed altri scritti*, (Roma: Maglione e Strini, 1920).

Perugia/Umbria);[33] lieutenant Leonardo Cambini (born in 1882 in Livorno/Tuscany, a teacher educated at the Scuola Normale);[34] and Catholic lieutenant Filippo Guerrieri (born in Monti/Tuscany in 1891, who studied in the High School of Chiavari/Liguria and then law at Genoa University. Originally from Lunigiana (territory across Tuscany and Liguria), his family was deeply influenced by the habits and traditions of Liguria.[35] Angelo Campodonico was the son of a shipowner. He was born in 1895 in Genoa/Liguria where he studied law.[36] Five notebooks were also used, all of them by officers who later became writers or who were writers already: the volunteer Alpini lieutenant Carlo Emilio Gadda, engineering student at the Politecnico born in 1893 in Milan/Lombardy);[37] the volunteer Alpini lieutenant Piero Jahier (his father a Waldensian pastor from Piedmont, his mother from Florence, who was born in Genoa in 1884);[38] the volunteer soldier, later promoted lieutenant in the Granatieri Sardegna, Giani Stuparich, born in Trieste in 1891 and studied in Prague (he was taken prisoner in 1916);[39] the volunteer lieutenant in the Alpini Paolo Monelli, son of a colonel, born in 1891 in Fiorano Modenese/Emilia and

[33] Enzo Valentini, *Lettere e Disegni XV Luglio-XXII Ottobre MCMXV* (Perugia: Bartelli & C., 1930).

[34] Leonardo Cambini, *Epistolario di Guerra* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1941).

[35] Filippo Guerrieri, *Lettere dalla trincea* (Libia, Carso, Trentino, Macedonia), Enrico Guerrieri, ed., (Genova: Manfrini, 1969).

[36] Angelo Campodonico,*Lauri di gloria epistolario di un eroe lettere del tenente Angelo Campodonico*, Mario Panizzardi,ed., (Genova: I.G.A.P., 1918).

[37] Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*, Dante Isella, ed., (Milano: Garzanti, 2002; 1992).

[38] Piero Jahier, *Con me e con gli Alpini*, (Roma: La Voce, 1920).

[39] Giani Stuparich, *Guerra del '15*, Giuseppe Sandrini, ed., (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2015; Treves 1931).

graduated in law, he was taken prisoner in Castelgomberto in 1917.[40] These were the authors, respectively, of *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*, the notes in poetry *Con me e con gli Alpini*, the war notebook, re-edited after war, *Guerra del '15*, the novel, based on his war notes, the war notebook re-edited at a later stage *Le Scarpe al Sole*. The novel *Un Anno sull'altipiano* written in 1936-1937 and based on war notes and memories by the Sardinian lieutenant (then captain) Emilio Lussu was also considered.[41] Born in 1890 in Armungia/Sardinia, Lussu was a convinced democratic interventionist fighting with the Sassari Brigade. Three notebooks by what have been defined here as 'writing officers' were also considered: engineer lieutenant Sebastiano Spina (born in Acireale/Sicily in 1985), who worked in Venice as a customs officer while studying at the Scuola Normale to become an English teacher;[42] artillery lieutenant in the Alpini corps Antonio Vitelli (unfortunately this unpublished notebook is lacking bibliographical information but he was certainly cultured and influenced by the myth of Garibaldi)[43]; and the monarchist nationalist field artillery major, then promoted colonel, Pasquale Gagliani (born in Naples in 1867 and assigned to Sardinia as an instructor of field artillery companies first in

[40] Paolo Monelli, *Le scarpe al Sole, cronache di gaie e tristi avventure di Alpini, di muli e di vino* (Milano: Mursia, 2016; 1921).

[41] Emilio Lussu, *Un anno sull'Altipiano* (Torino: Einaudi, 2014; 1945) First publication in France (Paris: *Le Lettere italiane*, 1938).

[42] Sebastiano Spina, unpublished notebook 'Ricordi di Guerra/Memories of war' consulted at the Museo e Archivio della Guerra in Rovereto. On the biography of Spina, see Giacomo Spina 'Prefazione' in Sebastiano Spina, *Le vicende di un siciliano alla Guerra* (Trieste: LCM, 1999) p. 3. The date of birth is presumed from some information provided but it is uncertain. On the discrepancy between the original manuscript and the published version see the appendix.

[43] Antonio Vitelli, unpublished manuscript notebook *Doss Remit col 17 gruppo montagna appunti di guerra* (Museo e Archivio della Guerra Rovereto).

Maddalena and then in Sassari).[44] Another source that has proved insightful as a contrasting source, adding insights from the perspective of a simple farmer-soldier, is the published diary by Giuseppe Manetti (born in Bagno a Ripoli/ Tuscany in 1884).[45] The appendix will present all the sources in greater detail. However, it may be useful here to discuss a diary which, at first, might appear a less coherent choice when considered alongside the selected set of sources. Colonel Pasquale Gagliani's diary epitomizes the complexity of primary sources and of war writings, and enables all *a priori* assumptions about higher-ranking officers, monarchists, and nationalists to be challenged. Gagliani's notebook is able to bridge the set boundaries and present a far more complex picture of support for the war, interventionism, empathy towards soldiers, and criticism towards the ways in which war is conducted.

The sources investigated were in the Archivio Ligure della Scrittura Popolare in Genoa, Archivio e Museo della Guerra in Rovereto, and the Archivio del Diario in Pieve Sant Stefano, in the BDIC/ La contemporaine in Paris and at the Biblioteca Oliveriana Pesaro.

[44] A copy of the manuscript of Gagliani's notebook was consulted at the Archivio in Pieve Santo Stefano. In 2015 it was transcribed and published by Leonardo Magini under the title *La mia prima guerra mondiale, diario di un artigliere dal Carso all'Altipiano di Asiago*, (Tricase: Youcanprint, 2015). The publication is not always faithful to the manuscript version that I consulted in 2012 and of which I have a copy. References to Gagliani's notebook with some images taken from the manuscript are now available within the project Pier Vittorio Buffa and Nicola Maranesi, 'La Grande Guerra I diari raccontano' av. at <http://espresso.repubblica.it/grandeguerra/index.php?page=autore&id=118>.

[45] Giuseppe Manetti, *Maledetta Guerra*, Cristina Chierchini, ed., (Firenze: Pagnini, 2007).

Representativeness of selected sources

The focus on a total of fifteen war writings derives from the necessity to deal with sources in their entirety, to undertake a thorough reading of each and compare their stylistic features and narrative attitudes. The rationale is that of privileging quality over quantity. A source was deemed to be of 'quality' depending on a series of features considered necessary to enable a more reliable observation of the topic investigated: the frequency of writing, the span of the period at war covered, the presence of several addressees for letters and of - conscious or unconscious - self-reflective passages on writing activity in private records. Although it relies on a focused set of specific private writings accomplished by a well-defined group of social actors, the present work should not be seen as failing to propose a structured argument on writing activity at war, nor should it be treated as being moved by the shortsighted and biased pretence of discussing even those groups that are not included.

In an insightful study on ordinary, scarcely literate, soldiers from the lower classes, Vanda Wilcox investigates the ways in which emotions enter their writings and in so doing, she challenges the long-lasting bias in traditional historiography that rigidly relegates Italian simple soldiers for their supposed stoicism and passivity.[46] While exploring the clashes between pre-existing civilian honour codes and the hideous tasks that soldiers were assigned, her article fills a gap and delves into the emotional realm of a group of historical actors who, for reasons ranging

[46] Wilcox, 'Weeping tears of blood', p. 174.

from an initial lack of sources to the problems their stories posed to politics and historiography, received little attention in the first half of the 20th century.

The case of junior officers differs from that of ordinary soldiers for many reasons. The legacies of a mythic Risorgimento to nurture the interventionist narratives merge inextricably with the ambitious projects, individual and collective, that drove them and their middle-class families to mobilize and, at times, volunteer for intervention. Ultimately, if it is true that officers' writings have received greater attention within historiography,[47] it is also true that, as detectable in the sources presented in this thesis, their writings have usually been framed and transmitted in a deformed way, and generally misrepresented. The ultimate aim is that of filling a gap, re-assessing a lacuna and looking for an answer for the silence surrounding some aspects of these junior officers' writings. The omissions characterizing Italian war-time and post-war publications and the historiography on war can be understood further by referring to Jay Winter on the performative role of silence, and his description of silence as a 'socially negotiated space'.[48]

Some features are downplayed by subsequent narratives, especially when highlighted in the publications proposed by fallen officers' families or by those that appeared under Fascism. The tribute they paid to serve the national myths combines realism with fiction, dressing them with selective omissions.[49] However, this communicative milieu impacts on writing activity, leading to some cases of self-

[47] Ibid., p. 173.

[48] Jay Winter, 'War memoirs, witnessing and silence', in Philip G. Dwyer ed., *War stories the war memoir in history and literature* (Berghahn: Oxford, 2017), pp. 26-47.

[49] Philip Dwyer, 'Making sense of the muddle', in Idem, ed., pp. 1-25, here, p. 9.

censorship detectable in officers' letters and in merged with retrospective 'fictionalization' in Gadda's memoir on Caporetto.[50]

Arguing that it is reductive to focus on a rather limited number of junior officers' documents without completing the picture with the writings by other subjects would be entirely right if the goal of this thesis were that of representing the war experience of different Italian actors. However, what this study aims to explore is writing in war, its connection with the bonds, sense of belonging to actual and 'imagined communities', self-projection, assumptions, habits, and expectations pre-dating the conflict of Italian junior officers.

This research proposes to divide the sources into two main groups: those written by officer-writers and those accomplished by writing officers. These definitions are redolent of the already existing notion of 'scrittori in divisa/ writers in uniform'[51] and to the general term *scriventi* as formulated by Roland Barthes and used in the studies of ordinary people's writings.[52]

In the first group are the writer-officers Carlo Emilio Gadda, Paolo Monelli, Giani Stuparich, Piero Jahier and Emilio Lussu.

In the second belong Franco Michelini Tocci, Angelo Campodonico, Giuseppe Zanivolti, Augusto Vivanti, Enzo Valentini, Leonardo Cambini, Pasquale Gagliani, Filippo Guerrieri, Sebastiano Spina, and Antonio Vitelli.

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[50] Geoffrey Mortimer, 'Style and Fictionalisation in eyewitness personal accounts of the Thirty Years Wars' in *German Life and Letters* No. 54, (2001), pp. 97-113.

[51] Mariacristina Ardizzone, ed., *Scrittori in Divisa, memoria, epica e valori umani* (Brescia: Grafo, 2000).

[52] Roland Barthes, 'Scrittori e Scriventi', in Roland Barthes, *Saggi Critici* (Torino: Einaudi, 1972, 2002) pp. 120-128.

It is necessary here to explain the decision to rely also on the five records by officer-writers. The exceptional event that is war seems to reduce the distinction between 'scriventi' and 'scrittori' for two main reasons: the state of emergency and the sensorial stimuli attached to war extend to writing officers the experiential wealth normally reserved to writers. More than this, the capacity attributed to literary authors by Segre who sees them as able to reinvent language and to push it to unforeseen expressive paths becomes accessible even to writing officers.[53] Even the notion of 'writer' itself should, to a certain extent, be softened here because many of them were not yet writers and only became so partly because of their experience at war.

The choice to investigate the notebooks by 'writers in uniform' along with those by 'writing officers' thus responds to a specific goal: that of exploring the impact of war on language and writing. Even though information on literary authors and their work is included in the appendix and the footnotes, a choice has been made here to analyze them as if they were 'writing officers' and only at a later stage consider the subsequent analyses provided on their war notes in the light of their subsequent literary texts (Gadda, Jahier, Stuparich), cultural production (Monelli), or political activity (Lussu). This decision responds to the need not to retrospectively apply perspectives matured at a subsequent stage to the experience of war. The same attitude was held also for writing officers, some of whom became important figures in Italian politics. One example is Guerrieri who was a father of

[53] Daniele Borghi, Alessandra Quintavalle and Riccardo Reina, eds., 'Conversazione con Cesare Segre', Enthymema, vol. 2011 pp. 242-248, here p. 246.

the Italian constitution and a member of parliament; another Zanivolti who secretly hid international political dissidents during the fascist regime. These pieces of information, which are certainly interesting in discussing the legacies of war, cannot be retrospectively adopted as the lens through which to analyze officers' war writings. The risk would be that of emphasising some features while flattening the textual analysis.

The documents which have ultimately entered this thesis were selected from a broader assortment of documents consulted and studied which remain as important preliminary contextual informants of the present work. Among these are the wartime publications consulted in the Genoa archive where a new *'lascito'* (i.e. the fondo Costantini) was acquired, reordered and catalogued during archival research work. The covers, mottos and titles of its books offered many insights on the aspects of the atmosphere characterizing the circulation of interventionist and mobilizing (or re-mobilizing) texts throughout the war era and in its aftermath. Though they lie at the core of this study in playing the role of vital informants, these documents have not entered this thesis as they would have deserved a specific focus. A valuable operation in this realm is that undertaken by Sara Mori in her brilliant essay on Italian publications and reading practices in war.[54] Mario Isnenghi devoted a great deal of his brilliant research to studying wartime publications and

[54] Sara Mori, '"Today they read even those who did not read": Reading Italy during the First World War', in Shafquat Towheed and Edmund G.C. King, eds., *Reading and the First World War Readers, Texts, Archives*, (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2015), pp. 115-129.

the collective take on war that they represented and promoted.[55] This thesis is different in focus, research questions, selection of sources and on the approach to them. Isnenghi tries, and manages, to answer important social, political and historical questions in response to public narratives and quarrels and, occasionally, adopts private writings by professional writers and by ordinary people as testimony. The present thesis starts from the particular, from the inconsistencies existing within a specific collection, then compares that to those emerging in the other documents explored. Finally, it attempts to detect common denominators. Among these common denominators, the lens adjusts to detect features of a collective experience, traces of public discourse, historical legacies, past emotions, collective myths and narratives. These are considered as redolent of local varieties, family traditions, specific linguistic, and possibly even religious or spiritual communicative microcosms. The work conducted by Isnenghi on Piero Jahier is epitomizing in this respect. He considers Jahier's attitude towards recruits through a socio-political lens and he concludes that it is hinted of paternalism, whereas here it is investigated and explored on the basis on his nuanced writing.[56] In line with Silvio Ramat,[57] this thesis is more inclined to describe Jahier's attitude in and

[55] Particularly insghtful for the present work is Mario Isnenghi *Storia d'Italia, I fatti le percezioni dal Risorgimento alla società dello spettacolo* (Laterza: Bari, 2011) and Mario Isnenghi 'La Grande Guerra' in Mario Isneghi, ed., *I Luoghi della memoria strutture ed eventi dell'Italia unita* (Laterza: Bari, 1997), pp. 274-309.

[56] Mario Isnenghi, *Il mito della Grande Guerra. Da Marinetti a Malaparte* (Bari: Laterza,1969) pp.176-180.

[57] Silvio Ramat,'"Qui siamo uniforme" Rileggendo Con me e con gli Alpini' in Mariacristina Ardizzone, ed., *Scrittori in Divisa*, pp. 13-22.

towards war as deeply influenced by his specific Waldensian background (from which he derived his pastoral attitude towards the recruits he instructed) and by family history marked by a traumatic loss that makes him feel responsible for his brother, as in the case with Leonardo Cambini.[58] Jahier's case exemplifies how an officer's spiritual family legacies, no matter whether welcomed or denied, cannot be omitted while investigating war writings.

Between doctrine and belief: between *langue* and *parole*[59]

The dichotomy between *langue* and *parole* proposed by De Saussure to define respectively the set of shared norms in language and the creative use of it is adopted in this section to draw a parallel between language and faith. These categories could prove useful to discuss the encounter between the institutional religion presented by the army (and compared to the 'langue') and the private forms in which faith and belief were experienced, lived and reworked by combatants (compared to the 'parole'). This dichotomy has been widely addressed and studied in depth and has emerged as a common trait in war.[60] The co-existence of both aspects and the contact between them is touched upon here in connection with the debate on the renegotiation of new languages, new jargon, and new communicative practices and the imagery underlying them. Religion represents a

[58] After the loss of Cambini's mother he looked after his younger brothers, the same happened to Jahier after his father committed suicide.

[59] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Corso di Linguistica Generale*, Tullio de Mauro, ed., (Roma: Laterza, 2009) (du Seuil, 1964) pp. 3-25.

[60] Edward Madigan, *Faith under fire Anglican army chaplains and the Great War*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2011).

fruitful aspect to be observed in writing as it is covered in several ways depending on many factors.

As a legacy deriving from the Risorgimento, there was a long-time mutual diffidence between the Italian government and the Church, intended as the Vatican institution. Especially from the outbreak of war on, the Church was monitored and, in war zones, there were many instances in which clergymen were accused of being defeatists, spies or supporters of Austria.[61] However, even in Italy, as was the case in other countries, war was considered by the Church to be too important an occasion to be excluded from: it appeared a chance to foster a spiritual and faith renewal and to reach out to broader groups of men.[62] This led the Vatican from an initial neutral position to one of fervent interventionism in 1915 when Catholics were mobilized through the Church.[63] However, the Pope's intention to be recognized as a supranational voice culminated in his Call for Peace on 1 August 1917, one against which many nationalists reacted strongly, as testified by several newspaper articles, and, among the sources considered, by Colonel Pasquale Gagliani's notebook and Lieutenant Cambini's letter collection.[64] Behind these

[61] Paiano, 'La Religione', p. 339.

[62] For a thorough discussion on the expectation and outcomes about war as a 'reviver of religion', see Edward Madigan, *Faith under fire*, p. 171.

[63] Maria Paiano, 'La religione nella guerra' in Nicola Labanca, ed., *Dizionario storico della prima guerra mondiale*, (Bari: Laterza, 2014), pp. 333- 342, here p. 333. On the modernization of the Vatican throughout WWI, see Patrick J. Houlihan, 'Local Catholicism as transnational war experience: everyday religious practice in occupied Northern France, 1914-1918', in *Central European History*, vol. 45 No. 2 (June 2012) pp. 233-267, here pp. 247-248 .

[64] See the poem 'Udite e Rispondete' published on 22 September 1917 in *La Provincia Pavese* signed with the pseudonym ‘Bertoldo’ probably (my guess) in order to recall the strong remobilizing activity by

reactions lurked the traumatic memory of the allocution of 29 April 1848 through which Pope Pio IX retreated from his initial support for Piedmont in the fight against Austria's dominion.[65] Due to the Austrian dominion and to the subsequent fight against it, the urban areas and students' societies of 'Lombardo-Veneto' were fairly mobilized against Austria throughout the Risorgimento. Pavia in particular, due to its traditional political commitment and the participation of its students as volunteers during the Cinque Giornate di Milano and later on to the Expedition of the Thousand, had a strong mobilizing tradition.[66] However, even in Lombardy, countryside areas were closer to Catholicism and were mobilized at a later stage and to a minor degree.[67]

Investigating the British army, Edward Madigan argues that war enabled chaplains to observe and compare soldiers' forms of belief.[68] This is also the case in Italy where combatants brought to the trenches their regional and vernacular traditions, family cults and rituals. An attentive observation of these features was

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Luigi Grillo, the military chaplain of the royal 'fregata Bertoldo'. This resulted in the publication of a poem entitled 'Fuori i Barbari!!!' in Luigi Grillo, *L'armistizio Salasco con documenti relativi* (Ancona: tipografia Aureli e C., 1849). For further insight on Luigi Grillo, see Arisi Rota, *Risorgimento*, p. 209.

[65] Arisi Rota, *Risorgimento*, pp. 198-199, G. Martina, 'Nuovi documenti sull'allocuzione del 29 Aprile 1848' in *Rassegna Storica del Risorgimento*, N. 53, 1966, pp. 527-582, and Ignazio Veca, *Il mito di Pio IX. Storia di un papa liberale e nazionale* (Roma: Viella, 2018).

[66] Arisi Rota, 'La gioventù delle università come avanguardia politica: per una fenomenologia dello studente patriota', in A. Ferraresi and Elisa Signori, eds., *Le università e l'Unità d'Italia (1848-1870)* (Bologna: Clueb, 2012) pp. 281-290.

[67] This is a common denominator to be found across time and space. See, for instance, the diverse level of adhesion to secularization in different areas of revolutionary France discussed in Joseph Clarke, *Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France*, *Revolution and Remembrance*, 1789-1799 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 273-288, here, p. 286.

[68] Madigan, *Faith*, p. 171.

undertaken in Italy by Father Gemelli and resulted in the publication of *Il nostro soldato. Saggi di psicologia militare*.[69] The study stated the importance of religion not only in supporting soldiers at war but also in educating, nurturing and reinforcing the newly-born nation in arms. However, Gemelli also admitted that the adhesion to faith was far from being driven by orthodox religious fervor but rather by a profound psychological need related to soldiers' life at war.[70] His attempt, in the course of war, to promote the cult of the *Sacro Cuore*, in order to unify rituals around a common religious cult, failed as soldiers (and officers) remained devoted to the saints, cults, practices, superstitions and celebrations from their villages or cities of origin, and to those specifically embraced by their families.[71] On the success to promote a shared orthodox doctrine, one could argue for Italy what is argued by Madigan for the British army: that, in spite of the efforts made to seize the occasion, war 'was a poor reviver of religion'.[72]

The Italian army and government were aware of the role of religion as an important support and motivating factor for men at war: Cadorna had already, in 1915, reintroduced the figure of military chaplain that was eliminated between 1865-1878 and assigned one to each Regiment, recognizing him the rank and pay of a lieutenant.[73] In total, 24,446 clergymen were mobilized, including 15,000 soldiers

[69] Agostino Gemelli, *Il nostro soldato. Saggi di psicologia militare* (Milano: Treves, 1917).

[70] Paiano, 'La Religione', p. 334.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Madigan, *Faith*, p. 171.

[73] Ibid., p. 335.

and 2,400 military chaplains. From June 1915, nine chaplains were also ordered, both Waldensian and Jewish.[74]

A few observations on religion and faith, intended both as shared legacies and as private forms of spirituality, appear necessary. This is not only because this theme is central to the war experience in Italy and on an international level but also, and most relevantly, as this theme is covered frequently in the set of war writings considered. Therefore, they provide some further insights that are worthy of attention. This thesis aims to propose a focused and cautious observation of the ways in which these religion-related topics are covered in the set of sources investigated, paying attention to the audience addressed when referring to the letters, and to the circumstances of writing for the private records.

Faith and even religious practice may also be included in diaries as a consequence of the nostalgic recalling of a loved person who was particularly keen on religion. In this case, we witness a mutual influence between the person recalled and the religious immersion re-enacted in writing. However, precisely because of the audience-oriented coverage, a few problems emerge when exploring religion, faith and belief in letters. The most relevant is that what is openly or explicitly addressed rarely represent a truthful insight of the officer's actual adhesion to faith or respect of religious norms and practices. Most of the time, in fact, it reveals the level of religiosity of the receiver and is used as a reassuring shared topic and/or language (a further identity and communicative anchor). There is a tendency to mention faith and religiosity in letters to younger sisters, mothers or wives, in some cases even

[74] Paiano, 'La Religione', p. 334.

with male friends or relatives if they are particularly close to the Church (as is the case with Cambini's father).[75] Even when it comes to private records, it appears difficult to discern whether what is written represents a temporary need or a more general inclination. This connection between audience and religion, or faith, is crucial when assessing the way in which religion is covered in letters but it also opens up to the issue of 'relational identities', different emotions and communicative styles associated with different audiences and influenced by the receiver's gender.[76]In some Italian urban nationalist circles, and in some traditionally military milieux, 'religion tended to be viewed in the minds of men as something feminine and unmanly'.[77]

The aspect of language and imagery remains the main angle through which the coverage of religion, spirituality, ritual, old scriptures and superstition is examined.

Beyond the divide between written and oral sources

The categories of *langue* and *parole* are also relevant while considering the lively oral dimension of writing. This is a trait that characterized writing in other eras and that is hardly unique for Italy and for the First World War. However, in Italy it is connected to the search for a shared language perceived as a primary

[75] The issue of gender and faith see Madigan, *Faith*, p. 200.

[76] On emotions see Wilcox, 'Weeping tears of blood', p. 172, on audiences see Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula* (Milano: Bombiani, 1985), on relational identities see Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in everyday Life*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990) (Anchor, 1959).

[77] Madigan, *Faith*, p. 200.

concern as testified by the activity of De Amicis.[78] However, the interest for the oral dimension of writing also characterizes the education promoted in military academies through a series of reading and instructions concerning written and spoken orders.[79] Quinto Antonelli's observation on the difference between oral and written sources, and on the type of history that they enable, were of crucial importance for this study.[80] The research, in fact, draws inspiration from the historiography on oral sources and tries to find the freer attitude more suited to the oral dimension embedded in the written documents.[81] In order to do so, attention is directed towards different writing attitudes, styles, words, phrases and metaphors in a search for the 'breaking point' of writing and of a removed oral dimension that, from time to time, surfaces unfiltered in these documents. At other times it is censored, silenced or framed by euphemism.

[78] Matteo Grassano, 'Nodi e ambiguità di un ideale parlato. Appunti sulla riflessione linguistica di Edmondo De Amicis' in Giuseppe Polimeni and Massimo Prada, eds., *'Di scritto e di parlato' Antiche e nuove diamesie*, (Milano: Italianolinguadue, 2017), pp. 42-55.

[79] Michela Dota, 'Contaminazioni Diamesiche e didattica del parlato nella manualsitica per le scule reggimentali', in Giuseppe Polimeni and Massimo Prada, eds., idem, pp. 55- 72.

[80] Quinto Antonelli, 'La Grande Guerra L'Ora dei Testimoni', In Fabio Caffarena and Nancy Murzilli, eds., *In Guerra con le Parole*, *Il primo conflitto mondiale dalle testimonianze scritte alla memoria multimediale*, (Trento: Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino, 2018) pp. 35-52, here p.39.

[81] Alessandro Casellato, 'Il Mestiere della storia orale. Stato dell'arto e buone pratiche' in ARCHIVIO TRENTINO, vol. 1/2016, pp. 75-102. Cesare Bermani, ed., *Introduzione alla Storia Orale, Storia conservazione delle fonti e problemi di metodo* (Roma: Odradek 1999), Giovanni Contini and Alfredo Martini, eds., *Verba manent.L'uso delle fonti orali per lastoria contemporanea* (Roma: NIS, 1993), Elizabeth Tonkin, *Raccontare i nostri passati. La costruzione sociale della storia orale*, (Roma Armando 2000).

Caffarena's reasoning on the blurred boundaries between source categories and on the inadequacy of most of the necessary terminology formulated to define them suggests the idea that some officers could be considered, to a certain extent, as ordinary people at war. Combat officers' writings have therefore been considered with an eye to the oral dimension and dialectal influence.[82] Caffarena's observations on fragilities and on the notions of 'ordinary people's writings' and 'ego-documents' or 'Selbstzeugnisse' used within historiography, to name a complex set of documents, have oriented and informed the critical approach to the sources considered.[83]

Methodology

The work on sources resulted from the confrontation with different methodological approaches to the study of the war experience and war mentalities, but also from the direct impact of the sources. This thesis hopes to build a new intersection between different historiographical paths and ideally, in terms of method, among different disciplines.

In terms of methods, the thesis borrows certain strategies of structuralism,[84] applies some notions on the role of language from linguistics and uses certain studies on words as complex signs and audiences from semiotics- in analysing the

[82] Fabio Caffarena, 'Scritture in cerca di parole' in *Scritture non comuni una fonte per la storia contemporanea*, (Milano: Unicopli, 2016) pp. 15-27.

[83] Fabio Caffarena, 'Il fronte delle parole. Scritture della Grande Guerra', in Piero Conti, Giuliana Franchini and Antonio Gibelli eds. *Storie di gente comune nell'Archivio Ligure della Scrittura Popolare*, (Genova: Editrice Impressioni Grafiche, 2002), pp. 81-111, here, p. 92.

[84] Gérard Genette, *I Palinsesti*, *la letteratura al secondo grado* (Torino: Einaudi, 1997).

texts.[85] These sources were first examined at length in their purely textual and paratextual elements; they were then re-evaluated in the light of the specific background and writing context and, finally, were compared and contrasted with the other sources. Particularly relevant was the notion of 'dialogism' formulated by Bakhtin to explain intertextuality, along with his 'responsive understanding' of texts.[86]

The comparative and contrastive strategies adopted to explore the documents were also applied to every single source. These might present great differences in terms of writing attitude, level of commitment to war or the capacity to recount it at different stages and in different circumstances . All the documents are given further attention in the appendix.

The analysis of sources rests on the assumption that letters in particular (but also private records written with an imagined audience in mind) are placed 'at the intersection between the individual and the collective dimension.'[87] 'Ego-documents', that is the set of private writings including letters, diaries, notebooks, and memoirs, pose a series of methodological problems when used in historiography. However, they are particularly informative on the individual

[85] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Corso di Linguistica Generale*, Tullio de Mauro, ed., (Roma: Laterza, 2009) (du Seuil, 1964). Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana UP (1984) and Roland Barthes, *Elementi di Semiologia*, Gianfranco Marrone, ed., (Torino: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 2002) (Gonthier, 1965).

[86] Tzvetan Todorov, 'Intertestualità' in idem, *Mihail Bakhtin. Il Principio dialogico* (Torino: Einuadi, 1981).

[87] John Horne, 'Pubblica o Privata? La corrispondenza intima durante la Grande Guerra' in Caffarena and Murzilli, eds., *In Guerra con le Parole*, pp. 55-64, here p. 56.

perception of the person writing and, given the focus of the present thesis, i.e. the connection between writing attitude and experience of war, they represent the crucial set of primary sources upon which to base the observation.[88]

While considering letters and private sources in their peculiar traits, however, this thesis takes account of Gibelli's warning that in no way should the focus on the particular and the subjectivities behind writing exclude consideration of the broader picture.[89] On the subtle connection between letters and witnessing even the work by Bernd Ulrich represents a crucial compass by which to identify some of the central problems.[90] Ulrich underlines the close bond between letters and the society in which they are written. Building on Ulrich's suggestion, this thesis indicates different societies (those on the home front and in the army) that emerge during the conflict and which are described in letters and diaries. These new war societies inhabit different landscapes, are described with specific images, speak peculiar 'family lexicons', and share newly negotiated sets of values. Even different military units could be seen as different societies to a certain extent because they

[88] Lena Sowada and Sybille Große, 'Gli Ego-documenti della Grande Guerra' in Caffarena and Murzilli, eds., *In Guerra con le Parole* pp. 81-93.

[89] Antonio Gibelli, 'Un fiume Carsico tornato alla luce scritture di guerra di gente comune' in Caffarena and Murzilli, eds., *In Guerra con le Parole*, pp. 17-31, here 26.

[90] Bernd Ulrich, 'Feldpostbriefe und Augenzeugenschaft - Einleitung' in Bernd Ulrich, *Die Augenzeugen. Deutsche Feldpostbriefe in Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit 1914-1933,* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1997) pp. 11-38.

retain a specific status both as 'actual' and as 'imagined communities'. A striking example might be represented by the Alpini corps.[91]

Writing activity in war is intended here in the sense suggested by Gibelli which attributes to it a whole range of functions, among them bridging the distance from home, coping with the sense of confusion, enduring war while at the same time witnessing it. Gibelli defines writing activity in war as a crucial tool of the 'defence of what is human' and sees it now as a vital element through which to gain a further grasp on what that historical period was.[92]

From the rich historiography on ordinary people and illiterate and semi-literate soldiers this thesis borrows a series of methodological approaches, such as the attention to the broader socio-cultural background and everyday life habits, both pre-dating war and those developed throughout the conflict as factors able to influence soldiers' experience of war, military conduct, and writing attitudes.[93] In line with this approach, but considering literate and cultured officers, this thesis observes the way in which bonds, contexts, previous readings and values predating wartime entered the war experience and war writing. It also aims to bridge the gap that exists within Italian historiography - as a legacy of the fascist era - Like soldiers,

[91] For a thorough discussion on the regional recruitment and cohesion of different units, see Wilcox 'Leadership, Command Culture and organization', in *Morale and the Italian Army during the First World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) pp. 21-43, here p. 24.

[92] Antonio Gibelli, 'Un fiume Carsico' in Caffarena and Murzilli, eds., *In Guerra con le Parole,* pp. 17-31, here p. 24.

[93] Gianluigi Fait, Diego Leoni, Fabrizio Rasera, and Camillo Zadra, 'La Scrittura Popolare della Guerra (Diari di combattenti trentini)' in Diego Leoni and Camillo Zadra, eds., *La Grande Guerra: Esperienza, Memoria, Immagini* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986), pp. 105-135, here p. 135.

they express their need to remain close to the habits of their reassuring, at times rural, small communities (as is the case with Filippo Guerrieri when he recalls his village Monti and the tradition -derived from the religious ritual- of reuniting the family for a hearty Sunday lunch).

In dialogue with Omodeo: historiography or war memorial?

The work of Adolfo Omodeo is discussed here in order to explain further certain aspects of this thesis that range from the selection of sources to the research questions that underlie it.[94] The first reason to undertake a dialogue with Omodeo is that his work had huge repercussions on Italian historiography. Secondly, several works considered in this thesis were first considered by Omodeo, as is the case with the letter collections of Angelo Campodonico, Enzo Valentini and Leonardo Cambini and with the published notebook by Giani Stuparich *Guerra del '15* and Jahier's *Con me e con gli Alpini*. Thirdly, and most relevantly for this work, the confrontation with Omodeo's study fostered the development of a different approach to the sources.

The merit of Omodeo's work lies in the fact that it presented the set of sources considered, mainly letters and private records by upper-middle class combat officers, as incredibly informative material for historiography through which to understand the mentality of this group in pre-war and in wartime. In this sense, his work is more than insightful and provides a great contribution to the

[94] Adolfo Omodeo, *Momenti di Guerra, Dai Diari e Dalle Lettere dei Caduti 1915-1918*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1968) (Bari: Laterza, 1934).

historiography of war. Omodeo's source base is similar to that considered in this thesis. However, there are differences in the choice of sources and in the way of dealing with them, even when the same sources have been addressed.

The title of Omodeo's work indicates his intentions, as an ex-combatant and as a scholar, in the light of both a personal and collective need, namely to celebrate the sacrifice for the nation and, in the light of the losses, reaffirm the values that made such a sacrifice worthy and even necessary. The subtitle specifies 'Dai diari e dalle lettere dei caduti 1915-1918', thus making a statement that these letter collections and private records were published in effect as semi-private war memorials, or as epitaphs on paper, by the families of the fallen officers.[95] This aspect characterizes collections or diaries published immediately after the war.[96]

The sacred tone that is noted in the paratextual elements that frame them (forewords by family members or former military comrades, letters of condolence, etc.) initially acted, even for this study, as a deterrent to the critical handling of the materials they included. To a certain extent, this reluctance to represent all aspects and feelings detected in the letters could be explained through that sense of intimidation a researcher may experience while consulting sensitive material as 'Death is always a parochial affair, a matter for family and friends'.[97] Therefore, the

[95] The attention to the paratextual elements is derived from Gérard Genette, *I Palinsesti*, *la letteratura al secondo grado*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1997).

[96] Fabrizio Dolci and Oliver Janz, eds., *Non omnis moriar. Gli opuscoli di necrologio per i caduti italiani nella Grande* Guerra, (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e di Letteratura, 2003).

[97] Joseph Clarke, *Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France*, *Revolution and Remembrance*, 1789-1799 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 288.

fear really resulted from an unwillingness to challenge what the family of the fallen officer so accurately staged within the editorial choices and paratextual elements attached to the publication.[98] The sensation was similar to that of desecrating the officer's grave, negating part of what his family said about him, defiling what, due to historical reasons and necessity, had become not only a family but potentially a collective war memorial. Omodeo steers well away from testing these assumptions; rather, he reinforces and replicates them through his selection of letters and commentaries and through the language sustaining his operation.

This sense of deference, respect for the sanctity of those sources which are more similar to war memorials rather than to published letter collections, is a feeling from which even the author of this thesis struggled to escape. It is a sensation that resembles that of entering a place of worship when inadequately dressed or of stepping on someone’s grave. In spite of this, the author tries to explore this set of writings with a critical eye going beyond the representation provided of junior officers' through the close reading and comaprison of this focused set of war writings.

Evaluating the actual or projected expectations, past or present, of the writing officer’s families lurking behind the letter collections published in the post-war era to celebrate fallen officers' sacrifice, is a challenging task. These publications not only respond to the need to share mourning, or to restitute an image of these officers that is perceived as the one they wanted to project. To a certain degree, they also respond to families' and societies' need to tone down the

sense of guilt and worry at having been shortsighted while promoting youngsters' sacrifice at war.[99]

A work of cultural history with a few multidisciplinary crossings

This thesis is the result of the confrontation with the multifaceted cultural history of the WWI. The approach to the study of war writings recalls the theories that have inspired work in the field of cultural history. The in-depth descriptive model by Geertz, along with what in literary studies is defined as the abundance of meanings, have informed the respectful approach to the complexity of documents.[100] The warnings on the consideration of temporalities introduced by Leopold von Ranke, and developed further by Koselleck and Kern, have been adopted as lenses through which to view war.[101] On the Italian side, the observation by Benigno on the obsolescence of words and on their constant redefinition has proved particularly relevant in order to place the words from each document in the right perspective to try to avoid mistakes or hyper-interpretation. The work by Ricoeur on the connection between temporalities and narrative and the study by Leonard Smith on

[99] Oliver Janz, 'Famiglia e Nazione. La memoria dei caduti della prima guerra mondiale nella borghesia italiana' in Oliver Janz and Fabrizio Dolci *Non omnis moriar. La memoria dei caduti nella grande guerra, Mostra documentaria,* (Roma: Museo Centrale del Risorgimento), pp. 5-16, here p. 9.

[100] Clifford Geertz, 'Thick description: toward an interpretive description of culture' in *The interpretation of cultures selected essays*, (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1973) pp.3-30.

[101] Theodore H. von Laue, *Leopold von Ranke, The formative Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1950). Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1979); idem, *Zeitgeschichten. Studien zur Historik* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 2000), Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Space and Time 1880-1918*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1983, 2003) and Francesco Benigno, *Parole nel tempo*, (Rome: Viella, 2013).

war accounts and narratives and on the connection between projected subjectivities and writing were particularly insightful.[102] Alan Kramer and John Horne's exploration on German Atrocities has been considered as an insightful study on the connection between collective emotional states and the spreading of rumours.[103] The insights of the work on atrocities have been set in a dialogue with literary and stylistic analysis and with Bakhtin's theory in order to observe the impact of the rout of Caporetto, both as a military setback and as a breakdown, on officers' writings. The study of the reception horizon of texts matured within the field of hermeneutics by Schleiermacher was the essential toolkit that accompanied this journey.[104] Ezio Raimondi, in his self-reflective book on the reading experience *Le Voci dei Libri*, is held as a compass through which to further thematize the quotes, references, echoes, atmospheres, images and religious mantra which recur in officers' letters and notebooks.[105] The reference to the oral dimension of his book explicitly recalls the oral and acoustic dimension as part of the reading experience. This is crucial for the present work, which also grants great importance to another concept connecting the sound of certain words and phrases to experience and shape memory, that is the 'family lexicon' as formulated by Natalia

[102] Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1985) and Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007).

[103] John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914. A History of Denial*, (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2001).

[104] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[105] Ezio Raimondi *Le Voci dei libri* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012).

Ginzburg. Of further interest for the present thesis is the research carried out at an international level on the theme of reading in war.[106]

From Clifford Geertz's 'thick analysis' model it borrows the intents, the idea of the complexity and, to a certain extent, mysterious nature of communication and the ambition to provide an explanation to aspects not yet covered as well as providing a new perspective on those already covered. However, this work is also conscious of the fact that, as Geertz might say: 'cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete.' His arguments on this incompleteness is the compass with which the author started out on the research path and with which this labyrinthine piece of writing emerged.

The notion of relational identities formulated by Erving Goffman and stating that identity is developed, constructed, and adjusted/renegotiated depending upon the context and the audience, has proved particularly insightful.[107] The double-bind theory formulated by Bateson was adopted in this thesis as a means of understanding certain aspects of both family and national communication in war, which have been often described as paradoxical and absurd.[108] This communicative scheme has been adopted as a further lens through which to observe war writings and put them into perspective.

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[106] Shafquat Towheed and Edmund G.C. King eds., *Reading and the First World War Readers, Texts, Archives*, (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2015).

[107] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in everyday Life*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990) (Anchor, 1959).

[108] Marco Deriu ed., *Gregory Bateson*, (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2000) and Max Visser, 'Gregory Bateson on Deutero-Learning and Double Bind: A Brief Conceptual History', in *Journal of History of the Behavioural Sciences*, vol. 39 (3) Summer 2003, pp. 269-278.

Thesis structure

The first three chapters deal specifically with the impact of war on language and the different forms of communication it engendered. The first chapter focuses on the encounter between different lexicons, officers' family and home village lexicons and the new military jargon imposed on men at war. However, it also observes the birth of hybridized lexicons, and even more of new family lexicons that matured within the new families at arms. The second chapter explores literature, in the form of shared readings, of evoked images, and identification with the author's experiences, as an identity anchor and as a further common denominator in fostering mutual understanding in letters. The idea of reinforcing communication through a shared language and through a series of common values and norms lies at the centre of the chapter on family communication in war.

The chapter on the sense of justice in war investigates a series of emotions such as the sense of disorientation, frustration and resentfulness resulting from the rapid obsolescence of peace-time values and norms. These are invalidated and subverted by war, yet may still be accepted on the home front. The increasing war front/home front divide accompanying the collapse of this vital common ground of values and norms results in a sense of vertigo. This is experienced both by families on the home front and their sons at war. Private records are rich in reflections on this change, but also ponder the ways in which the sense of injustice is dealt with and possibly fought at war. Even in this respect language assumes a crucial role, becoming both the tool with which this increasing divide is framed, lamented, put

into perspective, and the field in which a new sense of justice and an emerging legal mindset are elaborated.

The chapter on landscape and combat represents the central element of this work, where experience and language meet more closely to show the mutual influence they exercise on each other. Places suggest renaming, whereas the new toponymy evokes specific experiences of war, as is the case with the 'lake of death' described by Stuparich. The name is adopted for the high number of corpses in it, but, at the same time, the name remains as a scar, haunting the area, providing it with a negative aura that stays in soldiers' memory and interaction with the space. The encounter and the renegotiation with space, observed through the studies by Le Febvre and De Certeau, impact on writing and foster new forms of representation and a new language for it.[109] Language and writing become both a source of what Lars Frers and Lars Meier call 'envelopment', that is a form of protection and a selective barrier from what surrounds us and a further means of total connection with the surrounding landscape.[110] The sensorial aspects of experience are investigated further in the chapter on combat, one that devotes attention to the theme of post-traumatic synaesthesia as a result of the encounter with combat in highly technological and destructive warfare. Even here, language is

[109] Henri Lefèbvre, *The Production of Space,* (Malden: Blackwell, 1991; 1974) Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: UCalPress 1984).

[110] Lars Frers, 'Perception, Aesthetics, and Envelopment - Encountering Space and Materiality', in Lars Frers and Lars Meier, eds., *Encountering Urban Places: Visual and Material Performances in the City*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) pp. 25-45, here p. 35.

both the result of post-traumatic synaesthesia and an attempt to treat it or elaborate it.

The focus on the impact of individual trauma on private records and letter-writing prepares the ground for the chapter on the rout at Caporetto, where private and collective traumas meet. This provides the occasion to explore the contrast between different perspectives and narratives and the narrator's construction and the stylistic choices that characterize the emotional state following the military collapse and its symbolic relevance.

The appendix presents the translated quotes, the status and biography of the officers, and further information about the nature of the publications of their letter collections and notebooks. On the influence and impact exercised by WWI on language, the work by Alfredo Panzini is of great interest. In some entries of his *Modern Dictionary of the words you would not find in other Dictionaries*, Panzini introduces some terms which entered Italian throughout and because of the conflict as 'voce della guerra'/'terms of war'.[111] Therefore, a selection of terms described by Panzini in his *Modern Dictionary* are included in the appendix; a couple of soldiers' songs attacking volunteers and defining ironically the different military corps, and a selection of documents poking fun at the recruits of '99 who still 'wet the bed'. There is a reference to the first appearance of the nickname 'Cecco' for Cecco Beppo, one which dates back to Giusti's poem 'Dies Irae', celebrating the death of the Austrian Emperor Franz II, called simply Cecco. Finally,

[111] Alfredo Panzini, *Dizionario Moderno delle Parole che non si trovano negli altri dizionari*, (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1935).

there is a description, provided by Carlo Cima, of the happiness of the Milanese people for the less strict controls in force in Lombardo Veneto announced by Franz Joseph. The appendix proposes a journey that leads from the legacies of the Risorgimento to World War I, and then to the complex use of them that was made throughout the conflict. It is meant to provide a more complete perspective on the discourse made on private communication, offering insights on the hybridization of several discourses, at both a synchronic and diachronic level. A few articles from *La Provincia Pavese* echoed the sentiments expressed in the *Corriere della Sera* and are presented as a sample of the atmosphere characterizing the home front in 1917. The appendix includes a series of photographs offering a visual compound to certain concepts and themes investigated in the thesis.

'Domesticating' and 'foreignizing' war

The notion of 'language shock' could help to understand the cognitive and emotional encounter with war both for those officers who were new to military life, and for those who were already used to it. Even experienced officers such as Lieutenant Guerrieri and Colonel Gagliani realized that WWI was different from previous wars both in its facts and in its communicative aspects. The concept of 'domesticating' and 'foreignizing', borrowed from translation studies and defining two possible effects of different translation choices on the audience, are thus useful to put this thesis into perspective and describe the observation on sources and the

translation reserved to them.[112] The 'domesticating approach' smoothes differences and translates them into understandable terms in order to make life easier for the reader. By contrast, the 'foreignizing approach' maintains the elements of difference and discontinuities and thus requires an effort on the part of the reader. The second approach is the one privileged in this thesis, not only in terms of the translation of primary sources but also in relation to the way in which sources are represented: the original text is prioritized over its English translation. However, the foreignizing attitude is also applied to the role and content of sources, which are investigated, compared and contrasted without having in mind a preset thesis to demonstrate.

The need to confront the sources directly and in depth lies at the core of the decision to provide a new translation even for those sources which had already been translated into English, as is the case with Monelli and Lussu. This should not be mistaken as presumption but the opposite, namely an attempt to contrast through the direct confrontation with language the sense of uncertainty experienced while engaging with the documents. Remaining close to their texts, first through a close reading of them, then through a thorough investigation of their different parts, became not solely a research necessity but also a way to contrast the fear of distancing the interpretation from the actual documents. 'Domesticating' and 'foreignizing' processes proved particularly informative when approaching the theme of the officers' encounter with the new languages of war,

[112] Lawrence Venuti, 'Introduction', in idem, *The Translator's invisibility A History of Translation*, (New York & London: Routledge, 2018) pp. vii- xix, here p. xiv.

both the military jargon and the new family lexicon of men at arms. This encounter, translated in letters to families back home or were recorded in diaries as a sort of vocabulary entry, is the object of analysis of the first chapter of this thesis.

If some approaches in terms of presenting and eventually translating war to those at home or to future imagined audiences might be seen as prevailing in some officers' writings, depending on their own subjectivity, they are also deeply influenced by the various circumstances of war. The initial phase of entering war is thus the one of translation, be it 'domesticating' or 'foreignizing'. Then, depending on the front and on the actual war front and military unit, officers respond to the actual war experience, and to its languages, with different writing and linguistic attitudes.

Due to the complexity of the source sets considered and to the analysis conducted on them, this work is conceived as a comparative observation of sources. These have been considered with the same methodological approach, which consists of a close reading supported by linguistic and literary analysis, informed by semiotics and contextualized according to pre-existing research on writing activity in WWI and on war mentalities.

The analysis of the language of sources, however, far from being the end point of this work, has instead been adopted as tool to shed further light on some aspects of communication in war and writing in relation to the war experience. Linguistic and literary analyses are thus adopted to delve into war mentalities, the war experience, an evolving sense of belonging and, even more, into the subtle

connection, and mutual influence, between the experience of war and officers' writing activity throughout the conflict.

Chapter 1

War lexicon as a family lexicon

Introduction

This chapter investigates the encounter with the new language of war as a crucial experience recorded by officers in both their letters and diaries. Language is understood here as a form of lexicon, a precise and characteristic mode of communication which emerges in specific contexts and stages of war. On the influence and impact exercised by WWI on language, the work by Alfredo Panzini is of great interest. In some entries of his *Modern Dictionary of the words you would not find in other Dictionaries*, Panzini introduces some terms which entered Italian throughout and because of the conflict as 'voce della guerra'/'terms of war'.[113] Letters are considered here as the ambassadors of a peculiar language, a language that has its roots in the pre-war period, and certainly is a 'family lexicon' of sort.[114] Throughout the conflict this is kept alive through writing, but it is inevitably influenced by events and by the new language, and new family and military lexicon, engendered by war itself. The reason why the concept of family lexicon by Natalia Ginzburg is adopted as the main source of inspiration for this chapter needs explaining. Ginzburg's novel represents not only a way of writing about the past but also a way of experiencing life through language, and therefore to recall experience

[113] Alfredo Panzini, *Dizionario Moderno delle Parole che non si trovano negli altri dizionari*, (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1935). A list of relevant entries taken from the diary is reported in the appendix.

[114] Natalia Ginzburg, *Lessico Famigliar*e (Torino: Einuadi, 2010) (1963).

through its linguistic-acoustic representation and the images and multi-sensorial dimension attached to it.[115] Moreover, in her novel, the phrases of her family lexicon represent the cognitive and emotional structures through which to make sense of events and build identity and memory over time.

The entire thesis addresses the connection between language and experience but this chapter, in particular, directs specific attention to lexicons (both past and newly born) as an important form of 'intimacy' and as a tool to prevent identity dispersion.[116]

Keeping in mind Koselleck's warnings on the temporal dimension of concepts and of the lexicon expressing them thus proves essential, not only when considering the writings dating back to WWI in general, but also when 'zooming in' on a specific letter and observing the evolution of its lexicon in response to the experience of war, to the circumstance of writing and to the developments and change in the relation to the targeted audience (most of the time the family of origin).[117] The letters sent to women usually differ from those sent to men, both in content and in form; this trait is often explicit in officers' letters. Similarly, officers reflect on the differences between letters sent by their mothers and by their fathers. This is due not only to the different forms of communication held as appropriate according to a general view of gender, but also due to the different

[115]Giuseppina Terragrossa, 'Natalia Ginzburg e Lessico Famigliare' av at <http://www.raiscuola.rai.it/articoli-programma-puntate/giuseppina-torregrossa-natalia-ginzburg-e-lessico-famigliare/29115/default.aspx>.

[116] Antonio Gibelli, *L'Officina della Guerra* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991).

[117] Reinhart Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006).

nature characterizing the bond with mothers and fathers. Even here, however, there are exceptions that are ingrained in the evolution of the relationship with family members. This aspect is investigated more extensively in the third chapter. Nonetheless, the theory pertaining to targeted audiences is a vital compass with which to navigate the entire thesis.

Audiences might be both actual and imagined, both synchronic and diachronic. Moreover, unintended audiences might become the actual public of a private document, for instance letters addressed to one reader might end up being read by other members of the family or by a broader audience of acquaintances. Epitomizing this is the case of Campodonico's letter of 25 September 1916. This was published by his family in Il Caffaro, a local newspaper from Genoa, without his consent. From his letter of 18 February 1917 Campodonico's disappointment emerges clearly as he defines it 'una strana idea'/ 'a weird idea'.[118] Behind this 'weird idea' lies not only the reluctance to see a private message disclosed publicly without his consent, but also, with all probability, the skepticism towards some ideas or tones characterizing it which, re-evaluated six months later, might have appeared obsolete or no longer in correspondence with his grasp or view of war.

The introduction has briefly reflected upon the blurred boundaries between the written and oral dimensions in war writings. Letters and private records differ in many respects, as do contemporary and retrospective writing.[119] However,

[118] Angelo Campodonico, *Lauri di gloria*, p. 126.

[119] Diego Leoni, 'Scrivere in Guerra. Diari e Memorie Autobiografiche', in *Materiali di Lavoro*, No. 1-2, pp. 77-85. Armando Petrucci, *Scrivere Lettere Una Storia Plurimillenaria* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2008), Fabio Caffarena, *Lettere dalla Grande Guerra. Scritture del Quotidiano, Monumenti della Memoria, Fonti per la*

sometimes their boundaries are more blurred than one would expect as diary entries might become letters to a loved person recalled and letters can be used as future private records or as detailed notes for a future retrospective recollection and memoir.[120] In the former case, the author starts out by being the main audience of his writings which then reach to other readers; in the latter, he ends up becoming a future audience for his own writing.

It would be short-sighted, not to say impossible, to address these lexicons without paying the due attention to both 'signifier', i.e. words' physical structure, and 'signified', i.e. word meanings as they were envisaged by Saussure.[121] However, the connection between them should be challenged and observed in connection with the more complex idea of 'sign' as formulated by Roland Barthes.[122] Words are complex signs that necessarily need to be evaluated in strict relation to the actual objects and circumstances they refer to but also in relation to the context from which they emerge and the horizons for which they are conceived.[123]

To what extent does the encounter between the two lexicons - the already existing one that is used to keep alive the reassuring interaction with the family (along with the identity dimension related to it), and the one pertaining to the war

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Storia. Il Caso Italiano (Milano: Unicopli, 2005). Philip G. Dwyer ed., *War stories the war memoir in history and literature*, (Berghahn: Oxford, 2017).

[120] On audiences see Umberto Eco *Lector in Fabula* (Milano: Bombiani, 1985).

[121] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Corso di Linguistica Generale*, Tullio de Mauro ed. (Roma: Laterza, 2009) (du Seuil, 1964).

[122] Roland Barthes, *Elementi di Semiologia*, Gianfranco Marrone ed. (Torino: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 2002) (Gonthier, 1965).

[123] Sui Yan and Fan Ming, 'Reinterpreting some Key concepts in Barthes' Theory' av. at < https://academicjournals.org/journal/JMCS/article-full-text/ABC767050719>.

experience - emerge from the two contexts (home and war front) while also impacting on them?[124] The letters sent from the front have the merit of documenting not only nuanced and unheard information and details, but also another crucial aspect of war, namely a new lexicon.[125] Lexicons, old and new, are the main focus of this chapter, and, in some respect, also of the second and third chapters of this thesis.

This chapter follows the encounter with both war experiences and language through a comparative and contrastive analysis of the following sources.[126] It focuses on the letter collections by Lieutenant Zanivolti, Tocci, Vivanti, Cambini and by volunteer Valentini in order to explore the way in which family lexicon is maintained, re-evoked and developed further through exchanges with loved ones. Letters also try to recount the birth of a new military family lexicon among comrades. The published notebooks by the 'officer writers' Gadda, Monelli, Lussu, and by the volunteer Stuparich, have been considered, along with the observations made by Piero Jahier in his literary notebook 'Con me e con gli Alpini', as they offer insights to further grasp the shared nuanced context in which this newly born military family lexicon emerged. While letters show the actual process of language renegotiation, both private records and letters present self-reflective passages when encountering the new jargons.

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[124] On the relational construction of identity, see Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1990) (Anchor, 1959).

[125] Meant here in close connection to the use of 'lexicon' made by Natalia Ginzburg in her masterpiece *Lessico Famigliare*.

[126] A necessary tool with which to deal with both kinds of writing is Roland Barthes 'Scrittori e Scriventi' in *Saggi Critici* (Torino: Einaudi, 1972) (du Seuil, 1964) pp. 120-128.

Letters as family epiphanies at the front

Particular attention is directed to officer families' linguistic oral tradition and to the set of feelings, ideas, and values that they foster. These, in fact, are often represented, recalled and adopted in letters as a further tool to communicate or are melancholically and nostalgically longed for in private records (both diaries and notebooks).

Campodonico's letter collection is quite informative on the oral nature attributed to letter exchange as he reflects several times on this and frequently argues that reading equals hearing the dear voices of his family:

Conversazione con me (così mi compiaccio chiamare l'insieme della vostra epistolografia che non tanto spesso m'inviate)… Immenso piacere mi fanno i vostri scritti perchè in questi io sento la vostra voce [127]

Also perceived as a discourse held with his mother is the letter collection by Enzo Valentini. He imagines reading and browsing through his previously numbered letters with his adored mum once he is back from war. The oral dimension and evocative power attributed to letters as a means through which to hear the cherished 'family lexicon' is covered by all the sources considered, not solely by correspondence. In this section, the idea of the actualization of family is explored

[127] Campodonico, *Lauri*, p. 108.

through the observation of a selection of passages taken from both Giuseppe Zanivolti's and Filippo Guerrieri's letters. These have been singled-out as being particularly representative of officers' interaction with their families and, due to their rural origin, of the relevance of the oral dimension.[128] A good example of the immersion in the reassuring acoustic dimension of home is provided by Zanivolti's letter, one written from Genoa where he has a military schedule to respect:

Qui non c'è la mamma che con quel ripetuto: 'Pipin - Pipin' mi fa svegliare; è una sveglia, accomodata da me alla meglio, che mi stride per alcuni secondi in modo sguaiato agli orecchi…[129]

In the passage above, Zanivolti recalls the memory of the time passed at home before war broke out. The family lexicon ('Pipin-Pipin'), well known to his parents and to the audience receiving the letter, is used to explain his everyday military life at the front by contrasting it to his time at home. The sweetness of his mother's voice, probably the only person who calls him "Pipin-Pipin" (a charming take on the already familiar version of his name Peppino) is evoked as a common denominator of his awakening at home and contrasted to the impersonal and annoying awakening he gets far from home. Due to the fact that home is far away, both in time and space, there is an idealization of life in the home village, as is also the case with the last few lines of the following quote taken from Filippo Guerrieri's letter

[128] Testifying to the importance of nicknames in the rural village of Magherno is a list of dialectal nicknames for all the village's inhabitants preserved by Zanivolti's daughter.

[129] Zanivolti, unpublished collection, 8 January 1916.

written on 29 June 1916 from Forte Aralta:[130]

> Su un blocco di calcestruzzo rimasto da una parte piano e liscio si è improvvisato un tavolino, dagli zaini, dai tascapani è uscito un foglio di carta, una penna stilografica ed ognuno scrive, e scrivendo si riposa, perchè nel ricordare voialtri, nel narrare a voi la nostra vita sembra che la stanchezza si allontani, pare che ogni parola scritta si porti via uno dei nostri tanti dolori e quando la lettera è finita si prova realmente un dolce benessere, si respira più liberamente, direi quasi si comincia di nuovo a vivere... In quei momenti ci si astrae da tutto quello che ci circonda e che non è mai bello, non si è più sotto un sasso, nascosti in una roccia, non si è più al pericolo, no, no, si è accanto a voi nella casa tranquilla che non conosce che la pace e si parla di tante cose del tempo bello e del vino buono.

Also interesting in this letter is that Guerrieri describes what happens when letters by friends and families arrive in the trenches and, more generally, at the front. It is a vivid and moving description which explains clearly what has been mentioned and argued so far, i.e. that letters and postcards are much more than updates and simple messages to keep in touch and make sure that everything is alright. The following passage hints at the extra function, and most of all, of the extra value, sense, and we might even say 'aura', which these letters have:

[130] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 139. He is with the 210th Regiment (Bisagno Brigade) is advancing in Valle Riofreddo in the area of Mount Cimone.

Quando poi arrivano le vostre lettere è un'esplosione di gioia è un protendere le mani nel buio, perchè giungono sempre di notte nelle posizioni avanzate, divise, separate per compagnia, e per tutta la notte stanno lì con noi serrate al petto del primo che l'ha ricevute e quando l'alba permette di leggere ecco che ciascuno di noi esce dal riparo, dal nascondiglio e afferra la nota busta col noto indirizzo.

This helps us to understand further the additional value of keeping family lexicons alive through daily letter exchange. It is possible to follow Guerrieri's description in order to visualize the amazing impact that letter arrivals might have. The 'known' and dear address and envelope start communicating something, they embody families and loved ones; they have recognizable features (a lexicon of shapes and colours) which help soldiers and officers detect them in the huge pile.

Guerrieri continues his description, giving the details of this apex in enthusiasm and amazement:

Si sa, la cernita è fatta in un momento, s'intravede anche a distanza, anche nel mucchio geloso la propria corrispondenza, chi non conosce le buste della propria famiglia e la calligrafia dei suoi anche da lontano? Ma tutti. Le vostre buste sono più lunghe, più grandi di tutte le altre e ciò mi è utile perchè le scorgo più presto degli altri, le tiro su in fretta e poi scappo dietro il mio sasso che è il mio palazzo[131]

[131] Ibid., p. 140.

Letters are magical. Filippo's family is at once at the front with him. He takes the messages behind his stone which has become, almost miraculously, his palace. This is why we can speak of 'families of paper' but also of home villages of paper,[132] in that, through letters, family members and home villages become, in a way, present in space and time: they are actualized, through words, signs, and through the physical features of writing, as epiphanies at the front. We could go as far as to suggest that these letters, in their simplicity, are tools for reinventing the front itself. A stone becomes a palace and everything around is seen in a different light; not gone but rather transformed and seen with new eyes. Even Vivanti records the power of letters in a letter home on 1 November 1915:

Sono sotto una roccia tra le pozzanghere eppure sono contento perchè oggi ho ricevuto le vostre lettere. Fanno così bene[133]

The two family lexicons of front and home

The need to describe in letters the new experience and language encountered while at war results from the impact they have on officers. The first encounter with military life and its new lexicon might take the form of enthusiastic surprise, shock, and a sense of disorientation. Several examples of this are provided by the published notebook by Stuparich in which military phrases enter the text unmediated and abruptly convey the sense of bewilderment and the curiosity they

[132] A definition inspired by Quinto Antonelli suggestive work title Quinto Antonelli and Anna Iuso eds. *Vite di carta* (Napoli: L'ancora del Mediterraneo, 2000).

[133] Vivanti, *Scrimivi*, p. 161.

engender. This is the case with the term 'squadra sopprannumero'.[134] When Giani and his brother Carlo are assigned to this squad, they wonder what the term means in order to know what their fate will be. However, they ask 'timidly' about it as they are ashamed to show their ignorance of the term. 'Ci spiegano che è la squadra alle dirette dipendenze del capitano: è un onore appartenervi'/ they tell us it is the squad that directly follows the captain: it is an honour to belong to it.[135] Of the utmost eloquence is the warning belonging to the war jargon and war praxis 'scoperti!'[136] In war, certain phrases stand for much more than a simple piece of information: being charged with a whole set of implications and consequences, they have a prevailing performative nature. In this case, the phrase 'scoperti' urges soldiers to find shelter or go to ground.[137] The performative nature of military orders, however, goes beyond the fact of intimating an action as, after a long period at war, military orders have the power to become emotionally harmful right at the moment they are pronounced. One example is the case of 'pronti all'assalto!/Ready for the assault!' pronounced by the captain leading Lussu's squad and commented by Lussu as follows 'Le parole del capitano caddero come un colpo di scure /The captain's words fell on us like a blow'.[138] This is due to the fact that

[134] Stuparich, *Guerra del '15*, p. 29.

[135] Ibid., p. 30.

[136] Ibid., p. 22.

[137] John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, 1962 Eds. James Opie Urmson and Marina Sbisà, (Cambridge Massachussets: Harward University Press 1975), p. 10.

[138] Lussu, *Un Anno*, p. 105.

soldiers know exactly what awaits them outside the trenches and already feel the pain of the certain losses the squad will occur.

The dryness of military jargon appears as premonitory of a completely new life to Enzo Valentini in a far less tragic circumstance (away from the front lines). In a letter sent to his mother on 21 July 1915, we see the emotional impact of the 'metallic' tones common to military jargon:

Noi eravamo in rango; io con la bandiera in testa. Il Capitano, ritto sul cavallo ha cominciato a gridare con voce metallica i nostri nomi, a uno a uno e ad assegnare a ognuno la sua compagnia. È stata una cerimonia un poco triste, perchè ciascuno incarnava in quel Capitano il suo destino ferreo e irremovibile, e ciascuno temeva la Legge non scritta.[139]

At times, learning the new communicative rules and phrases of the group means feeling part of it and being accepted. Stuparich's notebook records a particular phrase belonging to the newly born family lexicon of the squad rather than to military jargon. It is used to sarcastically greet a comrade, Sergeant Lattuada, known to be too clever for his own good and who is suspected of having injured himself just before an action in order to be sent home rather than participate in the attack. While he is leaving, the soldiers comment sarcastically 'Tanti saluti a casa/ say hello to everyone at home'.[140] The way in which this phrase is recorded and

[139] Valentini, *Lettere*, pp. 11-12.

[140] Stuparich, *Guerra del '15*, p. 41.

explained in connection with the given circumstance reveals Giani and his brother's struggle to understand and become familiar with the communicative habits and specific lexicon of the new group. This struggle is even greater for the Stuparich brothers because of their status: they are volunteers from Trieste. This fact grants them some interest and even protection from certain officers but a lot of scepticism and ostracism from soldiers.[141] This is not recorded by Stuparich in his notebook but an example is provided by Gadda who writes 'I volontari sono odiati e maltrattati'/volunteers are hated and mistreated' and acknowledged by historiography.[142]

The attempt to become familiar with the new language of war becomes such a relevant experience that officers feel the need to record it in their letters and translate the new meaning to family audiences: they do this in order to provide them with the vocabulary necessary to understand their new life at war.

Letters crossed Italy on a daily basis, and became, with their peculiar lexicon, a war within the war. They represented, not only on a linguistic basis, the encounter between the front and the home front, an attempt to fight the necessary distance created by the fact of experiencing different circumstances, to downplay the trauma of separation,[143] and, ultimately, to bridge the gap inevitably emerging between the war zones and the home front. Among the different functions fulfilled,

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[141] On the delicate and nuanced theme of volunteering, see Fabio Todero *Morire per la patria. I volontari del 'Litorale adriatico' nella Grande Guerra*, (Udine: Paolo Gaspari Editore, 2005) and Pietro del Negro, 'Volontari italiani nella Grande Guerra' in Fabrizio Rasera and Carlo Zadra, eds., *Volontari Italiani nella Grande Guerra*, (Rovereto: Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra , 2008).

[142] Gadda, *Giornale*, entry of 6 October 1915, p. 40.

[143] Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self*, p. 29.

many letters show an attempt to inform families of the discrepancies between the information provided by mainstream newspapers (one above all: the *Corriere della Sera* is quoted, in a critical way, in many messages) and the actual state of things in the trenches.[144] Examples of these critical attitudes towards newspapers are to be found in many sources, among them Zanivolti's letter home of 29 June 1917:

Come scompare fra le farraggini di tante cose utili e inutili il piccolo elenco dei morti per la patria sul Corriere della Sera! E subito dopo segue il programma dei cinematografi e dei teatri.

The disappointment resulting from this discrepancy and from this divide also motivates the emergence of trench journals meant to give voice to combatants and find a proper way to provide an account of and reinforce a new 'lexicon' and communicative arena through which to tell another war.[145] Trench journals are mentioned here in that they represent an example of how crucial the issue of language and war lexicon was, as witnessed by the vocabulary attached to certain trench publications (such as *L'Astico*).[146] This was born as a tool to explain, to external or non-combatant audiences and novices, key terms from combatant jargon or from specific slang varieties pertaining to small companies and squads.

[144] Cristina Guani 'Il Fronte e il paese tentativi di dialogo' in Augusto Vivanti, Cristina Guani, ed., *'Scrivimi più che puoi' L'epistolario famigliare di Augusto Vivanti in guerra (1915-1918)* (Milano: Unicopli, 2011), pp. 87-108, here p. 105.

[145] On trench journals, Mario Isnenghi, *Giornali di Trincea* (Torino: Einaudi, 1977).

[146] *L'Astico* is influenced by the figure and writing of Piero Jahier, who provides his contribution under the pseudonym of Piero Barba.

These sorts of small vocabulary (which, in fact, are much more than simple linguistic explanatory tools) are to be found in letters as well and resulting from the need to tell family members and friends about new meanings and new expressions. An example is provided by Lieutenant Franco Michelini Tocci (class of '99): fresh from military academy, his entry into war coincides with the Rout of Caporetto.[147] Tocci introduces and explains to his parents the term 'La Buffa', used among Alpini and artillery squads to refer to the infantry. Behind the term, which literally means 'the Ridiculous', is the assumption that the infantry is unreliable (cowardly, inexperienced, disorganized, etc). In the following passage, Michelini Tocci first recalls a song frequently sung within his new Alpini company which goes:

E tu Austria che sei la più forte/fatti avanti se hai coraggio/se la 'buffa' ti lascia il passaggio/i prodi alpini fermarti sapran[148]

And then explains:

La 'buffa' è la fanteria che porta sul bavero mostrine di tutti i colori e per copri-capo berretti di tutte le fogge; mentre gli Alpini hanno tutti le fiamme verdi e portano tutti il cappello con la penna d'aquila[149]

[147] Tocci, *Fede il Dovere*, letter written from S. Pietro in Cariano on 5 January 1918 with the well-known battalion Pieve di Cadore of the 7th Alpine Regiment, p. 122.

[148] See the entry 'Buffa' reported in Alfredo Panzini and inserted in the appendix along with other terms of war.

The infantry corps is called ‘ridiculous’ not only for its look, which is described as being less serious than that of the Alpini, but also for its characteristics: in fact, in the passage of the song, there is a clear contrast between the 'weak/cowardly' Buffa and the 'brave' Alpini.[150] Far from representing a reliable source of information on the infantry itself, this passage provides us with insights on the representation of infantry within Tocci's and Jahier's Alpini company. A further example of this attitude towards the infantry is provided by a passage taken from the first notebook by Piero Jahier in which he writes about the honour of being part of the Alpini.[151] By reporting what is said within the company, he explains how being an Alpino is a privilege, the result of considered selection, and whoever is not good enough might be sent to the 'Buffa'.[152] In another letter to his father, Tocci introduces another word belonging to the military lexicon: 'Il mio plotone è sempre buono, e , come si dice in gergo militare, scatta./My squad is always good, and, as

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[149] On the mythical representation of the *Alpini* Marco Mondini, *Alpini*. *Parole e Immagini di un mito guerriero* (Roma: Laterza, 2008).

[150] This opposition between infantry and *Alpini* is recurrent in Michelini Tocci's letters. In another letter (30 December 1917) he writes: 'I came back to my Alpini who know no betrayal, who know no fear of death.' And in another (12 December 1917) he refers again to the infantry as follows: 'For two days we have been with the infantry corps, yesterday this undesirable troop (deserters and missing) left'. More insights on the mutual diffidence cahracterizing different military units in the appendix.

[151] Piero Jahier and Franco Michelini Tocci belonged, for a while, to the same squad and the 'pignolo' (another term which is explained in the vocabulary included in L'Astico) to which Jahier refers in one of his passages, is, with all probability, Tocci himself, as Tocci also explains in one of his letters.

[152] Piero Jahier, *Con me e con gli Alpini*, p. 15: Talking about the generational gap within the company, 'They (the Alpini) keep reminding to the 'old ones' that as 'permanent' they were chosen; that one should kiss the faded decoration and then pass the exam of weight and of grunt; that there is the risk to be sent back to the *Buffa* for those who cannot make it'.

we say in military jargon here, *clicks* '[153] The 'linguistic lessons' given by Tocci to his parents at different stages of war thus have to be interpreted as an attempt to share his experience: an experience which could only be expressed and shared by a mutual understanding of the new lexicon which is inextricably inherent to that experience. In his letters he not only exposes his family to this new lexicon, but also matches it to elements of their traditional family lexicon in order to make it understandable.

Conveying difference in letters home

War stands out as a somehow surreal experience, where words take on new meanings, people are displaced, and objects used for different purposes. An example is provided in this passage by Giuseppe Zanivolti who, still shocked by the novelty of his experience, on the first day of war describes how he is asked to travel on wagons which 'in peace time are used to carry animals'; he also describes how he has to sleep with his head on a loaf of bread, which becomes, in fact, an improvised pillow: [154]

Udine, 24 – 5 – 1915: Il bel giorno di Pentecoste lo passai interamente sul treno, su uno di quei treni sui quali si legge 'cavalli otto, uomini 40'. In tempo di pace servono per condurre le bestie. Quella notte la passai dormendo sotto una banchetta colla

[153] Tocci, *Fede il Dovere*, letter to his father written on 23 December 1917, here p. 113.

[154] Zanivolti's case bears witness to the nuanced and multifaceted nature of mobilization and to the consequences (both practical and theoretical) it engenders. A similar but more tragic account about the journey to the front is to be found in Stuparich's *Guerra del '15* in the entry of 2 June 1915 p. 9-11.

testa appoggiata su una pagnotta. …Ad un tratto 'Zaino a terra' si gridò.[155]

This passage enables us to understand war through its dynamic lexicon/concepts; these changed in time (throughout the conflict), in space (in different places/circumstances of war), and depending on the 'actors' taken into consideration. The specific circumstances of war transform people, objects, words, and mentalities from the outset. The bread, which at this early stage of war is used bizarrely as a pillow (to be more comfortable in the absence of the pillow he is still accustomed to) will become, at more dramatic stages of the conflict, such as that of his imprisonment,[156] the main object of Zanivolti's wishes and dreams, the main request in all his desperate and laconic letters and postcards home.[157] The already mentioned transformation of the real, which is engendered by war, is accompanied and reinforced by the evolution of language.[158] A common denominator to many, many letters is the attempt to make military life, front-line conditions and the mentality and language resulting from them, understandable. In order to do so, young combatant officers try to explain the new communicative war universe starting from 'ABC' thus propagating and generating further contamination. At times, this operation is achieved simply by introducing the new lexicon (with a foreignizing effect on the audience) and, at others, by 'adopting' either a

[155] Zanivolti's unpublished letter collection, Udine 24 May 1915.

[156] On prisoners' writings, see Leo Spitzer's *Italienische Kriegsgefangenenbriefe*, (Bonn: Hanstein, 1921).

[157] The typical message in the telegrams he sends from the prison camp is 'Bread, Bread, and Bread'.

[158] On the interaction and mutual influence on language variations and societal change, see Francesco Benigno *Parole nel tempo Un lessico per pensare la storia* (Roma: Viella, 2013).

domesticating or 'descriptive' approach and translating it into the old family lexicon in order to make it clearer.[159] The passage by Zanivolti mentioned above, portraying the very start of the war, provides an account of the speed of the change in communication. However, it also evokes and mimics the abruptness, dryness and coercive nature of military speak. After having described how things (trains, bread etc.) are used differently because of war, Zanivolti allows examples of military talk to interrupt the narrative flow and substitutes them with his own narrative voice, thus putting the reading audience *in medias res* with military speech quotations such as 'Zaino a terra'. These enter the letter with the same immediacy and unexpectedness with which they enter his daily life. The choice not to provide an introduction to them is meant to create the same shock and surprise he felt while hearing them and to mimic their performative effect in the letter.

The descriptive attitude characterises many different stages of war, but it appears to be particularly frequent in the 'entering war' phase. This, in fact, is a time in which writing about everyday life might be understood as a way of reflecting upon it, and making sense of it. It is an interesting writing phase, as mentioned by many studies on the topic,[160] similar in its descriptive aspects to travel and migration writing.[161] A common factor is the attempt to document the novelty of

[159] Venuti, 'Introduction', in Venuti *The Translator's invisibility A History of Translation* (New York & London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 7-19, here p. 14.

[160] Antonio Gibelli, *Pratica della Scrittura e mutamento sociale,* in *Materiali di Lavoro 1-2 1987 Per un Archivio della Scrittura popolare*, (La Grafica: Mori Tn, 1987), pp. 7-20, here p. 10.

[161] Diego Leoni, 'Scrivere in Guerra. Diari e Memorie Autobiografiche', in *Materiali di Lavoro*, No. 1-2, pp. 77-85. Armando Petrucci, *Scrivere Lettere Una Storia Plurimillenaria* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2008),

the experience and previous circumstances, and their conceptual categories, into dialogue with the new one. Another common aspect of migration and war writing is the attempt to introduce the new circumstances and their language to the audience, which often betrays the need to keep communicating with families back home. The description of war, with its rules, language, objects, rituals, rhythms etc., thus becomes a necessary step in order to enable communication.

At times, letters explain some basic features pertaining to the universe of communication in war, in order to fulfil more practical needs. An example might be that of telling parents and family how to rephrase the address on their envelopes, like in this hilarious passage taken by Zanivolti's letter written from Alessandria on 15 November 1915:

Carissimi,

ma che diavolo avete scritto sulla busta? '*Allegraggio* signor G. Z. ecc…. Alessandria *preme*' Ma no, guardate. Scrivete così 'Sottotenente G. Zanivolti Ospedaletto Arrigo. Alessandria' Il *preme* lasciatelo agli scribacchini. Avete capito? Bisogna essere semplici e brevi, massime scrivendo ai militari.[162]

In this passage, Zanivolti explains to his parents, with irony and sarcasm, even with a somewhat amused paternalism, what they are supposed to write on the envelope

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Fabio Caffarena, *Lettere dalla Grande Guerra. Scritture del Quotidiano, Monumenti della Memoria, Fonti per la Storia. Il Caso Italiano* (Milano: Unicopli, 2005).

[162] Zanivolti's unpublished letter collection, 15 November 1915.

when they send him letters. The tone is similar to the one we might sometimes find nowadays on Facebook posts when youngsters make fun of their parents' and grandparents' attitudes toward the language of, and interaction with, new technologies. In this case, however, the new social network is not a virtual one, but is the actual social network of war, with its too-rapid language change, the overall communicative and interactive transformation and the massive *risemantizzazione* it engendered.[163] After having provided them with a more suitable and, in his opinion, appropriate version for their message, he explains and summarises his points by concluding: 'One should be short and simple, especially when writing to members of the military'. This passage sheds light on the close bond linking the nature of military life and the form through which it is experienced and expressed.

In such a transitional and crucial phase for language, culture, politics and society, letters become the daily terrain of an encounter between the military and home fronts; the semi-private arena in which the hybridization of military and family lexicons takes place. Furthermore, they represent the means through which the emerging language of the unified Italy is witnessed, portrayed, enriched and transformed. Worth considering here is Piero Jahier's argument according to which one cannot understand the men of the company without being able to understand their dialects and the meaning assigned to Italian words in their home villages. Jahier argues that, in order to know his soldiers, he needs to learn their dialects

[163] On military language, see Michela Dota, 'Contaminazioni Diamesiche e didattica del parlato nella manualistica per le scuole reggimentali', in Giuseppe Polimeni and Massimo Prada, eds., *'Di scritto e di parlato'*, pp. 55- 72.

first:

Bisogna imparare il dialetto, unica lingua dei loro pensieri. Far presto a imparare questo dialetto, anzi lingua veneta, così armoniosa e sensitiva. Io che vorrei sapere tutti i dialetti d'Italia, anziché il dialetto toscano dei letterati.[164]

The contribution provided by Jahier is also of interest here in that it introduces the theme of the peculiar communication which takes place within the company: since the company is like a family, it has its own communicative scheme, with an established and repeated lexicon which might seem obscure to another company. The following passage introduces the shift from a sense of belonging to villages, to a sense of belonging to the team:

Ora vi cercate tra paesani, ma tra poco vi cercherete tra compagni che han fatto quella notte, quella solitudine, quella passione. [165]

The birth of a new family bond is supported by the emergence of a new geography, narrative, lexicon and story, which characterize the group and keep it united. Jahier recalls the attitude of the old members of the company who, in a way, embrace each other and exclude newcomers, as, due to the campaigns that they have carried out, the places that they have met etc., the company has become a real

[164] Jahier, *Con me e con gli Alpini*, p. 59.

[165] Ibid., pp. 97-98.

family, as described in the remainder of the passage:

Vedete gli anziani che non ammettono neanche alla compagnia e si abbracciano come fratelli ritrovati. Scherzavano su quella vita nelle posizioni: erano tane fetenti nella rocca perduta dove quando ci si spoglia bisogna mettere il piede sulla giubba perchè non cammini sola; ma poi le hanno nominate amorosamente, sasso per sasso, come paesi : I due dadi — Gli Strapiombi — Il Sasso Misterioso — ; e ne parlano sempre, e piangevano a doverle abbandonare perchè eran diventate la casa della loro bravura. [166]

Episodes of war become family anecdotes for the old members of the company, with the nostalgic feeling that this implies. The new sense of belonging to the 'stones' or 'places' of war in the mountains is a trait shared by other Alpini, as is, for instance, the case with Monelli and Vitelli.[167] The geography of their war and the people with whom they have shared it, become an inextricable aspect of their new identity.[168] That geography of war is also inextricably related to its common lexicon, which, from time to time, is part of a specific dialectal universe.[169] As addressed by Jahier in the following passage, the unification of Italy can only happen through the

[166] Ibid. p. 58.

[167] Reference to them in the introduction of the present work.

[168] Alessandro Scillitani dir. 'Paolo Rumiz nei Luoghi della Grande Guerra L'Albero delle trincee' (Reggio Emilia: Artemide Film, 2016).

[169] On geography and identity, see Antonella Tarpino, *Geografie della Memoria, Case, Rovine, Oggetti quotidiani*, (Torino: Einaudi, 2008).

sharing of a common hybrid lexicon (and the mentality and sense of belonging necessarily attached to it):

E si scambiano lingua, oltreché trincee e posizioni. Commovente sentire gli agordini sforzarsi al piemontese, e i segusini taroccar veneto per ricambio di affetto militare. Gridare 'pais' invece che 'ciò ti' alle casere, come alle bergerie di Val Chisone. Brava Italia che si lega per sempre nel sacrificio.[170]

As is the case with friends who start sharing common phrases and borrowing expressions and jokes from each other, soldiers and officers from different parts of Italy, and from different life paths, seem to become one in Jahier's idyllic and idealized portrait of war and its universe of communication. We could extend Jahier's argument and argue that it would be impossible to understand war without taking into serious account the variety of meanings and values which were assigned to things and words in these letters home.

In line with Jahier, the birth of many families in arms is documented by all the sources considered and emphasized, especially in the Alpini units. This is the case with Monelli who feels the need to include in his text a letter received by the oldest of the soldiers from his company (Paolo Ferro), one who was moved to another battalion:

e poi noialtri diremo sempre bene di lei che la sera che siamo partiti si ano degnato

[170] Jahier, *Con me e con gli Alpini*. p. 58.

di darci la mano Come se avessimo sempre statti in compagnia come Fratelli d'armi dunque la ringrazio di tutto. La riverisco il vechio soldato della sua Compagnia.[171]

Two communicative universes

Home and war front: the hybrid lexicon of an encounter

Letter writing could thus be seen both as bridging the gap between the two communicative universes (the military and the family) and as the mediator introducing them to one another. If, on the one hand, it can be interpreted as an attempt to teach the new military language of war to home-front families, on the other, it represents a way to let family members participate in the experience of war, by enabling them to stay close and 'tuned in' not only to the events of the conflict and the language of military orders but to everyday life at the front and its jargon and lexicon. The following passage is taken from a letter by Franco Michelini Tocci, and shows the extent to which this young Alpini officer (sent to war in 1917 after his promotion from the military academy) tries to share aspects of his new life with his father. He achieves this by describing moments of collective amusement that characterise his dinner and lunch times with the squad at the military canteen. He employs a light and enthusiastic tone and a great immediacy.

[171] Paolo Monelli, *Le Scarpe al Sole*, p. 17. (the grammar mistakes of the original are faithfully reproduced).

This letter of 5 January 1918 portrays the serene atmosphere by evoking the jokes and games shared with military mates:[172]

La mia Compagnia attuale va benissimo: ho per colleghi degi ufficiali bravi e simpatici. La nostra mensa poi è una delle più allegre del Battaglione. Quando a mensa Mario Jahier (cugino di Piero) e il tenente medico infervorati nelle discussioni prendono capello, il tenente Perin si alza con aria solenne e mette sul capo del colpevole un enorme cilindro di panno grigio-verde, opera riuscitissima di Goria e del sarto di compagnia. Se poi Piero Jahier e Aldo Perin incominciano una conversazione interminabile sulla Russia, l'Ucraina, il Papa o magari sulla utilità delle molettiere, allora Goria, come direttore di mensa, fa servire in tavola ai nominati tenenti un grande bottone di legno che porta inciso "vengo dato a chi mi attacca" e scritto: "qui me non vult, cilindrum vult"[173] opera non meno ben riuscita di tuo figlio.

He shares his internal views and direct experience with his father, and puts the reader in *medias res*, so as to involve him in the atmosphere of his company, inviting him to share his youthful entertainment. The aim does not seem to be that of receiving approval, but rather that of sharing something positive with his father, something which is not inherently political, or related to the war, his career, or

[172] Tocci *Fede il Dovere,* p. 121.

[173] Ibid., p. 161.The unusual use of Latin to make jokes and have fun with the company betrays the cultured background of these young officers and is similar to that attitude characterizing the *goliardia* (replicated in the military academy he attended).

further education, (as is generally the case with many of his letters). Behind these lines shines the idea and awareness that jokes and laughter, being a crucial aspect of social life within the company, belong to war as much as battles and are thus entitled to enter the communication with his father. The language of the company in this passage is far from a military lexicon of war, it should rather be intended as a family lexicon developed in a military context by the family-company in arms. The sentences written on the 'bottone', given to those who are speaking too much and making rhetorical speeches during lunch (among them the well-known Piero Jahier), is a perfect example of something that becomes immediately clear to any of the members of the group, but which, on the contrary, needs to be explained to anyone who does not belong to it and who does not share that specific circumstance. By sharing this 'scorcio domestico militare' with his father, Franco is, in a way, creating a link between his old family and his new one. He excludes neither but merges them and lets them meet through his writing.[174]

This act of sharing the 'fun' with his father is worth noting, as it is more frequent to find this type of sharing and this sort of tone with friends rather than with family members: in line with this general trend is, for instance, the corpus of letters by Leonardo Cambini.[175] This is mainly a collection of letters to friends and acquaintances in which it is not infrequent to find attempts to share the fun and

[174] On the tradition of the encounter through letter exchange, see Armando Petrucci *Scrivere Lettere Una Storia Plurimillenaria* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2008).

[175] Cambini's case is a peculiar one as the beginning of war for him is immediately marked by the loss of his brother and the communication with his family of origin is therefore characterized by the tones of traumatic loss and mourning.

crazy games invented to fight boredom in the rear , as is the case with the following message sent to his friend Professor Plinio Carli, from Cava Zuccherina, on 21 November 1915:

...La sera poi un baccano dell'altro mondo. Siamo ritornati ragazzi: e facciamo un chiasso come io non l'ho fatto mai, neppur da studente, quando cioè ne facevo abbastanza. Ieri, ad esempio, siamo stati a Capo Sile. Mi è succeduto nel comando della Piazza Beppino Papanti ..... Là abbiamo bevuto come Lanzechenecchi, abbiamo fatto una corte assassina a una signora, maestra, poetessa, incinta, che era a desinare con noi. Io le ho fatto persino dei versi, di quei versi senza senso comune, che io improvviso facilmente, specialmente quando ho bevuto mezzo bicchiere di più (a Capo Sile ne avrò bevuti anche venti, ma lasciamo andare....) La conclusione è che per mercoledì siamo invitati a pranzo a casa sua: altra bevuta, altro fottìo, altra improvvisazione [176]

Even in Cambini's case there is an attention to language, to how things or people are named and redefined, as in the following passage which contains many phrases ('cenci', 'piscian discorsi', 'cuoco delle mie ribòtte') characterising the communication within the squad:

C'è un sergente specialista per fare i cénci, e noi lo abbiamo nominato cuoco delle nostre ribòtte, così come io sono stato eletto oratore ufficiale. Che è, che non è, si

[176] Cambini, *Epistolario*, p. 48.

piscian discorsi: due me ne hanno fatti fare per la nascita del re! E uno ne ho fatto ieri l'altro sera per conto mio.[177]

Family lexicon and mourning in war

The theme of mourning war and in war is a primary concern and it is covered in all the writings considered. Officers remind their families to pray for the dead of war that they have come to consider as members of their own family and they want their parents to empathize with them for the losses provoked by combat. Campodonico insists on this: at the beginning of November 1915:

Oggi è il giorno dei Santi, domani quello dei morti, ricordatevi dei caduti per la Patria./ Today is All Saint's Day, tomorrow that of the dead, commemorate those who fell for the Fatherland.[178]

And adds:

Ricordatevi perciò di questi morti, pregate per loro ed esaltateli, come io compiango i morti della famiglia nostra/ Remember then these dead, pray for them and celebrate them, as I commemorate the dead of our family.[179]

[177] Ibid., pp. 50-51.

[178] Campodonico, *Lauri*, p. 75.

[179] Ibid., p. 76.

The war experience determines certain new forms of bond, the creation of new families at the front line and the lexical change that this implies. A great example of this is the epitaph created by soldiers and described by Zanivolti in this letter written from Villa dal Brun on 22 June 1917:

> Ieri i miei soldati gli hanno preparato una bella tomba, con una croce di sassi rossi in mezzo ai bianchi ed una piccola lapide con un'incisione: 'Al loro Luigino Corti. I soldati della 18° Com. Mitragliatrici.[180]

The contamination of private and official forms of writing is particularly interesting in observing the convergence, and divergence, of different registers of communication and to further understand the extent to which language enables people to experience things in different ways.[181]

> Sto bene: sono amato, stimato come un padre dai miei soldati: la mia sezione non è che una famiglia.[182]

Not only is it possible to find two lexicons, one belonging to family life and language and the other to the war experience (direct and indirect), further, we also find the hybridization of war and family language and the entering into the war experience

[180] Zanivolti, unpublished collection, (Villa dal Brun, 22 June 1917).

[181] On the connection between family lexicon and mourning, see the poem by Henry Scott Holland, *Death is Nothing at All*.

[182] Zanivolti, unpublished collection, September 1916. Written on a postcard at 5 pm from the war zone.

of emotional bonds generally inherent to the family sphere, as is the case with the following passage taken from Zanivolti's epistolary corpus.[183] Here the familiar affection and the grief for the loss suffered by the company after the death of Luigino Corti becomes clear from the use of modifiers for the terms (occhioni, fanciullone) which convey a more intimate tone to the description. These, however, are mixed with descriptive items which pertain to military discourse such as 'era della classe 96':

si chiama Luigi: un buon fanciullone, semplice, robusto, bello. *Era* della classe del '96. il giorno 20 ci ha dato l'ultimo addio cogli occhioni aperti, pieni di lagrime e di tante cose ed è andato a festeggiare il suo onomastico in Paradiso. Il babbo non l'aveva conosciuto, la mamma gli era morta alcuni anni fa ed ora aveva solamente l'affetto di due sorelle.[184]

Zanivolti explains how, for this *fanciullone* (big lad), the squad also becomes a new family because he is orphaned of his mother and father and thus is in clear need of bonds. It is not only the remoteness of their condition, but also the absurdity and ineluctability of it which makes soldiers and officers feel the need to become part of a new family.

The peculiar lexicon of mourning can be understood further by taking into consideration another epistolary corpus, namely that by Leonardo Cambini.

[183] Ibid. Villa dal Brun on 22 June 1917.

[184] The gap between 'ora' and 'era' is faithfully maintained in the translation along with all the time discrepancies of this passage. Emphasis mine.

Cambini's is a war which, from the outset, is both a cause and an effect of mourning:

ed ora che è morto, io penso con rimpianto vivo, che molto più utile sarebbe stato, sia pure il suo sacrifizio alla patria nostra, se non lo avesse colto così presto la granata che l'ha sfragellato. E' così, mio buon Rosati: e non è mica vero sai, che io dissimulassi la inquietudine dell'animo mio. io ero tranquillo, ero sereno: mi sembrava di essere sicuro che al mio ragazzo non sarebbe stato fatto niente di male. Sì: una ferita: quella l'avevo messa in conto: ma, più che altro, per averne il pretesto di tenermelo un paio di mesi in casa. [185]

Cambini's war could thus be considered 'una questione privata'[186] as for him war meant, from the very beginning, loss and mourning. This is explained in the following passage taken from the preface to the published version of his epistolary corpus:[187]

ebbe il battesimo di un grande dolore: il suo Raffaellino, il fratello-figliuolo, che già aveva partecipato valorosamente come sottotenente alla campagna libica, cadeva sul campo, presso Sagrado, il 30 giugno 1915. Questo lutto, che colpiva Leonardo in

[185] Leonardo Cambini, *Epistolario*, Letter to Prof. Carlo Rosati, 20 July 1915, p. 3.

[186] The term is borrowed from Beppe Fenoglio's literary work.

[187] Vittorio Cian and Plinio Carli, 'Preface' in Leonardo Cambini *Epistolario di guerra (1915-1918)* pp. 4-23, here p. 11.

uno dei suoi affetti più cari, fu il più potente impulso a quel fervore di vita spirituale ond'è contrassegnato tutto l'ultimo periodo della sua vita terrena.[188]

In spite of the values which motivated his initial interventionism, Leonardo's attitude towards war and military life seems to be strictly intertwined with his private experience and family history. The rhetoric of patriotism, underlined and emphasised in the preface, is part of the joyful enthusiasm with which he entered the conflict: *quasi* an occasion to share something with his brother (who had already participated, as Filippo Guerrieri had, in the Libya campaign). Part of Leonardo's fervour, and also his absence of concern for the potential dangers of war, is reported in the passage opening this section, taken from the letter which breaks Leonardo's silence after the traumatic death of his brother, Raffaello, in June 1915. Interestingly, Leonardo opens the letter by explaining that he did not feel like writing earlier on:

Io non volevo scrivere a te, non volevo scrivere a nessuno. Mi ci forza la gentile pietà vostra, che ha trovato il modo, nell'onorare la memoria del mio bimbo, di fare un'opera buona.[189]

The passage in which Leonardo argues he was not worried for his brother is followed by a vivid memory of his first days at war. The way of recalling presents

[188] Worth noting is that this is a preface written in 1941 is inspired by the Fascist rhetoric on war and military sacrifice: the attitude toward war attributed to Cambini should therefore be examined with a critical eye. (see appendix).

[189] Cambini, *Epistolario*, letter to his friend Prof. Carlo Rosati, p. 3. Written on 20 July 1915.

the nuances of melancholic sweetness and amusement which generally characterize the posthumous remembering of moments shared with the dear people we have lost:

E i primi giorni della mia vita di un ufficiale novellino, io li ho vissuti sempre con lui, pensando a lui, a quel che avrebbe egli riso, se mi avesse visto marciare sbagliando il passo o fare il saluto a gambe larghe: e quella mattina stessa, io mi ero goduto l'ultima parte della mia tattica, rimuginando nella testa la lettera che gli avrei scritto, per raccontargli come avevo fatto perdere la mia compagnia in mezzo alle macchie di Limone, e venivo su, allegro e spensierato, ripescando la frase per farlo ridere e per tenerlo di buon umore... E poi, tutt'a un tratto, un cavallo che mi viene incontro, a spron battuto, mio fratello che mi corre incontro urlando, e poi... poi siamo qui: domani farò una marcia, poi andrò a far colazione, dopo schiaccerò un pisolino: a rapporto si farà la Burletta col Maggiore e coi miei colleghi.[190]

Worth noting here is the crucial role of letter-writing as a means of sharing wartime experiences, even from afar. Leonardo mentions how, even while he was involved in his daily military activities, he was already thinking of what to write, and of which tone to use, in his letter to Raffaello. He also states the function of his letter, which was that of making his brother laugh and amusing him by writing him about his mistakes and the resulting confusion which emerged from them. The passage interrupts the flow of narration a moment before Leonardo is informed by one of

[190] Ibid., p. 4.

his brothers about Raffaello's death. He stops writing, unable to go on, as if time itself virtually stops.[191] Before going into more details, he writes 'then' followed by ellipsis and repeats the 'then' and starts writing *ex abrupto* about something else, about how things go on according to the rules and rhythms of military life: 'then we are here: tomorrow I will march, then I will have breakfast, then I will take a nap...'. Leonardo's narrative voice seems to stop suddenly and is replaced by another, a military one, which says what should be done. In this way, military discourse and routine become a means of facing daily life, of forgetting grief, or hiding it behind actions that must be taken. It also shelters behind the military lexicon and discourse which leave no room for personal feelings and thinking, apart from occasional collective rhetoric.[192] Also worth noting is the 'we' which substitutes the 'I', underlining the sharing of daily life with military comrades and the belonging to a common mentality and life experience. Evoking the moment preceding the trauma, as if events stood clearly before his eyes, Cambini's passage represents what Freud defines as 'a type of emotional fixation with a theory of the past which also brings with it the most complete alienation from the present and the future':[193]

[191] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (3 vol., Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984 -1988) vol. 1, p. 52.

[192] 'time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal experience' Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, p. 52.

[193] Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, 1920 online version available at <http://www.bartleby.com/283/18.html>.

But what is mourning? Mourning is reconciliation. With what? With the object of love; objects of love maybe persons of course but also, as Freud says, abstractions like fatherland, freedom - ideals of all kind.[194]

Physically Leonardo lives in a present which is marked by actions that he goes on repeating in order to survive and because he thinks his beloved brother, Raffaello, would approve of them.

The subjective nature of time,[195] is also essential to understanding Leonardo's choice to remain at war even if he was offered the chance to go back to his teaching activities. Since he started his war alongside his brother, and maybe even because of his brother, he seems unable and unwilling to abandon this experience. He even asks friends, such as Professor Vittorio Cian, to help him find an excuse of any kind to be sent to a place close to his brother's grave. This episode helps to understand better the role of letters throughout Cambini's war: Cian's words enable Leonardo to avoid working and to be near the front line to visit his brother's grave. If words could have a direct and performative effect on practical circumstances, they also impact massively on Leonardo's emotional sphere. When he and his brothers receive the letters sent to Raffaello and returned by the military post after his death, Leonardo pays attention to the way in which the death of his brother has been described by the person examining the messages:

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[194] Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley, *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary: Debates in Philosophy*, (London, Routledge, 1999), p. 7.

[195] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, 1-3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984 -1988) vol. 3., p. 109.

E su due lettere respinteci la mano dell'ufficiale postale non si è contentata di scrivere "morto" ha scritto "morto da eroe" nell'altra "morto, onore e gloria". Che gratitudine ho sentito, caro Professore, per questo omaggio di un ignoto, per questa gentilezza infinita che sa trovare una parola di superbo conforto per chi si vedrà tornare queste lettere non recapitate. [196]

The theme of words, lexicons, ways of communicating and of the mentalities, feelings, values, and attitudes related to them, is recurrent in Leonardo's epistolary corpus. Among the situations considered, for instance, Leonardo reflects upon the way in which, living within a military and war context, the reduction to 'common duty' of Raffaello's brave death and extreme sacrifice impacts on his own elaboration of his brother's death. The failure to acknowledge the deep hurt that death might have caused leaves Leonardo shocked on the one hand, but, on the other, helps him focus on something else. He might feel alone in his grief but this loss becomes a relative loss, part of a broader enterprise. It thus elevates Raffaello's sacrifice, helping Leonardo to go on:

Sono qui, spaurito nel cuore della guerra: cioè nel cervello. E spaurito non per l'aspetto terribile della città, tranquilla e silenziosa, o dei soldati, allegri e puliti, ma per questo affaccendarsi silenzioso, per questa vita turbinosa che scivola per le vie, quasi che si sottragga agli sguardi dei profani. E ci sentiam piccini, piccini, piccini

[196] Cambini, *Epistolario*, p. 13. Written from Livorno, 23 August 1915.

dinnanzi a questa grande cosa che è la guerra nostra. Si scende baldanzosi e fiduciosi: sottotenente della Terribile mi pareva che tutto dovesse spalancarsi dinanzi a me. Ora sono sperso, confuso, spaurito: e mi par che tutto sia piccolo, che tutto scompaia, dinanzi a questo maestoso aspetto della guerra: tutto, tutto: anche il mio grande dolore. 'E' morto un sottotenennte' ecco che cosa significa qui tutto lo strazio dell'anima mia. Ancora ancora bisogna dare: ancora bisogna soffrire.[197]

Cambini's interaction with his brother, and the sharing of war and military life with him (even from afar) is of great interest and can be contextualised along with other experiences of family sharing and family discussions on the theme of war. One of these is represented by Piero Jahier who, in his first notebook, writes of his initial daily sharing of life at war with his younger brother, who is in the same war zone leading another squad. Jahier's attitude towards his brother is similar to that of Leonardo. Worth noting in the following passage is the observation concerning the way in which words are recognized a role in accompanying the change in their brotherly communication throughout the conflict, engendered, among other factors, by military life:

Perchè siam separati ora. Non che non ci amiamo; godiamo di ritrovarci nella smiglianza di impegno e di intenzione; ci scambiamo piccoli favori affettuosi con sobrietà di parole; ci lodano reciprocamente i nostri soldati: ma c'è riserbo tra noi

[197]Ibid., pp. 16-17. Letter to Prof. Alberto Niccolai, Udine 30 August 1915. 'Terribile' is the disparaging nickname given to the milizia territoriale/reserve unit.

sulle cose gravi; ma la confidenza va' altrove. Ecco la guerra e mentre il destino vi riunisce alla stessa fatica d'amore e l'amore è indispensabile come il pane, siete separati.[198]

There is an explicit reference to the way in which the affection between him and his brother necessarily needs to be 'rephrased' *con sobrietà di parole* (with sombre words). Jahier also mentions the silence and *riserbo* (self-restraint) behind which they hide their worries. Some passages taken from Jahier's notebook are of interest as they also reflect upon his protective attitude towards his brother, they bear witness to the process of acknowledging that his brother has grown up and is now a man. Jahier reflects upon the importance of ceasing to protect (and suffocate) his brother:

Ritirati fratello-padre, perchè è il momento di ritirarsi e di soltanto guardare: questo forte adolescente che sorpassa di tutto il capo ogni alpino. Tanto più forte del suo fratello-padre. Con meno fantasia e meno violenza. Ma più bontà vera.[199]

Stuparich and his brother Carlo, both volunteers in the Sardinia 1st infantry regiment grenadiers, develop a specific kind of communicative system made up mainly of body language and generally in response to feelings or thoughts that cannot be explicitly expressed in the military context. Stuparich himself refers to

[198] Jahier, *Con me e con gli Alpini*, pp. 43-44.

[199] Ibid., p. 48.

this new language as 'the first language of war' shared with his brother and with their close friend, Scipio Slataper. The passage follows their first experience under bombardment and the order to take cover behind buildings that is given by a second lieutenant, one who has been wounded on the arm: 'Ci guardiamo con Carlo e con Scipio. Il primo linguaggio di guerra. / We watch each other with Scipio and Carlo. The first war language.'[200] The sharing of the same ideals about war and intervention characterizes the experience of Stuparich and his brother Carlo. The sense of mourning for the death of his brother is absent from his diary as his brother took his life before capture in 1916 whereas Giani's notebook recounts only the year 1915, significantly leaving aside his own capture and his brother's suicide. However, premonitions of his brother's death can be traced in the notebook. Following their initial enthusiasm at volunteering, these feelings surface when encountering real warfare.

Conclusion

What emerges from the observation of the selected sources in relation to the war experience is that language is not only an essential means through which to investigate war, but it represents an element of continuity, connecting pre-war and war itself; the home and war front. Moreover, language witnesses, through the contamination of the old with a new lexicon and the subsequent hybridization engendered by this encounter, the complex connection and mutual influence

[200] Stuparich, *Guerra del '15*, p. 23.

between mentality and the war experience. Language also represents a form of resilience in response to the difficult and diverse circumstances engendered by conflict; it serves to overcome distance through letters, as a personal tool with which to make sense of the war experience in private records, it is the ground upon which new bonds are created and old ones maintained. Further, language is a crucial aspect of mourning and of the re-elaboration of traumas and, as such, it will retain a crucial role in the post-war era and in retrospective analyses of war. This chapter has provided an angle from which to observe the transformation of language and the shifts in meaning and communicative attitudes which took place throughout the conflict in connection with the circumstances, roles, war contexts and personal backgrounds of those involved.

Chapter 2

Literary anchors

Introduction

This chapter provides an exploration of literary (and sometimes religious) resonances in officers' writings. As with the family lexicon, if literature enters junior officers' letters as an additional tool to convey a sense of the war to families and friends on the home front, it is also a way to share — and, in so doing, confirm — a common set of values, images, and phrases. A prescriptive potential is ascribed to literature even at an institutional level; the connection between discipline and the reading of the classics can be understood further through the work and thoughts of Tancredi Fogliani in *Letteratura e milizia*.[201] According to Mondini, young junior officers as a group presented a generational, cultural and social cohesion.[202] Shared literary readings belonging to the pre-war period and embedded in the traditional canon and school education of this well-defined social group become, along with any reading undertaken during the conflict, a further tool to enhance communication from the front line.

On the other hand, however, this chapter moves beyond the view of literature as a shared lexicon for epistolary communication. It also provides a broader exploration of the role and resonances of literature in war and, indeed, private war writing. The pervasiveness of literature in officers' diaries and notebooks is, in fact, explored and

[201] For a thorough discussion on this see, Wilcox, 'Leadership, Command Culture and organization', in, idem, *Morale*, pp. 21-43, here p. 28.

[202] Mondini, *La guerra Italiana Partire raccontare, tornare 1914-18*, p. 118.

interpreted as a means of evasion, a survival tool, a form of entertainment (as is the case with the act of reading), an identity anchor, a form of consolation and a source of inspiration for self-projection in writing.[203] In order to indicate the dual role played by reading, as both a further communicative tool to reach families on the home front and as a shelter for the self-exposed to the wartime experience, this chapter attempts to maintain a balance between epistolary and private writing in the sources selected.

Literature is intended here as a process: beginning with literary readings in pre-war and in wartime, and continuing with the consequent fixation of a shared set of phrases and imagery and of a *repertoire* of values meant to reinforce a sense of belonging. This, ultimately, culminates with the recurrent use of evocations and echoes in officers' writings. If certain aspects and functions ascribed in this chapter to literary resonances are shared with writing activity *tout court*, some features pertaining to the role of literature in war appear rather peculiar and thus require specific attention. From the comparative exploration of published and unpublished primary sources, a set of recurrent themes and features, approaches, images, phrases, allusions and quotations emerge which are worthy of attention.[204] Therefore, this chapter also offers an overview of the samples of literary works and masterpieces that are more frequently mentioned or implicitly present in officers' letters and diaries. This overview is not intended to be conclusive, but rather

[203] On the projection of self and on the relational dimension of identity see Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959).

[204] Gérard Genette, *I Palinsesti, la letteratura al secondo grado* (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), p. 5.

attempts to interpret both the choice of, and references to, these texts and images in specific war circumstances.

A few aspects pertaining to Genette's theory are adopted in this chapter to observe literary resonances in war writings and to investigate war as it is written by officers. In juxtaposition to Genette, transtextuality is implemented in this study to investigate private writings rather than proper literary works. Genette's *Palinsesti* (*Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree)*[205] is particularly relevant for a further investigation of the relationships between cultivated junior officers' writings and traditional literary texts. Genette's view of transtextuality is not only relevant in describing the only thing that 'creates meaning': his peculiar explanation of transtextuality, which is described as 'the textual transcendence from the text', particularly 'everything that is able to put a text in relation to other texts', is also pertinent to other non-textual circumstances. Genette's theoretical and methodological reasoning can be employed to shed light onto the peculiar complex textual landscape represented by war writings.

If Fussell and Mondini have focused on literary forms as a way to communicate war (to themselves and to others), the present section aims to underline the necessity of literature in wartime and the roles played by transtextuality. Limiting our attention to a straightforward interpretation of literature and transtextuality as a further form of survival, entertainment, and evasion from the struggle of war (as was the case with writing activity *tout court*) would nonetheless be reductive. Literature, in the form of readings and intertextual

[205] Ibid.

re-elaboration in writing, represents not only a linguistic compendium to the 'indicibilità'/unspeakable nature'[206] of war, but also a cognitive and therapeutic language to face and process daily traumas. To put it in another way, it is not only the case that if one lacks the words could one feel isolated and frustrated at a lack of communication (with oneself and others) that derives from this state. This issue is dealt with by Ferdinando Camon in an interview on the horror and communicative isolation of concentration camps.[207] In spite of the clearly different circumstances considered here (not imprisonment in a concentration camp but life at war) it is still possible to take Levi's wise observations and apply them in a broader understanding of reading, writing and transtextuality as special ways to cope with war. A common denominator to be found in both war accounts and prisoners' memories is the impossibility to explain and share a tragic experience. A far greater issue is when something lies so far from one's imagination, understanding, set of thoughts, and fears, that it no longer seems possible to frame it logically and emotionally. War thus challenges the emotional intelligence and its communicative opportunities (intrapersonal and interpersonal) of military

[206] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 184.

[207] Ferdinando Camon, *Conversazione con Primo Levi* (Parma: Guanda, 1997), p. 65. Camon: 'Lei sentiva molto l'incomunicabilità linguistica, vedo'. Levi: 'Molto. Perchè io sono un parlatore. Se mi si tappa la bocca muoio. E là mi si tappava la bocca.' Camon: 'E gli altri come la sentivano?' Levi: 'Gli altri morivano. Magari non si rendevano conto che morivano per quel motivo'/ Camon: 'You suffered a lot because of the impossibility to communicate I see.' Levi: 'Yes, a lot. Because I am a speaker. If one shuts my mouth I die. And there they used to silence me.' Camon: 'And how did the others feel that?' Levi: 'The others died. Maybe they did not realise that this is why they died.'

members and people on the home front.[208] The definition of emotional intelligence employed in this dissertation is in line with the definition provided by Reuven Bar-On who argues:

Ultimately, being emotionally and socially intelligent means to effectively manage personal, social and environmental change by realistically and flexibly coping with the immediate situation, solving problems and making decisions. [209]

Making sense of the real and representing it constitutes a relevant issue. However, lacking the general axes with which to frame it is even worse because one is no longer able to situate the personal and collective experience (which is worse in the case of war). When at war, those directly involved are supposed to use their cognitive and emotional 'survival kit' to cope with the situation. Literature, for those who master it, becomes a great therapist. As such, literature suggests the words when they are lacking, shares with the readers (like a doctor with a patient) similar stories or emotional conditions. This offers consolation and helps to see the world through different eyes while also recognising the importance of individual stories. Moreover, although literary atmospheres are conjured through words they are, once evoked, able to transcend language and become a more immediate form of communication.

[208] Reuven Bar-On, *The Bar-On Model of Emotional-Social Intelligence*. Av. at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/6509274_The_Bar-On_Model_of_Emotional-Social_Intelligence>.

[209] Ibid.

In assessing the role of transtextuality in officers' epistolary exchanges, it is crucial to consider specifically the circumstances of war, because this can help to disentangle further unforeseen and more practical reasons why literary references are adopted, such as the need to represent war without falling in the trap of censorship. To a bookish audience, in fact, a literary echo or image, or even a structure borrowed from a masterpiece, could appear more meaningful and able to convey the actual state of things at the front (along with the personal perceptions of it) better than anything else. This is the case with a letter written on 7 February 1918, which presents the following reference to Carducci, with an exact quote of the final verse taken from 'The Ox':

Siamo in aperta campagna e l'unica cosa di bello e di buono è quel 'divino del pian silenzio verde' che fa bene più che al corpo allo spirito[210]

To anyone familiar with Carducci's poem, the quote recalls a universe of specific moral values, but also a sense of fatigue for the troubles of history, and a longing for peace and reassuring escape in tranquil nature. The adjective 'divine' acquires a further nuance of meaning through war, in that it signals something quiet and reassuring which appears separate from the real, and completely distant from the purely human and hectic occupation of war. This verse by Carducci comes to Augusto's mind on his first day of rest in a new village (the place cannot be specified as it is still a war zone) after a long period of continuous frontline duty, as

[210]Vivanti, *Scrivimi*', p. 313.

lamented in another letter written on 7 January in which he says he has been in charge of line surveillance for 30 days.[211] Greek and Latin literature often provide a repertoire that is particularly eloquent and intelligible. In a letter to his son, Enrico, written on 26 August 1917, Cambini comments on his wife's support for the Papal call for peace with a quote taken from Virgil's Aeneid in its Latin translation 'Ma quando la mamma ti parla della pace del Papa dille 'Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes'/ When Mum tells you about the Pope's peace tell her 'I fear Greeks and the gifts they carry.' This replicates in cultured and literary terms rooted in mythology his diffidence towards the Vatican and the clergy, compared to Austrian enemies. This sense of betrayal is not overcome by Cambini despite his religious education and in spite of the active participation in war of Catholic chaplains and bishops.[212] In a letter dated 19 August 1917 to his son, Brenno, Cambini defines the call for peace an 'act of betrayal' and in a letter to his wife, commenting on soldiers' commitment to the cause and conduct in war, he writes 'Bravi figlioli che non han letto il Vangelo e son più vicini al Cristo del Papa'/ Good lads who have never read the Gospels and are closer to Christ than the Pope himself'.[213] The Gospels are, for Cambini, a constant reference point guiding both conduct and consolation.

Echoes from literature and sacred scripture thus become condensed ways to convey the atmosphere of war as, in recalling well-known texts they also carry a whole set of meanings, allusions, implications, and nuances. The *plenitude* of meanings inherent in literature and the intertextual richness migrates from literary

[211] Ibid, p. 308.

[212] Cambini, *Epistolario*, p. 173.

[213] Ibid., p. 169.

texts and, due to the situation of emergency, they reach out to ordinary private writings where they are adopted, and adjusted, as further communicative tools.[214]

What a transtextual war!

The title of this section recalls Fussell's chapter, 'What a literary war!'. However, it distinguishes itself from his approach, to a certain extent, in the selection of sources and regarding these sources' dialogue with literature. The critiques proposed by certain scholars to Fussell's work are supported by this study, such as those concerning the contrast between the arbitrariness of his selection of sources and the universal nature of the assumptions he made.[215] This chapter on literature and war writings distances itself from *The Great War in Modern Memory* in many ways. First of all, the sample of sources investigated is only partly ascribed to officers who later became writers (e.g. Monelli and Lussu). Secondly, the topic itself emerged from the consultation of primary sources. Thirdly, and most importantly, the present section has no ambition to disentangle a truth about the war experience from the study of literary resonances in it, but instead it aims to examine the references themselves, the reasons behind their choice and use, and the communicative meaning they assume in each case. What is shared here, however, is the important role literature has at the frontline, which is witnessed widely in Italian officers' writings. Even here though, there is no pretention to advance an absolute truth. On the contrary, an attempt is made to highlight the

[214] Eugenio Spedicato, *La Letteratura Tedesca*, *Manuale per l'Università* (Pisa: ETS, 2005). p. 10.

[215] Leonard V. Smith 'Paul Fussell's "The Great War and Modern Memory: Twenty-Five Years Later"', in *History and Theory*. 40(2), pp. 241-260.

peculiar ways in which each piece of writing relates to literature. Nonetheless, this section might even appear arbitrary to a certain extent because the passages selected from the sources considered are those which, more than others, appeared relevant to represent the topic under examination.

This study shares Fussell's opinion regarding language as being inherently human and capable of describing human experiences. Fussell explains that people do not dare to use language in a realistic way as they find real circumstances too horrific, or morally despicable, to be thoroughly described or represented to an audience: 'We have made unspeakable mean indescribable: it really means nasty.'[216]

The apparent (or real) lack of words to describe particular circumstances, such as those engendered by war, is widely witnessed in the primary sources investigated and is a great starting point with which to address the following questions: why do previous readings, carried out both before and during war, become useful (not to say vital) at the front line to the point of surfacing in both letters and diaries? Does the perspective on them change while at the front and, if so, in which way?

It could be contended that transtextuality is the most functional and multi-layered communication bridge in war; the best way to link synchronic and diachronic dimensions, thus helping those writing out of their actual, finite, and, most of the time, desperate condition. Their use of transtextuality (be it conscious or unconscious) may elevate them to a dimension of literary greatness, existential

[216] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory,* p. 184.

hope, and emotional strength. If reading and writing are already a sign of health in unhealthy conditions, literature can be seen as both a symptom of health and as a toolkit of resilience available to the fortunate.[217] In order to exemplify the great assistance provided by literature when the actual circumstances become absurd and obscure, Lieutenant Vitelli's description of his living and working conditions in the new position to which he has been assigned is worth considering. The useless set of activities he is required to perform drive him crazy, and the frustration resulting from having to satisfy what, in his opinion, are completely irrelevant and nonsensical orders, are emphasized in his account. The emotional burden finally culminates in an intertextual play in which he explicitly refers to Don Quixote's surreal adventures as a term of comparison to represent his own disorientation and emotional experience:

Inoltre un semplice razzo di segnale può determinare il mio intervento e se un osservatorio mi segnala due pacifici pastori che portano a spasso le pecore, come un Don Chichiotte qualunque devo porre in resta la mia vecchia lancia. [218]

The original passage Vitelli refers to is the conclusion of chapter VIII of Don Quixote in which the main character is ready to fight against gigantic enemies that are, in fact, windmills.[219]

[217] Camon, *Conversazione*, p. 65.

[218] Antonio Vitelli, manuscript notebook, (Museo della Guerra Rovereto) *Doss Remit. (col 17o gruppo montagna) Appunti di guerra" 1917, Novembre 6 -1918 Gennaio 9*.

[219] Cervantes, *Don Chichiotte de la Mancha* (Roma:Newton Compton, 1018; 1994), pp. 64-65.

Ciò detto, e raccomandandosi di tutto cuore alla sua signora Dulcinea affinchè lo assistesse in quello scontro, ben coperto dal suo scudo, e **posta la lancia in resta**,[220] spinse Ronzinante a gran galoppo e si scaraventò contro il primo mulino che incontrò dinanzi[221]

Vitelli's literary echo is at one and the same time an attempt to exorcize his condition through irony and a sharp critique of the senseless nature of military orders and mainstream news. 'News', of uncertain reliability, pertains to the potential danger of those who were dressed like ordinary people, as documented in the *Corriere della Sera* of 17 June 1915 under the title:

'Travestiti da Contadini'/'Dressed up as farmers':[222]
I gendarmi, le guardie forestali, i soldati d'Austria preferivano generalmente vestirsi da contadini. Coi rudi panni da lavoro si recavano di buon mattino con gli attrezzi nei campi più prossimi alla nostra trincea. Faticavano tutto il giorno con la falce e con l'occhio, tagliando fieno e sbirciando verso le nostre posizioni. Alla notte contro i nostri soldati giungevano improvvisamente colpi partiti quasi sempre dai luoghi dove erano stati visti durante il giorno 'i contadini'.

[220] Emphasis mine.

[221] Translation available at http://www.spanisharts.com/books/quijote/chapter8.htm.

[222] *Corriere della Sera* 17 June 1915 (my translation).

Apart from representing a great example of what Paul Fussell has widely described as the irony and sarcasm alluding to war writing, through the transtextuality with the masterpiece by Cervantes, Vitelli's passage transcends the actual and present situation by making it general.[223] The consolation derived from the comparison with Don Quixote is due not only to what is explained by the motto 'misery loves company', but also to the very presence of Don Quixote in Vitelli's cultural *repertoire*. This, in fact, has helped him to disentangle and create distance from an absurd war circumstance otherwise difficult to decipher and endure. The relief is achieved through irony, but derives also from the 'transtextual journey', which, for a while, takes Vitelli somewhere else, to a more elevated, no matter how paradoxical and surreal, circumstance.

The epitomizing value assigned to Don Quixote is betrayed by the phrase, 'as a Don Quixote of sorts'. Later, a closer thematic link between war in the mountains and the literary setting is guaranteed by the reference to the two 'shepherds' and reinforced by the mention of weapons in the explicit, but unmarked, quotation of the phrase, 'porre in resta la mia vecchia lancia' (ready my old lance). Here, for instance, the personal assumptions of Don Quixote's perspective create a superimposition between Vitelli at his war and the iconic character busy with his futile, but nonetheless epic, enterprise.

The reference to epic deeds is unsurprisingly common to many war writings. The following passage borrowed from Lussu's *Un anno sull'Altipiano* witnesses the extent to which literature can be applied as an additional lens through which to

[223] Fussell, 'A Satire of Circumstance', in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, pp. 3-38.

perceive and understand war. Unlike Vitelli's notebook, Lussu's text is written at a subsequent stage and should thus be considered as such. Nonetheless it warrants interest in that it reflects extensively upon the role of literature and literary characters and authors throughout the conflict:

Ariosto era un po' come i nostri giornalisti di guerra, e descrisse cento combattimenti senza averne visto uno solo... Le grandi battaglie sono per lui delle piacevoli escursioni in campagne fiorite e persino la morte gli appare come una simpatica continuazione della vita. Qualcuno dei suoi capitani muore ma continua a combattere senza accorgersi di essere morto.[224]

On the one hand, literature helps one understand war further and even represent its contradictions, which is the case with the war correspondents compared to Ariosto. On the other hand, war creates the right conditions to understand literary works and the reasons and needs inspiring their authors to write them in the first place:

Baudelaire è l'opposto. Il sole dell'Altipiano era fatto per illuminare la sua vita tetra. Come lo studente bolognese, egli avrebbe potuto vagare nudo sui monti e bere sole e cognac. Egli avrebbe ben potuto fare la guerra a fianco del tenente colonnello dell'osservatorio di Stoccaredo. Simile a lui, simile a mille altri dei miei compagni,

[224] Lussu, *Un Anno*, p. 114.

egli aveva bisogno di bere per stordirsi e dimenticare. La vita era per lui, ciò che era per noi la guerra. Ma quali scintille di gioia umana sgorgano dal suo pessimismo![225]

According to Lussu, reading in peacetime and wartime, at the frontline or in the home front, is different. Therefore, this impacts significantly on the degree of understanding of the literary works used and the personalities who conceive them. Lussu compares Ariosto to the correspondents who are accused of describing war without having ever experienced it. Ariosto is described as an 'optimist' whereas, due to his pessimism, Baudelaire, is compared to those soldiers who indulge in drinking during war. To a certain extent, both authors appear to be beyond normality, but, nevertheless, they are able to sublimate their peculiarity to transform it into something special. These two literary references have war as a common denominator. According to Lussu, it is war itself which contributes to a further grasp of them:

È sui monti d'Asiago che ho imparato a conoscere due tra i più caratteristici spiriti della cultura occidentale. Io li conoscevo già, ma superficialmente, come può conoscerli uno che li legga, a tavolino, in città, in tempi normali. Di loro, non mi era rimasto alcun speciale ricordo. Letti in guerra, a riposo, sono un'altra cosa.

Franco Michelini Tocci's collection provides additional evidence of how literature is often adopted as a framework to share and make sense of the experience of war.

[225] Ibid., pp. 114-115

However, at the same time, it becomes the condition through which to make complete sense of certain concepts, mottos and the great teachings of literature. In the following passage, for instance, the aphorisms of Horace are mentioned as something which could only be grasped fully in war:

(letter of 5 January 1918)

Forse solo nella guerra il *carpe diem* oraziano è di una verità evidente[226]

The reason for this further presumed understanding of literary works is due to the emotional exposition engendered by the extraordinary circumstances of war, which are also dealt with by Augusto Vivanti in a letter to his mother written on 10 May 1918 (which will be considered more intensively in the following chapter):

Quassù, nella solitudine dei monti, in alto in alto, lontano lontano, fa piangere (si intende, internamente) il suono d un mandolino, la novella di una rivista, o la partenza di un collega; chi saprebbe vivere di risentimento o di odio? [227]

Recurrent literary references

Before exploring the influence of a selection of literary works on officers' private writings from the front line, it is worth introducing a field of study which focuses on the *repertoire* of images and values derived from literary tradition, namely imagology, which can be defined as 'the study of images (more or less truthful,

[226] Tocci, *Fede il Dovere*, p. 121.

[227] Vivanti, *Scrivimi*, p.324

more or less distorted, idealized etc.) of a certain country and of its inhabitants, as passed down through literature.'[228]

A few works can be considered part of the core of Italian culture, above all those by Dante and Manzoni, and which considerably influence the set of values common to the sources taken into consideration in this chapter. In order to understand the ways in which literature is received, interpreted and transmitted in this specific period by the targeted group of officers considered, attention should be directed to the wider educational system with which these (and other authors) were set as cornerstones of school programmes and as key repositories of the Italian national identity and sense of belonging. As argued by Bosna before the war, the educational system was seen as a:

strumento di elevazione e progresso civile di tutto il popolo e di realizzazione delle istanze politico-ideologiche dello stato risorgimentale[229]

In her work on the Risorgimento, directing attention to the nation-building process of the period and post-unity era, Lucy Riall disentangles the failure of some strategies, such as festivals and monuments, to spread a general sense of belonging to the newly born nation. Further, she confirms the significant impact of other channels, such as that of theatre and literature, which proved more capable of creating, among the narrow elite able to access them, the new sense of nation,

[228] Hermann Dorowin, 'Germanistica e letteratura comparata', in Eugenio Spedicato, ed., *Letteratura Tedesca*, (Pisa: ETS, 2005), pp. 121-149, here p. 136. (my translation).

[229] Ernesto Bosna, *Stato e Scuola*, (Bari: Cacucci, 2000), pp. 198-199.

proposing the ideals of nationalism and fatherland.[230] Given that the education referring back to the value of the Risorgimento[231] in liberal Italy displayed features that could be detected as having an influence on educated people's attitude towards war and intervention (for instance in universities), the general aspects pertaining to the nature of education in the pre-war period are particularly worth considering.[232] These are important in distinguishing officers' unconditional support for war from their personal ambitions, thus helping to understand mobilisation further.[233] Although an exhaustive exploration of this field lies entirely outside the scope of this chapter, a few remarks are worth noting. In the Italian educational system, literature was granted a crucial role and, as Bosna argued in *Stato e Scuola (State and School)*, literary works were attentively selected as they were seen as determining components of personal and collective evolution.[234] According to Bosna, in the Giolittian era, the importance of school was due to:

atteggiamento mentale che vi si acquisiva vivendo gli anni crcuciali della formazione della personalità in una collettività sottoposta a regole comuni, in cui si formava l'attitudine all'obbedienza, al rispetto della proprietà, al sacrificio, a tutti quei valori

[230] Lucy Riall, *The Italian Risorgimento The History of Italy from Napoleon to Nation State* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 157

[231] Ibid., p. 41.

[232] Augusto Vivanti, *Pavia in grigio verde* (Pavia: Boerchio Editore, 1968).

[233] Pietro del Negro, 'L'esercito Italiano, I volontari e i Giovani nella Grande Guerra', in Fabrizio Rasera and Carlo Zadra, eds., *Volontari Italiani nella Grande Guerra*, (Rovereto: Museo Storico Italiano della Grande Guerra, 2008), pp. 5-37, p. 21.

[234] Bosna, *Stato e Scuola*, p. 170.

insomma diffusi anche dalla letteratura del tempo: Cuore, Pinocchio e simili, e dalla quale si apprendeva che soltanto il bambino obbediente avrebbe potuto ottenere la benevolenza della Fatina dai capelli turchini

Along with other authors adopted by the education system, such as De Amicis, and Collodi, there is no doubt that Dante was presented and considered as the spiritual father of Italy. A pocket copy of Dante's *Commedia* was given to soldiers during mobilization regardless of whether they could read or not. For many it was a lucky object rather than a book to be read but it was especially seen as a guide and a consolation in war. This pocket edition became a 'Bible' of sorts, perceived by less cultured individuals who were not so familiar with reading, as a lucky and sacred object, as was the case with the Bible for British soldiers.[235] The guiding role ascribed to this work derives from the fact that Dante's message is both universal and attentive to the individuality of each character, and to the specificity of different circumstances.[236] Along with the *Vademecum dell'allievo ufficiale /Training manual for officers*, young officers left for the front line with this larger existential, moral, literary (and, perhaps even linguistic) *vademecum*. This came in a physical form, when they actually received a pocket copy of it, or simply in a spiritual form when they did not and thus had to rely on their mnemonic

[235] Michael Snape, *God and the British soldier: religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 235.

[236] See *Piccola Enciclopedia Treccani* av. at <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/dante-alighieri/>.

knowledge of it.[237] In understanding one of the reasons behind the national and interventionist interest and institutional recognition[238] of the *Commedia* as an enlightening reading in war, the following passage reported in the *Piccola Enciclopedia Treccani* is worth considering:

L'ideale uomo che nasce dalle sue pagine è colui che vive con pienezza, non rifugge da alcun dovere - spirituale, morale, pratico - che la vita gli impone, affronta fermamente ogni responsabilità, anche la più rischiosa: e tuttavia non pensa mai solo a sè stesso, sa che la sua azione e il suo pensiero sono una particella d'un ordine universale.

However, there is something which both governmental and military institutions, along with mobilizing forces, could not forecast, namely that the war would have been so bad as to resemble Dante's *Inferno* to a greater extent than could ever have been imagined.[239] Given the long-lasting darkness of wartime violence and suffering, the exemplar provided by the *Commedia* could also be seen as a consolation of sorts; a reassuring text which, on the one hand, provided the images

[237] Pennella, Giuseppe (Colonnello di fanteria Stato Maggiore), *Il Vademecum dell'allievo ufficiale* di complemento, (Roma: Tipografia del Senato, Giugno 1915).

[238] Aldo Vallone, *Dante e la Commedia come tema letterario dell'Ottocento in Studi sulla Divina Commedia*, (Firenze: Olschki editore, 1955), p. 131.

[239] The role ascribed to Dante is witnessed also by the institutional postcards inspired to the *Commedia*. On this, see Davide Scotto, "La Feroce Trine. Cartoline Dantesche Della Grande Guerra." in *Lettere Italiane*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2007, pp. 507–563, av. at <www.jstor.org/stable/26267188>.

and lexicons to depict hell and unimaginable sufferings and, on the other, opened up to incredibly great passages of poetry and hope:

Il lettore scende nel buio seno della terra, risale all'aperto su una montagna alta e aperta alla luce, sola nell'oceano sconfinato, penetra corporalmente nella densa e pur non corporea luce del Paradiso.

Briefly, we can infer that the *Commedia* came to represent both a *vademecum* for coping with the worst scenarios and with both physical and emotional sufferings related to war, and as an *overture* to future hope and the chance of transcendence. Considering its role as a guide for readers, a sort of Catholic and patriotic moral compendium, and at times perceived as an amulet in battle, the *Commedia* often becomes a lens through which to make sense of life at the front and it provides a set of images and phrases to represent and share the experience of war. This is evident in the following passage taken by Monelli's *Le Scarpe al Sole* where the role of 'amuleto' of the *Commedia* is described:

Cerco la sorte nel Dantino tascabile che porto sempre con me nella tasca di sopra della giubba, con la speranza che serva almeno a fermare una pallottola. Quinto a sinistra: 'vostra sustanzia rimarrà con voi'.[240]

[240] Monelli, *Le scarpe al Sole*, p. 127.

This passage shows a circular description as it starts by assessing the spiritual relationship with the *Commedia*, then focuses on the physicality of this pocket version of the book (concrete details such as its appearance and its location in his jacket), and finally links the physical and spiritual aspects, (i.e. location of the text in the book and its inspirational message): 'fifth on the left: your essence will remain with you'. This final quote has the aura, and probably the usability, of a *mantra*: something to repeat to oneself to help face despair; a high message to store close to one's heart, both physically and spiritually.

In the case of the 'scrittori in divisa/writers in uniform', such as Monelli, the *Commedia* not only becomes a prism through which to understand and represent war, but it is also, at times, seen as a source of stylistic inspiration from which to borrow narrative and rhetorical structures to describe the terrible vision of the battle field while also enhancing the literary value of writing:

Al di là del costone d'un colpo, ecco la spaventosa bolgia dantesca, uno scoglio di malebolge fatto realtà [241]

The use of 'bolgia infernale'/'bolgia of hell' also permeates the less literary writing of Colonel Pasquale Gagliani. On 11 March 1916, commenting on the wounds reported by one of his men, accidentally shot by his artillery, he wonders whether he might somehow feel relieved to be granted leave and have the chance to see his loved ones, thus placing some distance between himself and 'questa boglia

[241] Ibid.,p. 115.

infernale'/'this Dantesque bolgia'. What appears of interest in this passage is the fact that the term 'bolgia' in Gagliani is extended to the general condition of life at war rather than being reserved solely for the battlefield, thus widening the perceived gap between the war front and home front.

Based on the role ascribed to *Commedia* in the examples provided, it is possible to make a few observations on the recurrent references to Dante's *Inferno* in war notebooks and diaries. Dante's ability to describe the unspeakable, with an unimaginable richness of language and courageous use of metaphors, hyper-real details and examples, was an inspiration for men at the front. While scarcely literate soldiers stop and substitute saying the unsayable with silence or stock expressions such as 'words can't describe', officers often recall images or phrases borrowed from Dante. A battle full of corpses, blood, death and a high degree of both physical and spiritual suffering seems to require the adoption of Dante's imagery, as proved by the frequency of the phrase 'bolgia dantesca'/'Dantesque Bolgia'.[242]

In line with Levi's observations on writing and communication under extreme circumstances, one could argue that imagining oneself facing a 'bolgia infernale', does not prevent one from being shot or from falling in battle. However, recalling a literary universe with similar features to that witnessed in war might mitigate the psychological disorientation derived from these shocking

[242] The resemblance between the battlefield and hell is acknowledged internationally and, as such, investigated even by Madigan, *Faith*, p. 175.

circumstances.[243] Ideally sharing (through transtextuality) with Dante himself the feelings that derive from being exposed to such terrible scenes and experiences might also help to overcome the sense of isolation resulting from the impossibility (or unwillingness) to share it fully with loved ones on the home front. The act of recalling a particular atmosphere could also help writing officers to transcend their actual circumstances and return, through memories, language, and literary echoes, to a more favourable situation. This is the case with Augusto Vivanti's cultivated reference to the opera by Boito, *Mefistofele*, inspired by Goethe's *Faust* and reported in the passage below. Far from serving solely as a tool to describe war, this reference is much more complex: it represents a way to recall (and thus, in a way, regain) his former existential, social and cultural status. The reference brings Augusto back to a time in which he was exposed to an opera rather than to a battle, comfortably sitting in a theatre rather than in the trenches, well-dressed in bourgeois clothes rather than in an ill-fitting uniform, surrounded by reassuringly well-off people from his home city rather than by a constantly changing set of other men in uniform. The following letter, written on 15 March 1916, is striking. Unlike the one sent on 28 February in which Augusto encourages his parents to keep calm and think positively, this letter does not attempt to reassure his family audience of the safety of his frontline duty:

[243] Camon, *Conversazione*, p. 65.

... lo scambio di fucilate si accelera e degenera in un vero e proprio combattimento, tuonano allora tutte le artiglierie, spaziano i proiettori, si alzano a centinaia i bengala e tutta la conca assume le caratteristiche infernali delle scene del Mefistofele...

Compared to the references to Dante's *Bolgia infernale*, this quote is more cultivated and also betrays a knowledge of opera. Augusto's attendance at several theatrical representations is mentioned in many letters among which the following, written on 2 April 1916 and in answer to one from his father: 'e sarò ben lieto di assistere, come tu ben dici, alle opere che si danno al Fraschini, al Rigoletto in ispecie' / I will be quite happy to attend, as you rightly suggest, the performances at the Fraschini theatre, especially *Rigoletto*.[244] Augusto's (and Cesare's) passion for theatrical matters is also evident in the following passage in which he refers to the thespian travelling theatre in order to describe the device invented to provide military members with a moving cinematograph:[245]

8 settembre 1918 fa molto caldo ma non importa, ieri sera sono stato al cinematografo... all'aperto. Si tratta di divertire i soldati ed il cinmetografo montato su camion gira e si ferma a dare due rappresentazioni. È il carro di Tespi.

[244] Opera by Giuseppe Verdi adapted from *Le Roi s'amuse* by Victor Hugo.

[245] Riccardo Viagrande, *Il Carro di Tespi Storia del Teatro Musicale dall'Epoca Classica al Cinquecento*, (Milano: Casa Musicale Eco, 2013).

This passage can be read in dialogue with the passages dealing with operas. The popular nature of the offer provided by the travelling cinematograph, and what it meant to the mass of soldiers, contrasts sharply with the setting and offer of the Fraschini theatre. Even if the cinematograph probably amuses and entertains Augusto, temporarily distracting him from boredom and thoughts of war, he feels the need to signal his sober detachment from it. He does that by calling it a 'thespian travelling theatre', and by underlining that it is meant for soldiers (which means that it doesn't appeal to him). It is difficult to grasp here whether he writes this in order to reassure his father that his taste and cultural level has not been undermined by life at war or whether he is trying to reassure himself after having enjoyed the performance.

Depending on the texts evoked, as well as on the form of evocation chosen, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the act of writing, of the relationship with the audience addressed leading to hidden or more explicit references. In other words, the way in which certain literary passages are first chosen and then echoed reveals something new about the need to communicate the war in letters sent home, or even only to make sense of the experience of war in notebooks and diaries. If, as suggested elsewhere in this study, letters can be seen as bridges connecting people and overcoming both spatial and emotional distance, then diaries might represent a way to connect personal identity in time and remain present to oneself while enduring a difficult, extraordinary or simply disappointing, situation.

Reference is frequently made to the passage known as Lucia's 'farewell to the mountains' from Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, in order to describe the act of leaving for the frontline, or even the sorrow attached at having to leave behind a loved position or squad. The former circumstance is that behind Augusto Vivanti's letter that explicitly refers to the feelings of anxiety and melancholy experienced by the Manzonian character:

Un vero dispiacere lasciare Padova. E' doppio dispiacere perché si abbandonava la vita cittadina con tutto i suo comfrot e poi si lasciava il certo per l'incognito infatti con la nostra partenza da Padova diventammo uomini di guerra. E fu un viaggio, specialmente dopo Mestre... un po' doloroso perché abbandonando la nostra terra ci tornavano alla mente le cose più care, ci si ridestavano gli aspetti ed i ricordi più intimi. In viaggio ti scrissi una lettera in lapis che poi spedii per espresso e poi trovando i miei compagni assopiti mi rincattuciai anch'io in un vagone. Ma per tutti noi quel dormire fu un po' come quello di Lucia.[246]

The second circumstance, namely that of having to move from one position to another, is behind the transtextual writing by Lieutenant Vitelli. In the following passage, the echoes of Manzoni's 'Farewell to the Mountains' are clear. The theme of separation from a treasured place, the uncertainty for the future and a mixed emotional state influence the observation of landscape and accompany the

[246] Vivanti, *Scrivimi*, p. 146.

movement from a loved place to an unknown one where the battalion has been assigned:

Io rimango ancora a far caricare l'ultimo residuo di materiali sugli ultimi muli. Prima di partire mi affaccio ancora a guardare le posizioni nemiche che si avvolgono d'ombra, un lontano crepitio di mitragliatrici, razzi ancora che si alzano e ricadono in piogge di argento e d'oro; lame argentee di riflettori che si incrociano in fantastici duelli, i cecchini invisibili e mortali nei soliti agguati. L'aria *crepuscolare* s'imbianca di nebbia e di nevischio ... Non rivedrò forse mai più questi luoghi che avrebbero potuto essermi una tomba, andrò lontano, altrove. Ma dove? Ma cosa mi aspetta? … Si sentono ancora echeggiare nell'aria i sonori Attenti! Forza! ...Non avete dimenticato nulla? Tutto è caricato? Tutto, signor Tenente! Avanti allora, con Dio! Gli ultimi muli partono, una neve dura e ghiacciata scende nell'aria serale con un brivido di tormenta. Partiamo: a piedi, in mezzo alla neve e al fango io e i pochi uomini rimasti c'incamminiamo per la scarpata serpeggiante. Addio Doss Remit! Addio Maly e Tures! Addio Quota 514! Addio Roncola! Partiamo curvi sotto le raffiche tormentose; andiamo via in pieno inverno lasciando ricoveri certi senza sapere dove saremo domani ma certi solo di dover lavorare ancora, di dover vincere ancora la natura e la sorte avversa, pieni di un lancinante desiderio che non si può soddisfare di conoscere l'infido avvenire, pieni di un'accorata nostalgia di riposi che ben sappiamo non ci potranno essere accordati.[247]

[247] Vitelli, manuscript *Doss Remit*.

The knowledge of literary strategies is signalled not only by the tones and registers borrowed from Manzoni, but also from the rhetorical devices adopted, such as direct speech to introduce his thoughts and his soldiers' questions and comments. As in Manzoni's passage, the farewell takes place when it is still dark. Even if a new day and a new chapter of war are approaching, Vitelli defines the atmosphere as crepuscular. Sunset suggests that a crucial existential experience is coming to an end. The inspirational link to Manzoni's passage is marked by the reiteration of the 'Addio'/'Farewell' to be found in the concluding section of 'Farewell to the mountains'.

'Thirst for printed paper'[248]

There is a proximity and a circular influence between reading and experience. Raimondi describes a sort of inextricable mutual influence operating between the reading undertaken/encountered and the moments, space, relationship, historical events and emotions (both subjective and collective) accompanying it. On the one hand, the personal emotional perception of the given circumstances becomes part of the text encountered in that specific moment in space and time; on the other hand, the reading itself impacts on that experience with its own words, message and images that are adapted, received and reframed by the circumstances of fruition.[249] This is acutely and openly acknowledged by Lussu who reflects upon the different grasp of authors such as Baudelaire and Ariosto when read in peacetime

[248] Cambini, *Epistolario*, p. 34.

[249] Raimondi, *Le Voci*, p. 93.

and then again at war. However, it is also represented by Valentini who adopts Saint Francis' words to make sense and gain a more optimistic view of his own experience and sacrifice connected with his military life.

The words, sounds, images, values, teaching and examples derived from religion represent a diverse framework that emerges in different ways in the sources considered. As has been studied elsewhere, even religion and belief is strictly connected to family and local traditions and appears to be articulated in an almost infinite set of practices, celebrations and cults which blend official and vernacular aspects. Due to his origins in Perugia, Umbria, Enzo Valentini's letter collection is deeply influenced by the spiritual breadth of Saint Francis of Assisi. His teaching and perspective frequently enter Valentini's letters with explicit quotes from his *Cantico* as a form of gratitude whenever his conditions at war improve after feeling deprived of, for example, water or fire, as emplified below. Commenting on the stop to drink after a long march:

Agordo 18 Luglio 15, mattina

Laudato sii mi signore per sora acqua, mai la laude francecsana mi fu nel cuore viva come oggi. / Praised be my Lord, through Sister Water. Never before was the Franciscan praise so vivid in my heart as it is today[250]

The same praise is repeated in a letter of 25 August 1915 when, thanks to the pleasant weather, he has the chance to take swim in a river and clean himself.[251]

Even the wind and the fire are celebrated through Francis' phrases:

[250] Valentini, *Lettere*, p. 8.

[251] Ibid., p, 65.

4 August Ho montato la guardia a cielo sgombro 'Laudato si mi Signore per Frate Vento'/ I stood guard with a clear sky 'Praise be my Lord, through Brother Wind'[252]

6 September The Franciscan praise 'Laudato sii mi Signore per frate focu'. is re-evoked to comment the memory of the distant home.[253]

However, Saint Francis' teaching and example lies at the core of Valentini's spiritual and fusional observation of nature and of the sacred aura he attributes to animals, flowers, trees and mountains. Here it represents a form of pervasive implicit influence, as is the case with the Waldensian background for Jahier.

30 luglio Un fremito di vita intenso corre sul vento a sfiorare i prati su cui vola/ 30 July An intense thrill of life runs with the wind and strokes the grass above upon which it flies.[254]

Another officer who borrows extensively from sacred scriptures, in spite of his openly anticlerical feelings and his constant swearing, is Leonardo Cambini. In his letters, Cambini always respects a linguistic and communicative framework that underlines the aspect of faith and family bonds with his father, using the discourse on the national cause only to reinforce the idea of honour and the sense of his

[252] Ibid., p. 39.

[253] Ibid., p. 80.

[254] Ibid., p. 26.

brother's sacrifice. This becomes apparent in a letter written on 22 December 1915 in which he borrows extensively from the Gospel of Saint John: 'dopo che Egli disse 'io sono la rissurrezione in vita'/ After He said 'I am the resurrection in life' and from that by Matthew 'Beati quelli che più avranno dato perchè più riceveranno'/'Blessed are those who have given more because the more they will receive' or 'beati quelli che più hanno sofferto, perchè loro sarà il merito, e la gratitudine e la gloria/ blessed are those who have suffered the most because theirs will be the merit, the grateful and the glory'.[255] Whenever he has to cope with or make sense of death, he returns to the sacred words of the Gospels. Even when writing his condolences to Guglielmina Cenzalti on 3 September 1916, he quotes a passage from the Gospel of Saint John.[256]

A great example of the ways in which different affiliations coexist and are challenged by the sacrifice of war is provided by Leonardo Cambini's father. The words are recorded by Leonardo in a letter dated 3 May 1916 from Cavazuccherina (p. 96) to Prof. Vittorio Cian, explaining his father's struggle: 'Come cristiano, dico fiat voluntas tua: come italiano, grido : Viva l'Italia: ma come padre, dico: che dolore, che dolore!'/ As a Christian, I say Fiat voluntas tua: as an Italian I cry 'Viva l'Italia', but as a father I say: what sorrow, what sorrow!' Of further interest is the fact that these coexisting faiths and matters of commitment are articulated and fixed through specific mottos

[255] Cambini, *Epistolario*, pp. 68-69.

[256] Ibid., p. 124.

'Fiat voluntas tua' and 'Viva l'Italia'.[257] However, in spite of their performative and motivational nature, they seem unable to compensate him for the death of Raffaello. Leonardo probably shares his father's 'what sorrow!' but he does not dare to openly accept it as his primary concern is that of embracing the national cause for which his brother died.

His father's words are interesting as the nationalist faith is framed between the Christian faith and the role of the father.

> This is particularly important here because it seems to create a proximity between the renegotiation of language taking place in the context of oral exchange and that then enters the written text, and the renegotiation of the written language of texts belonging to the canon, re-encountered, re-read, reconsidered, and re-evaluated in the context of war, and in the light of war.

Ezio Raimondi also refers to books as being infused of relationship. For instance, he defines *'libri dell'amicizia'* as those books that have been given to us by someone and which thus retain some aspects of the relationship between the end reader and the person who presented the book as a gift or who has lent it.[258] It is in this light that we should envisage the requests by officers of parents, friends and acquaintances to be given or lent books while at war. Significantly, Campodonico dies with his sister's pocket Dante close to his heart: his favourite book that he knows extremely well and recites to comrades is also a dear gift received from his adored sister while at war. On 30 January 1917 he comments on her gift as follows:

[257] Raimondi, *Le voci*, pp. 93-94.

[258] Ibid., p. 94.

Ringrazio in particolar modo mia sorella.. della piccola Divina Commedia che è così cara al mio spirito. Dono più gradito non poteva pervenire, gradito come la donatrice. / I thank my sister in particular for the Commedia that is so sacred to my spirit. A dearer gift could not have been received, as dear as the person giving it.[259]

Apart from the works of the canon, called for their *auctoritas* to bear witness, and to war and consolation or wise mottos to combatants, a broad range of less erudite readings accompanied men to the front. They are not covered in detail in this chapter as it focuses on the quest for identity anchors and shared backgrounds which, in the case of junior officers, relied on canonical literature. However, instances of further readings are not lacking: Campodonico suggests that his sister reads *I pescatori d'Islanda* by Pierre Loti, published by Salani in 1900. On 11 January 1917 after having received the pocket Dante, he wrote:

Ho piacere che tu legga 'I pescatori d'Islanda' perchè è un bel libro./ I would be happy if you read the An Iceland Fisherman because it is a good book.[260]

The passage of books and their delivery is a further confirmation of the existing relationship and, as such, it acts as an identity-reassurance. At times, it is war itself that 'gives books' to officers, for instance when they find them in ruins or in the attic of abandoned houses in war zones. In those cases, it is war itself that offers up the book, one that will then retain the special memory of the lucky discovery, its reading will remain infused with that aura. Further, it will help to reassess a war

[259] Campodonico, *Lauri*, p. 123

[260] Ibid., p. 144.

that has now become, even if only in a specific and unusual occasion, a generous book-giver.

The necessity to find books to read while in combat is witnessed extensively in famous accounts on war, such as those by Emilio Lussu, Paolo Monelli and Carlo Emilio Gadda. Even though the attention towards the presence of books at the front is more understandable in those officers who have been defined as 'scrittori in divisa'/'writers in uniform', the vital role of reading material is widely covered also in the letter collections of those who have been defined 'writring officers ' included in this thesis who were already familiar with reading and writing. One of these 'scriventi' is Leonardo Cambini who, in many passages of his epistolary collection, describes the use of books in war. If shared reading represents, as explored in the following chapter, an attempt to maintain an effective exchange and convergence of views between the frontline and the home front, reading *per se* can be seen as both a coping mechanism and as a source of bonding between 'war practitioners' at the frontline. The unconventional title given to the present section is borrowed from the epistolary collection by Leonardo Cambini who, in one of his letters, creates an interesting parallel between reading and drinking:

Donà di Piave 25 Ottobre 1915 to Prof. Vittorio Cian

...volevo dirle se poteva prestarmi dei libri da leggere: libri, libri di qualunque genere: Lei sa la sete di carta stampata che prende, a volte, quando ci troviamo

all'asciutto! Potrebbe Lei -nella sua lettera settimanale- pregare sua sorella di favorirmi qualche libro, o di procurarmeli presso qualche persona di S. Donà? [261]

What is interesting here is the parallel between the need to read and the need to drink expressed by the 'thirst' for printed paper and reinforced by the explanation 'that affects us when we are all dry'. This could be interpreted in two ways: 'dry' could mean that they have a dry place in which to read but it might also mean that there is nothing alcoholic left to drink. If the former interpretation would be reassuring for someone who is going to lend some books to the writer then the second, and most relevant meaning, signals the urgency of the request and underlines the coping/therapeutic function of reading. In Cambini's case, this urgency is connected to the need to escape the sorrows deriving from the unexpected death of his beloved younger brother, Raffaello. For Cambini, even war is a way to react to, and cope with, mourning. Therefore, books become vital to him as is evident in many letters from his collection:

Se fosse possibile, io li manderei a prendere per un soldato, e passerei così lietamente i miei giorni... Ho fatto qualche perlustrazione nelle soffitte e nei granai, per vedere se capitava anche a me una fortuna del genere di quella che fece a Lei venir sotto mano le opere del Conti: ma, fino ad ora, ho cacciato in vano!

[261] Ibid., p.34.

Here, he is responding to a letter by Professor Cian, in which Cian probably tries to avoid lending him any books and suggests that he looks for some in abandoned houses. As stated, Cambini's search has, so far, been fruitless.

Even for Augusto Vivanti and Franco Michelini Tocci, whose collections of letters and family exchanges will be examined in more detail in the following chapter, reading has an important function while at war; in fact, so much so that Vivanti buys books whenever he has the chance to do so, as he mentions in a letter written in May 1916 from Udine:

Udine 11 Maggio 1916 In un pacchetto qui davanti a me ho due libri acquistati ora, l'Aiglon e il Cirano, ambedue di Rostand e che tanto mi divertono. [262]

In another letter, sent on 6 June 1916, he asks his father to send him some books:

Ho letto anch'io 'La lettura' ed il 'Secolo XX' nel quale, ben scritto, un articolo di Caffa 'Retrovie e ospedaletti'. A proposito di libri: se i volumi della collezione Salani non li hai prestati, potresti, per mezzo di pacco postale, mandarmeli? Sarebbe un bel regalo! [263]

Furthermore, what is also worth considering is a letter written by Franco Michelini Tocci to his mother, in which he asks her to send a specific selection of books

[262] Vivanti, *Scrivimi*, p. 205.

[263] Ibid., p. 207.

mentioned in *Corriere della Sera*. In addition to providing an example of the constant request of books from the front line, the following passage also sheds light on the disseminating role played by *Corriere* in wartime:

Zona di guerra, 18 marzo 1918

Io qui non ho bisogno di nulla. Puoi tuttavia provare a mandarmi un pacco d libri. Per non darti imbarazzo, t'indico i libri che trovo scritti sul Corriere della sera del 17: La passione d'Italia, versi di Sem Benelli- Novelle d'ambo i sessi di A. Panzini, L'altare del passato di G. Gozzano. Se questi libri non si trovano mi rimetto completamente a te.

Slightly different is the case of Carlo Emilio Gadda, for whom reading and studying are activities deeply grounded in the cultural and personal development begun long before the war:[264]

Nelle poche ore libere dal servizio mi piacerebbe leggere, studiare, scrivere; ma non ho libri, altro che la guida di Val Camonica e un manuale militare in tre volumi. Se avrò la licenza per recarmi a Milano, porterò qui un sacco di roba, specie i miei poeti[265]

[264] Tocci, *Fede il Dovere*, p. 155.

[265] Gadda, *Giornale,* p. 37.

Reading is more than just reading: it is a compelling necessity through which to calm a sort of anxiety not strictly connected with the war experience, as expressed in the following diary entry written on 27 September 1915:

Oggi è una giornata abbastanza serena: il bel tempo tornato, la lettura di un romanzo poliziesco del 'Romanzo Mensile' hanno calmato un po' il mio spirito[266]

Pointing out that it is a serene day is necessary for Gadda to create distance from the gloomy mood of his notebook entry of 25 September. He appears only briefly in this section as a further witness of the role of books at the frontline. The limited space granted to him is due to the fact that his attitude towards reading and writing throughout the conflict will be thematized more extensively in the chapter on Caporetto in order to provide a comparison between writing accomplished while at war and the act of recollection typical of memoirs.

Shared reading: a common ground at the frontline

In addition to its function and role as a coping and entertaining activity at war, reading is considered here as not solely the act of sharing views on texts, but also as a ritual that can both unify and divide. As a way of introducing this topic, Emilio Lussu's *Un Anno sull'Altipiano*/*One year on the high-plateau* has been examined in-depth. Despite it being at a subsequent stage, Lussu's work is considered here as it sheds further light on the issue dealt with in the present chapter. The author

[266] Ibid., p. 39.

describes the finding of a few books as something special and explains how, due to the role they take on at war, books are preserved as treasures throughout the conflict and saved from the battle by both Lussu and by his attendant. Having these books not only breaks up their routine but also makes the soldiers feel unique as they are convinced they own 'the only mobile literary library of the army'. Additionally, the books represent a bond between the soldiers; an occasion to share the pleasure of reading while focusing on something other than war; a sort of shared secret escape from the trenches. The following passage tells of this privilege and of the togetherness created by reading simultaneously (while even focusing on different books and even if one of the two readers cannot read properly and focuses mainly on images):

Io avevo rintracciato nella villa Rossi, posta nel bosco, a mezza strada tra Gallio e Asiago, dei libri abbandonati. Era di notte e l'incursione di pattuglia non mi dava del tempo. Nella fretta, scelsi l'Orlando Furioso d'Ariosto, un libro sugli uccelli e un'edizione francese dei Fiori del male di Baudelaire. Al libro sugli uccelli, mancavano le prime pagine e ne ignorai sempre l'autore. Quei libri li portai con me sull'Altipiano. Una volta salvati da me, una volta dal mio attendente, io li conservai sempre. È probabile che questa fosse la sola biblioteca letteraria ambulante dell'armata. Il mio attendente aveva una particolare passione per gli uccelli, e quel libro, illustrato, era il suo passatempo. Egli era un cacciatore. Sapeva appena

leggere, ma s'interessava principalmente delle figure. Quando io leggevo, leggeva anch'egli e ci scambiavamo le impressioni.[267]

If sharing the act of reading at war and exchanging views on it unites Lussu and his orderly, then the absence of sharing of both the actual war circumstances and the reading activity could result in a paradoxically impossible communication. This is the case in the following passage, which first presents the idyllic distraction from life at war through reading and then provides an account of the annoying meeting with a non-combatant superior from another section of the front:

Era un giorno di sole, tutto il fronte era calmo. Solo da Val D'Assa, sospinto dal vento, ci arrivava, di tanto in tanto, il rumore d'un colpo di fucile. Il mio attendente, il fucile sulle ginocchia come uno spiedo, era curvo sugli uccelli. Io gli sedevo accanto, con Angelica e Orlando, attraverso una fuga. Una voce ruppe il nostro silenzio[268]

The proximity to his orderly and the pleasant calm and charm of reading are interrupted by the annoying arrival of a cavalry lieutenant from the 'Piemonte Reale' regiment and who immediately announces that he does not know Ariosto. This literary ignorance, along with his political beliefs and his military career-oriented narrow mindedness, are the reasons behind his impossibility to

[267] Lussu, *Un anno*, p. 113.

[268] Ibid., p. 115.

communicate with Lussu. The newcomer has neither a compatible human disposition nor a shared literary, cultural or lived background. What is worse, though, are his mistaken and unrealistic views on war, given that he is in a war zone for the first time. As explained by Lussu: 'He never saw the trenches. Even now he did not come out of duty but out of his own initiative to have an idea of the front line and of our life there'. Lussu also reports that he was dressed elegantly with bright clothes which could be dangerous as they might catch the eye of the sharpshooters, but the newcomer, full of assumptions of courage and honour goes further, regardless of Lussu's warning:

Egli scherzò sui tiratori scelti, scherzò sul mio libro. Volle conoscerne l'autore. Mi confessò di non aver mai letto l'Ariosto. Io consegnai il libro all'attendente, presi il bastone di montagna e ritornai a lui. Tanto per riallacciare il discorso dissi: 'Orlando è divino.' 'Meriterebbe- rispose - di diventare presidente del Consiglio' 'Presidente del consiglio? obiettai, è forse troppo. Ma l'esercito non lo comanderebbe peggio del generale Cadorna. No, sua eccellenza non ha preparazione militare, ma è certamente il più grande oratore e il più grande uomo politico che abbia il Parlamento. Sua Eccellenza? La questione divenne intricata. Nel breve chiarimento che ne seguì, capii che io parlavo di Orlando, il 'Furioso', quello dell'Ariosto, mentre il mio collega intendeva parlare dell'onorevole Orlando, deputato al Parlamento e Ministro di Grazia e Giustizia del Ministero Boselli .[269]

[269] Ibid., pp.115-116.

Of interest here is the fact that the misunderstanding is not solely ascribable to the ignorance of the work by Ariosto, but rather to the fact that the Piedmontese cavalry lieutenant is so obsessed with, and full of military narratives, as to be unable to connect Orlando to the title of the book he had just seen in Lussu's hands. This immediately reveals his weak grasp of the circumstances, both in general and in military terms. More than that, he also shows a patronizing attitude towards infantry corps which he evidently considers less valuable: 'I think that you infantry men are too cautious. You won't win war with caution'.[270]

Literature is often adopted to underline the distance from superiors and from those men considered as shirkers and being lucky enough to be at the home front, or in the rear areas. An example of this use of literature as a means to create distance from someone is provided by the following passage borrowed from the notebook by Sebastiano Spina (this will be considered in detail in the chapter on Caporetto). Here it is possible to find a direct and explicit reference to Manzoni's *Promessi Sposi*, one that represents an example of the transtextuality discussed in the second section of this chapter:

Alla vista del mio comandante ho un impeto di sdegno: ma la sua buffa figura e il comico terrore dipinto sul suo volto mi ricordano di Don Abbondio fuggente dinnnazi al'invasione dei Lanzechenecchi e la mia ira sbollisce per far posto a un senso di commiserazione e d'indulgenza. [271]

[270] Ibid., p. 117.

[271] Sebastiano Spina, manuscript notebook.

In this passage, literature is evoked and presented as a framework through which to make sense of those human beings one would otherwise fail to understand, of those situations which are too intense and surreal to be thinkable or intelligible, or simply too profound or quick (as was the case with the Caporetto rout experienced by Spina) to be absorbed emotionally and narrated. Literature, through transtextuality, becomes a lens through which to zoom out of the situation and then zoom in with more information, thus providing a more balanced view, and possibly a set of great phrases or metaphors upon which to rely when confronting reality. Bringing to mind Manzoni's famous metaphor used to describe the fragility and ridiculous aspect of Don Abbondio, Spina stops hating and sincerely disdaining his superior in spite of his cowardly behaviour. The figure of Don Abbondio as it is sketched by Manzoni helps Spina understand weakness and cowardice, to the point that it becomes easier for him to grasp his superior's conduct (which nonetheless remains unjustifiable). Transtextuality shows, in this case, many layers as Don Abbondio is evoked, not solely in that he epitomises cowardice but also in that, in an analogous situation, namely the invasion by Lanzechenecchi, his reaction was similar to that of his captain. The Rout is thus compared to a barbaric invasion. It is as if Manzoni himself were suddenly present in Udine, placing a hand upon Spina's shoulder and uttering the consolatory sentence pronounced in his work by Don Abbondio 'Il coraggio uno non se lo può dare' in order to explain (without justifying it) Don Abbondio's as well as Spina's captain's conduct.

As far as conduct is concerned, the following chapter provides an exploration of how potentially devious conduct encouraged by the circumstances of war represented a constant concern for families. This could be seen, to a certain extent, as a further reason motivating the constant sharing of readings with sons at the frontline.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on how literature, along with the family lexicon, becomes fundamental in war, shaping and informing images in both diary and letter writing, becoming a lens through which to make sense of war. The reading of classical literature and scared scriptures pre-dating the outbreak of war, along with the reading accomplished in war, is not only echoed in writings, but has much greater significance. They represent an empowering tool in that they provide images through which it is possible to envisage and give an idea of what is going on and to create narratives. Those images, those words, those pages, recalled in writing or read at the front, might also represent a way to dedicate some moments to themselves, or, at times, to have a clearer, or even simply different, vision of the experience of war. In the light of the passages analyzed, and of the theory and practice proposed by Raimondi on the act of reading, it would be too simplistic to refer to books as an evasion from the reality of war. In fact, they respond to a much more complex and nuanced need, namely that of 'dare nuovo senso'/'re-signifying' experience to get closer to and grasp the specific time - and space - frame of certain

moments lived at the front.[272] The confrontation, the encounter with the book reinforces the reader's inner space, thus strengthening it towards the attacks and challenges represented by life at war. As such, it keeps the crucial role of being an identity anchor if the reading is a private act, and, a relational anchor, if the book is a gift or is shared and commented with loved ones back home or with comrades in the trenches. The present chapter introduces the next, one which focuses on non-literary shared readings as a further form of connection with family audiences.

[272] Raimondi, *Le voci*, p. 76.

Chapter 3

Family communication in war: achievements and setbacks

Introduction

This chapter focuses on shared readings considered as an attempt to maintain a convergence of views and an effective communication between the war front and the home front. Unlike the previous chapter, non-literary readings are considered along with unwritten cultural and religious backgrounds consisting of narratives, rituals, and mottos. These shared repertoires (namely those readings that are discussed with family members in letters home) are explored in their role of identity anchors, and in the crucial 'bridging' function they play between the front and home front throughout the conflict. The bulk of shared readings include newspaper articles and famous publications that appeared in wartime, which are discussed, for instance, in Vivanti's and Michelini Tocci's epistolary collections. Also under examination here are the reasons behind the choice of particular readings, and the role attached to them. The references to a shared oral and factual common denominator—including proverbs, mottos, and rituals—are more frequently found in the exchanges of upper-middle class village families. Examples are Guerrieri and Zanivolti, for whom the rhythms of religion and country life appear to be crucial. While paying attention to those communicative anchors, this chapter addresses the encounter with actual war and its impact on language and family

communication.[273] It also examines the attempts by family members to maintain effective communication throughout the conflict, presenting both those cases in which family communication is successful and those in which, due to the asynchrony engendered by war, family dialogue results in different forms of misunderstanding.[274]

In particular, this chapter focuses on the occasions in which attempts at reciprocal communication are ineffective, and to the set of feelings both provoking a failure in communication and resulting from it. In spite of the mutual attempts made by officers and their families to anchor writing to a solid common background, communication becomes more difficult throughout the conflict in the ever-changing universe of war. Experiencing war also appears particularly disruptive because of the discrepancy between expectations and actual war. The disappointed expectations result in a series of diverse feelings, and each of them influence and enter writing in a peculiar way. Of particular interest, among other feelings, is the sense of frustration experienced at war and the ways in which this is re-elaborated and expressed in letters to the families; mainly, and, to a certain extent, even in private records (mostly intended for family audiences as an

[273] For a broad overview on family communication through letters in Europe, see Martha Hanna, 'War Letters: Communication between Front and Home Front', in: *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, eds., issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI**: 10.15463/ie1418.10362.

[274] Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1979); idem, *Zeitgeschichten. Studien zur Historik* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 2000), Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Space and Time 1880-1918*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1983, 2003) and Francesco Benigno, *Parole nel tempo*, (Rome: Viella, 2013).

'imagined reader' in the future).[275] This difficulty results in a series of feelings which give rise to different writing attitudes. Therefore, this chapter seeks to address certain questions: how do the feelings of anger, disillusionment and frustration experienced at war evolve; what further aspects of understanding, coping strategies and social interactions accompany these feelings; how do they enter war writings, and how are they received by their target audiences? How are beloved readers re-envisaged and 'treated' in writing when disillusionment and frustration take over? And last, but not least, what role is assigned to writing in response to the aforementioned feelings?

Attention should also be devoted to the values that permeated societies at the outbreak and in the various phases of war. Honour and sacrifice were pervading values especially for the upper-middle and the noble classes.[276] Nonetheless, even the relevance and the understanding of these shared values varies throughout war, at times making the divide between war and home front wider.

War in words and war in facts

Young aspiring officers enter conflict, sometimes voluntarily, convinced of the righteousness of war.[277] They hope somehow to change society with their

[275] Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP,1984).

[276]Ute Frevert, Wartime Emotions: Honour, Shame, and the Ecstasy of Sacrifice, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI**: 10.15463/ie1418.10409.

[277] On the narratives surrounding the term 'candidate officer' renamed 'candidate cadaver' as reported by Panzini in his *Dizionario Moderno* see the appendix.

participation, and occasionally wish to acquire a status (for themselves and for their families) from their sacrifice to the cause.[278] Even for them, however, the immersion in the routine of war might prove challenging and delude initial expectations with its contrast with pre-war interventionist narratives and assumptions. By way of introduction, the following letter taken from Zanivolti's private collection epitomises the dramatic clash between expectations and the reality of war.

In order to put his attitude towards war into the correct perspective, it is necessary to provide a little background on Zanivolti. He was born in Magherno (near Pavia) and hailed from a family of merchants. His father used to sell lengths of cloth and his descendants still have the shorter ruler he used to measure pieces of fabric in order to earn more from each individual sale. In order to provide their son with a high level of education, the family sent him to a Catholic seminary. So, at the outbreak of war, Zanivolti could either have become a priest and continued his life within the seminary, or he could have embraced war. He chose the second option and went to war without completing his seminary school studies but Catholic culture and rituals are, perhaps inevitably, present in his letters. In the course of the war, his faith becomes less explicitly addressed in letters, challenged both by the tragic events unfolding and by the vital impulses of youth. Coming from life in a

[278] Marco Mondini, *La Guerra Italiana. Partire, raccontare, tornare 1914-1918*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014), pp. 133--144; Pietro del Negro 'L'esercito Italiano, I volontari e i Giovani nella Grande Guerra', in Fabrizio Rasera and Carlo Zadra, eds., *Volontari Italiani nella Grande Guerra*, (Rovereto: Museo Storico Italiano della Grande Guerra, 2008) pp. 5-37, here, p. 21; Antonio Gibelli, *La Grande Guerra degli Italiani*, (Milano: BUR, 2007) pp. 74-80.

seminary and having acquired a high level of culture and understanding, Zanivolti never shared a militaristic view or a desire for a career in the military. His high level of understanding helps him to grasp (even in June 1915) the inconsistencies of some official news reports pertaining to the war. These inconsistencies are denounced in the following letter written in answer to a message he receives from his interventionist cousin in Milan:

Ah, caro Peppino, hai ragione di essere così per quanto leggi e senti lì a Milano, ma la realtà delle cose è ben diversa. Io pure nel fervore delle mie forze giovanili quando proprio tutto sembra poesia, gloria, onore, alle prime notizie della guerra di Libia, mi sentiva rimescolar forte il sangue nelle vene e invidiavo quasi quei prodi che combattevano lontano dalla patria in arida terra, sognavo gloria e trionfi. E anche quando scoppiò la presente guerra, che trascinò sul campo milioni di uomini, chi non ebbe un nobile palpito per la patria in pericolo e non sognò con piacere il suo posto d'onore sul campo di battaglia? Ma quando si varcò il confine e si salutò la Patria con tutti i suoi ricordi e le sue tenerezze, quando si udì il rombo sordo e terrorizzante del cannone con d'attorno una strage impressionanate, quando si vide scorrere il primo sangue e si udì il lamento dei morenti, ah, Pepino, quanti entusiasmi diventarono scialbi, quanta poesia e immaginazioni svanirono come cirri a sera nell'azzurro del cielo.

The falsity of propaganda and mainstream information is implicitly criticised in this letter through which Zanivolti tries to explain to his interventionist cousin, Peppino,

that these barely correspond to the actual conditions of war. This passage provides a particularly important example of the growing mutual unintelligibility between the war and home front, which will be explored in this chapter. Zanivolti's letter was sent immediately after his arrival close to the front in June 1915. Being near the battlefield is enough to reveal various aspects of war, even before any direct involvement in combat. In the above passage, the war front is described as a different world which one accesses by crossing the border, and is immediately welcomed by the 'terrifying rumble of the cannon'.

The structure of the above passage reveals the clash between imagination and reality; imagined and actual war. It is articulated in four long sentences, of which two - the first and the last sentence, which help develop the argument - are built around the word, 'but'. The second sentence tries to establish a connection with the audience, whereas the third sentence is a rhetorical question implying that it is normal to embrace war enthusiastically. In spite of its literal meaning, however, they both work as a rhetoric prelude for the point made in the final sentence which states how different the reality of war is from what is envisaged while at the home front. The narratives accompanying Italian interventionists are thus, overall, portrayed as something remote in place and time. The passage unconsciously underlines the different understanding that pertains to life at the front compared to life on the home front. The repetition of the adverb 'quando' ('when') serves as a distancing device. Each 'when' introduces something that challenges prior assumptions, and each 'when' takes Zanivolti away, as if marching towards another timeframe reached by stepping 'over the border'. It could be suggested that taking

a train and then marching to the front, resembles taking a spaceship that transports Zanivolti far from the former world to which he and his companions once belonged. The front is like a new planet characterized by 'the dull rumble of cannon', 'carnage all around', 'the flow of the blood' and 'the moan of the dying'. One might venture that Zanivolti is indulging in describing the war with the purpose of impressing his cousin and convincing him that mainstream news from the 'Earth-front' does not keep pace with war's rhythm and do not comply with its atmosphere (earthly words and concepts will become increasingly unintelligible and most of all out of place) on 'planet War'.[279] What is also worth noting is the tone adopted to answer his cousin's letter, one that probably betrays a lack of affection for him who, living in a big city and being lucky enough to avoid war, cannot but become an annoying voice, especially given that he uncritically embraces official interventionist narratives regardless of the difficulty experienced at the front. Zanivolti's use of the interventionist phrases, therefore, has to be seen here either as sarcastic, or at least as a rhetorical device to make his argument understandable to his cousin (whose acumen he does not hold in high regard). Worth noting is the fact that Zanivolti writes, 'I don't blame you for *being* like this'[280] rather than 'thinking like this', thus expressing a fixed opinion on him rather than on his ideas.

This heretofore mutual unintelligibility pertaining to different areas and different sections of society in war, witnessed by these passages, is due to the

[279] 'Earth-front' and 'planet War' are phrases developed for this research project.

[280] Emphasis mine.

'unsimultaneity'[281] of experience and understanding involving Italy at war, which could be investigated in light of Koselleck's Begriffsgeschichte.[282] Koselleck's and Kern's thoughts could be applied to the observation of family epistolary exchanges. Even families who maintain a constant communication through writing are challenged throughout the conflict by the obsolescence of words and concepts, as recorded by many officers. [283] This might be ascribed to the fact that, as argued by Kern, 'the war contradicted such notions of an extended present on a grand scale by isolating the present moment from the flow of time'.[284] Parents are sometimes accused by their 'children' of not being able to filter and respond to the real condition at the front in a correct manner: they are reproached for applying old structures and fixed concepts to it, ones which do not fit with the actual conditions of war. This issue of asynchrony is present, for instance, when parents do not abandon the idealised image of war provided initially by mobilizing campaigns or newspapers: in this case, parents are perceived as being 'backwards' because they do not keep the pace with the present. It could also be the case that families on the home front who are in search of hope are already convinced of something positive,

[281] Hanns Georg Brose, 'Das Gleichzeitige ist ungleichzeitig. Über den Umgang mit einer Paradoxie und die Transformation der Zeit', in *Unsichere Zeiten, Herausforderungen gesellschafticher Transformationen, Verhandlungen des 34. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie*, ed. Hans-Georg Soeffner, (Jena: VS Verlag, 2008) vol. 1, pp. 547-562.

[282] Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1979); idem, *Zeitgeschichten. Studien zur Historik* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 2000).

[283] Francesco Benigno, *Parole nel tempo*, (Rome: Viella, 2013).

[284] Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Space and Time 1880-1918*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1983, 2003), p. 294.

described as imminent by the press, but which has not yet happened and is not likely to happen.

If, in the above letter, the audience is 'guilty' of not being up-to-date with the current circumstances of war, the following example presents the opposite problem, namely an audience which is considered too optimistically 'forward' compared to the actual circumstances of the conflict. This is the case reported by the exchange between Franco Michelini Tocci and his father, in which Franco, for the first time in his letter exchange, tells him that he cannot and should not speak of peace yet, as he is still suffering at the front line with many other officers and soldiers. The reference to the collection by Michelini Tocci is not accidental here as his letters show an incredibly positive affection for his father, and great consideration of him. The two go on communicating and exchanging opinions on articles and readings throughout the conflict.This makes the following message even more relevant for our discourse, as it witnesses how dis-synchrony might disturb even the most effective and affectionate father-son communication:

8 Ottobre 1918:

Caro Babbo

Le notizie che i giornali in questi giorni ci portano sono stupefacenti. Io non credo però alla buona fede di quella gente. Finchè sono sulla riva del Piave, parlar di pace mi pare una cosa stonata. Baci Franco. [285]

[285] Tocci, *Fede il Dovere*, p. 196.

In this case of dis-synchrony, parents are perceived as being ahead of time, guilty of taking something for granted, of projecting an outcome that their sons have reasons not to be that certain about. Alternatively, we might venture, parents are perceived as belonging to another time, one which is completely different in nature but which enters and influences the real and disturbs communication. The great issue arising from these multiple speeds and from the existence of non-simultaneous and irreconcilable axes is that they engender a more serious problem than a simple gap on a timeline. This more complete form of dis-synchrony that emerges in many letters is the cause of a greater problem, namely that the people on the home front and the war front appear mutually unable to grasp the rhythm, events and new meanings assigned by each other. The consequence of this is that empathy between the two timelines becomes impossible and this generates the most frustration in some of the writings discussed in this chapter. This difficulty, or even occasional impossibility of communication, is a particularly hurtful and challenging event for families who desperately try to overcome it through shared readings and constant epistolary exchanges. In some circumstances, parents try so hard to keep pace with life at war that they eventually manage to stay connected to their sons. This is the case with Cesare Vivanti who, in the following letter sent to his son on 21 October 1915, seems to be aware of the difference between the expectations of war and the actual war itself. Not even a month has passed from when his son left for the front and Cesare, exposed to the worries and suffering due to the separation from Augusto, is already expressing a different perspective on

war.[286] Having found a draft of a letter written by Augusto before he went to war, when he was a committed interventionist student, Cesare comments:[287]

Bei tempi quelli, sebbene in apparenza perchè furono forieri dello scatenarsi di tante tempeste![288]

The nostalgic tone is directed towards the faith in intervention in a war that was perceived as just and good for everybody. Still convinced that war is right, Cesare seems to express his frustration for the unforeseen suffering provoked by the conflict, to his family and to society at large.

The reassuring and prescriptive nature of shared readings

The first chapter dealt specifically with the family lexicon. This section, however, goes further in that it considers the sources, contexts, activities and readings – in other words, the cultural, socio-political, religious and literary background that gives shape to a common universe of ideas, images and, finally, to a language sustaining it. A few sources have been selected here that epitomize this language. The published epistolary collections by Augusto Vivanti and Franco Michelini Tocci are singled out as great examples of the way in which urban upper-middle class interventionist families, share readings throughout the conflict in order to maintain

[286] See the letter written on 26 September 1915 examined in the following section.

[287] Augusto's draft letter was meant to promote the visit of the king on the occasion of the inauguration of a hospital.

[288] Vivanti, *Scrivimi*, p. 150.

a convergence of views and nurture a language to express them, thus building effective communication. Along with them, another, slightly different, collection of letters has been examined here, namely that by Lieutenant Giuseppe Zanivolti. Unlike Tocci and Vivanti's families, which belong to the politicised urban milieu, for Zanivolti's middle-class rural family of merchants, religion, along with the beliefs and rules of Magherno village life, frame the prescriptive warnings, and, sometimes, the reproaches, mentioned in certain letters.

The cases of Vivanti and Michelini Tocci are important because they represent the attempt of parents, and more specifically fathers, to embody through their offspring their own belief in the war, as the deological culmination of their interventionism and in the expectation of advancement for their sons and the family at large. In spite of their belief in war and their strong ideological assumptions, it is necessary to recall here what Del Negro wrote about upper-middle class families sending their sons to the military academy for candidate officers:

La domanda di ammissione ai corsi allievi ufficiali discendeva quindi in molti casi non tanto da un patriottismo particolarmente acceso oppure da coerenti ideali interventistici quanto piuttosto dal desiderio di conservare una posizione sociale e uno stile di vita borghese.[289]

[289] Pietro del Negro, 'L'esercito Italiano, I volontari e i Giovani nella Grande Guerra', in Rasera e Zadra, eds., *Volontari Italiani*, pp. 5-37, here p. 21.

War could thus be seen, in this respect, as a way to gain a future place within society, to make a statement of social and political standing (which was dear to both Vivanti and Michelini Tocci who were also fervent interventionists) and, for their sons, as a rite of passage to enter adulthood and meet their families' expectations. It was an initiation, not only for young soldiers leaving for the front and entering adulthood through a rite of separation,[290] but also for their families (aspiring to be recognised in their ambitions for a higher status in society). The epistolary collection by the Vivanti family from Pavia, unlike other collections, presents the letters to and from the home front. It will be explored in order to shed further light on the mutual construction of a shared language. What is of interest in the letters sent by Vivanti's father to his son, Augusto, is that, reading between the lines, we can detect his fear that his son might change his views on war. He is also concerned that, while at the front, Augusto's behaviour might not comply with the standards expected and imposed by his prominent family. Cesare tries to help Augusto from afar, contacting people who might intercede to recognise his merits and grant him some privileges. Nonetheless, this fatherly commitment is part of a pact that Augusto has to respect in order to safeguard the role and image of his family. Cesare's imposed control over his son emerges in the following letter sent on 26 September 1915, on the occasion of Augusto's departure for the front:

[290] Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self,* p. 29.

In questo giorno, che è forse il più triste che tra moltissimi ho vissuto, ti scongiuro di tener sempre presente, nel pensiero e nel cuore, lo stato di profonda desolazione in cui ci lasci e di trarre da tale pensiero e da tale sentimento costante norma di previdenza e di prudenza. Non ignori le mie aspirazioni e quanto abbia lottato pe raggiungerle: se ti si presentasse il caso di appagarle non mancare di farlo, *totis viribus*, per amor mio, anche se non riportassero tutto il tuo compiacimento. Epperò, ti scongiuro, non ostacolarmi in nulla che dovessi, per avventura, chiederti, pensando sempre che opero per il tuo bene, ma insieme anche per il tuo dovere e per il tuo onore. Accertati che, comunque, questi tre elementi formeranno l'essenza di ogni mia opinione. Il pensiero nostro ti sia guida conforto e speranza ognora: perchè l'amore di Patria non deve andar mai disgiunto da quello per la famiglia, specie qaundo questi, come nel caso nostro, vive di una sola vita come la tua. La fede, il bene, l'amor nostro ti sorreggano in ogni tuo atto e siano la triade fatidica che illumina la tua condotta.

Worth noting here is the fact that even though the recommendations about safety are placed at the start of the letter, they are only assigned a couple of lines. On the contrary, the rest of the letter expresses Cesare's expectations from, and ambitions for, his son at the front. He explicitly asks him to fulfil his aspirations and requirements, basically at all costs: 'totis viribus, out of love for me'.

The commitment to the social and political life of Pavia, where Cesare works as a lawyer and as a town clerk is witnessed constantly in his letters. What emerges clearly in his letters is a concern that something might happen to his son at war and

that this might undermine the Vivanti family's image and honour within Pavia society. The constant reference to city life can thus be interpreted in two, co-existing ways. On the one hand, Pavia, recalled as both a physical place and as a social arena, becomes an identity anchor; on the other hand, the social bonds and the experiences of acquaintances, both at the front and on the home front, accompanied by specific comments become a sort of warning, a reference field to re-orient and to align one's attitudes, behaviour and ambition. Even the discussions and small-talk engaged in by Cesare in Pavia with friends and acquaintances, which are from time to time reported by Cesare in his letters to Augusto, might also be seen in this light. They might be considered as similar to the shared reading of newspaper articles, namely as an identity anchor and a common communicative background. They also represent an attempt on Cesare's part to grasp the new circumstances of war more profoundly, to reassess its essence, as witnessed by the letter to Augusto written on 6 July 1915:

Mi chiedi cosa ne penso della guerra? Nulla e troppo. I Russi mi fanno l'effetto di un elefante che fugge davanti a una mosca. Qui in ufficio ho sempre ufficiali, in massima parte avvocati; ieri l'altro su tre ve ne erano due.[291]

The above passage depicts Cesare as a straightforward man who does not hesitate to write what he thinks to his son. Cesare shows a peculiar connection with his feelings and with those of his son.

[291] Vivanti, *Scrivimi*, p. 127.

Both readings and accounts can be seen as prescriptive, or at least as an unconscious attempt to check that the son still embraces the ideals and conduct held while at the academy. However, they also serve another, more important role, namely that of reassuring Cesare. He tries to convince himself that he and his son have taken the right, or at least the only possible decision. The following passage is taken from a letter written by Cesare on 20 July 1915 and includes a direct quote from the *Gazzetta del Popolo*. This has to be seen as an attempt to share the public recognition with his son, in order to make both him and Augusto proud of their decision:

Oggi la Gazzetta del Popolo reca un lungo e bellissimo articolo sulla Scuola Militare. L'ho comperata e te la porterò. Vi si dice, tra l'altro, che compite un nobile ed oscuro sacrificio. "Oscuro sacrificio perchè oggi gli allievi di Modena combattono nella Scuola una battaglia terribile "anche per" la sciente rinuncia di tanta giovinezza toltasi d'improvviso alle molli cure della casa paterna, alla spensierata vita goliardica per correre qui, in questo cupo tempio di studio, in questa immensa squallida caserma, dove si impara a diventare soldati...[292]

If Cesare Vivanti uses references to literature, culture and politics to keep his son's faith in certain views, Augusto does the same to connect with his father. His constant reading of the local newspaper, for instance, signals the proximity to his city of origin and with the universe of ideas and worries that characterise Cesare's

[292] Ibid., p. 130.

daily routine. Given Cesare's commitment to city life, Augusto's interest for news about Pavia and its citizens can be interpreted as a way to be close to his father. The following letter, written from the military academy on 31 July 1915, bears witness to this:

Ho ricevuto sempre 'La Provincia' che spesso mi viene contesa tra seconda, terza ennesima lettura dai vari pavesi e dai numerosi studenti di Pavia della compagnia. [293]

There is another epistolary collection, namely that by Franco Michelini Tocci, in which references to newspapers and magazines are adopted as bridges to connect to the family. Moreover, in Franco's letters it is possible to detect a need for *auctoritas*,[294] used to make his statements stronger and more convincing. This *auctoritas* is not a prerogative of literary references but is also to be found in those passages which show links, mainly in the form of explicit or implicit quotations, to articles in journals or newspapers. This is the case with the following passage taken from a letter written from Caserta on 1 July 1917:

[293] Ibid., p. 133.

[294] Gilberto di Tournai, *De modo addiscendi.* Introduzione e testo inedito a cura di E. Bonifacio, Torino, Società editrice internazionale (Pubblicazioni del Pontificio ateneo salesiano. 1. Testi e studi sul pensiero medioevale, 1), 1953.

Per trarre una conclusione da queste dicerie, occorre che io dica come Romano Guerra sul Giornale D'Italia 'il tempo ci dirà dove sia nascosto il vero'[295]

It is possible to see Franco's attempt to be appreciated by his audience in the light of Mondini's who sees letters as a way to reassure parents about the convergence of views.[296] Franco has no doubt that his father will understand this reference: firstly, as he knows he reads the *Giornale d'Italia*, and secondly, because they keep exchanging comments and reading suggestions via letters while he is at war. These shared readings, which are in line with the ideals and values of Tocci's family, thus become the basis of a mutual understanding and respect between father and son and have the power to accompany and guide Franco's experience, understanding, and writings about war. Another passage that bears witness to the exchange on mutual readings is the following, written in Pitero in Cariano (Villa Franceschetti Verona Province) on 23 December 1917. Here Tocci expresses his positive view on an article by Benedetto Croce and his negative reaction to the reading of news in the general press and, more specifically, of the discourse uttered by the socialist member of parliament, Morgari, and published in the newspaper:[297]

Carissimo Babbo,

[295] Tocci, *Fede il Dovere*, p. 73

[296] Mondini, *La Guerra Italiana*, p. 164.

[297] Tocci is referring to Morgari's speech on 21 December 'For a proposal of peace'. *'Per una proposta di pace' Discorso dell'Onorevole Oddino Morgari Tornata Parlamentare 21 dicembre 1917*, (Milan: Libreria editrice Avanti, 1918).

..Ho letto con mio grande piacere l'articolo di Benedetto Croce e la letterina del collega pesarese. Purtroppo le notizie che la stampa ci manda sono tutt'altro che letificanti: l'unico giornale che ho potuto avere è quello di ieri con il discorso dell'on. Morgari.[298]

The constant exchange between Tocci and his father and their commenting on newspapers and journals can be seen not only as a strategy to spend time together but also as a way to ensure that their views and perspectives still converge. The frequent writing and remarking on politics and current affairs plays a complex role for both father and son. Strong ideas and values are used as tools to reinforce family bonds, nurtured with constantly shared readings and with frequent epistolary exchanges, and inserted effectively into this father-son interaction. Their identity seems inextricably linked to a whole set of values, perceived as being inherent to real brave Italian men ready to sacrifice their lives for the 'fatherland', and all framed in a right-wing nationalist perspective.[299] Franco Tocci's constant appreciation of nationalist articles, people, or points of view can be seen as an attempt to reassure his father, and himself, that he is unchanged, that he still respects his family education and political views. On the other hand, however, by inviting his father to also comment on some articles, Franco betrays his wish to be reassured that his father, too, is still the same. In spite of their different experiences and roles in war, and in spite of the different qualities of time and

[298] Tocci, *Fede il Dovere*,.p. 112.

[299] On the equation of personal and national honour, see Ute Frevert, 'Wartime Emotions: Honour, Shame, and the Ecstasy of Sacrifice', p. 6.

space which characterise their daily routine, father and son achieve a synchrony through reading and writing.

Religion as a shared background

If it is straightforward that echoes of faith, doctrine, prayers and sacred scriptures can be found in the writings of openly Catholic officers, i.e. Zanivolti and Guerrieri, much more interesting and problematic are those cases in which faith, spirituality, and cult of the dead are merged with a distinct anticlericalism (of Mazzinian origin) as is the case with Leonardo Cambini. His collection offers the chance to study an interventionist officer infused with anticlerical sentiments of Risorgimental and Mazzinian derivation, merged with a strong religious family tradition and with the need to find the words and images that might help him cope with the loss of his beloved brother, Raffaello. Religious language is highly ingrained in Cambini's self-mobilizing rhetoric. In line with Mazzini, he embraces the commitment to the national cause as a sacred mission to the point that, at times, Raffaello's death is explicitly compared to that of Jesus, as in the following letter written to his wife on 18-19 March 1916:

'Che Iddio lo benedica, il nostro povero bimbo, e che Dio benedica l'Italia: e ci faccian vincere presto: caro, caro figliolo: gli avran messo Truci le braccia in croce?'[300]

[300] Cambini, *Epistolario*, p. 85.

In spite of the Christian imagery adopted, there is a constant self-distancing from religious practice in Cambini's letters. In one written on 3 January 1916, he writes that Truci, his wife, encourages him to pray but he doesn't:

E Truci vuol che preghi! Io non articolo ma- per quanto mi pare- una parola di preghiera ma ogni volta che si opera per un'idea di dovere, ogni volta che si figge lo sguardo nel dominio del soprannaturale ... non è questa un'evoluzione dell'animo... verso Colui che è il principio e la fine?[301]

In spite of Cambini's critiques towards institutional doctrine, something interesting was detected while analyzing five letters sent to his friend, Professor Plinio Carli. Plinio Carli informed him of his wish to be called up to fight, and of his wife's worries and incessant praying to the Virgin Mary for him to be declared unfit to enrol. Cambini promises that he will also pray so that he is spared from war. Cambini repeatedly recounts of having prayed for Plinio Carli to be *'riformato'* and self-ironically imagines that those in heaven might be surprised to hear him praying and celebrate the unusual event. The letter, written on 5 May 1916, testifies to this:

Dirai, ti prego alla tua signora, che stasera dirò anch'io una Ave Maria secondo la sua intenzione: e credi che ci sarà una gran festa in Paradiso, come succede sempre,

[301]Ibid., pp. 74-75.

dicono, quando s converte un peccatore. Ma io non mi converto mica sai? e la tua Ave Maria sarà la prima che io dico da quando son venuto alla guerra.[302]

It is also clear that for Plinio Carli participating in war is connected to a vital political commitment but also to a question of masculinity, and this is discussed openly by Cambini who, in spite of his own drive to the national cause, argues that, at times, men serve better on the home front rather than at war. This reveals a change in perspective compared to his initial enthusiasm.[303]

Finally, on 30 June 1916, he hoped that his prayers had been listened to and that that his friend would be able to serve on the home front. In his letters, he tries to reassure Plinio that he could help the nation more from home, because, as an intellectual, he would have been a brave but, probably, bad soldier. He goes further by arguing, ironically, that his erudite readings of the works by Giusti and Macchiavelli wouldn't have made a good soldier of him.[304]

Also of interest are the ways in which religion is covered in the notebook of another convinced interventionist, namely Colonel Gagliani. It is possible to infer that he returns to faith whenever he feels really low, and that faith reminds him of

[302] Ibid., pp. 100-101.

[303] On masculinity, see Alberto Mario Banti, *L'onore della nazione. Identità sessuali e violenza nel nazionalismo europeo dal XVIII secolo alla Grande Guerra*, (Torino: Einaudi, 2005), G. Bonetta, *Corpo e nazione. L'educazione ginnastica, igienica e sessuale nell'Italia liberale*, (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1990). On the traumatic effects of war on men's body, see Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the male: Men's bodies, Britain, and the Great War*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) and Michael Roper, 'Between Manliness and Masculinity: The "War Generation" and the Psychology of Fear in Britain, 1914–1950'. *Journal of British Studies,* No *44*(2), pp. 343-362. doi:10.1086/427130.

[304] Cambini, *Epistolario*, p. 114.

his wife, Bianca, to the point that, whenever he gets in touch with religion in its either institutional or spontaneous form, he transforms his diary entry into a letter to his wife. An example is offered by the entry of 25 May 1915.[305] Throughout the war his main concern is the fact that he has left his wife alone with five children, one of whom, Massimo, with a huge problem which is never explicitly mentioned by Gagliani who feels responsible for it. It is as if religion and family are one and the same: when reflecting on his future chances to be with them again leads him to pray or mention God. Instead, whenever life at war is so hard that he feels the need to pray, his family, and more specifically his wife, appears before him and becomes the imagined audience of his written record.

Catholic officers like Guerrieri and Zanivolti show a specific interest in observing and describing the religious practices which are an important common denominator that reinforces the sense of belonging to the national community. Name days seem to be extremely important for them and for their Catholic families. They are referred to frequently in their letters and, at times, are granted even more importance than birthdays. Epitomizing this is the fact that Lieutenant Zanivolti invents an acrostic for his father's name day even when enduring life at the Reichenberg Bohemia prison camp; he generally only writes short mails to request parcels of food and clothing.[306]

[305] The published version states 23 May but it is clearly wrong as the entry itself specifies that he bid farewell to Bianca on 25 May, the day before leaving Sassari to lead his men to the 'continent'.

[306] Zanivolti, private collection. Postcard written from Reichenberg Bohemia on 29 December 1917 for his father's name day on 17 January 1918.

The great value attributed to name days originally derives from religion but later becomes a habit; a tradition. Recording them is a way to acknowledge the passing of time, a practice that is invested with a new task while at war: it is a chronological anchor to the celebrations and rituals of the community of origin, as well as the time spent at the home front. Moreover, it can be argued that name day wishes sent from the front serve a dual purpose: they are a surrogate for absence and a written celebration of the family member but they also express the hope, and desire, to be remembered by the family community on an important occasion. The following passage by Guerrieri is striking in that it testifies that he is more familiar with the date of his name day that with that of his own birthday:

Scodovacca (vicino a Cervignano del friuli) 17 agosto 1915 Carissimi, sono nato ieri o sono nato oggi? Il 15 oppure il 16 di agosto? Il giorno di Santa Maria o quello di San Rocco? non ricordo proprio esattamente e nel dubbio li ho festeggiati tutti e due con molta, con parecchia solennità, ho mangiato un limone in più ed ho fatto una marcia in meno.[307]

The cult of saints varied across different villages or cities and this variety is witnessed by the amazement and subsequent need felt by Guerrieri to record the presence in the places visited at war of a specific cult of the Virgin Mary, one similar to that of his own village:[308]

[307] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, pp. 81-82.

[308] Ibid., p. 127.

'Anche qui come a Monti, come altrove, ho trovato l'uso di offrire il mazzo migliore più bello e più ricco alla Madonna.'[309]

The passage also witnesses the curiosity that he and his family share on understanding the varieties of religious cults and rituals across Italy, which testify to the cultural relevance attributed to them. Finding similar religious rituals among the enemies, however, makes it more difficult for Guerrieri to distance himself from them.[310] Epitomizing this is the passage written near the Ghelpach where he pays a visit to Austrian cemeteries and writes the following:

Trincee Le fratte, torrente Ghelpach, 13 settembre 1916
Eppure è una gente magnifica! Oggi ho incontrato nell'altipiano due loro cimiteri, con tante croci allineate nel verde come tante sorelle dolenti, su ciascuna di esse un nome, hanno più di noi il culto dei morti. Ho provato un senso di pietà infinita per quella gente sacrificata e abbandonata, illusa; su quelle croci ho pregato. Non siamo noi come loro? [311]

[309] Worth reminding is the fact that different villages or areas of the same city might propose different 'versions' of the Virgin Mary. This is the case with the Church of Santa Maria in Betlemme in Borgo Ticino, Pavia, where the Virgin Mary is named *la Madonna della Stella* and celebrated for having shined her holy starlight as a guide to sailors stuck and lost on the River Ticino in thick fog.

[310] On the sense of 'affinity in the midst of enmity' see Joseph Clarke, 'Encountering the Sacred: British and French Soldiers in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Mediterranean', in Joseph Clarke and John Horne, eds., *Militarized Cultural Encounters in the Long Nineteenth Century*, *Making War, Mapping Europe*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 49-73.

[311] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 174.

The letters by Giuseppe Zanivolti are considered here because they represent a shared language and ideals of a provincial Catholic middle-class family from a rural village near Pavia (Magherno). The main topics of conversation are religion, along with family ties, social bonds and daily life. Moreover, the letters also inform us about the nature of the language as well as the form of communication they set in place. The epitomy of this is, for instance, the ritual references to religious occasions, or daily religious rituals performed by Zanivolti. He tries to reassure his parents that, despite having left the seminary to go to war, he remains true to his faith and ideals. The letter, dated 19 June 1915, bears witness to the importance assigned to faith, which permeates Zanivolti's letters home:

Al Signor Arciprete ho scritto una piccola lettera di 8 fogli. Voglio credere che l'avrà ricevuta. Con Don Giovanni mi son trovato ancora e mi trovo tuttora. Dista da me 100 metri di ascesa. Tutti i giorni passiamo qualche ora in dolce conversazione del passato e dell'avvenire e del nostro Magherno. Finalmente son potuto riuscire nel mio intento. Il giorno 17 ho servito la sua Messa sul pendio del polveroso monte *Corrada (?)*. ... Stanotte, al mite sole d'Austria, durante il sacrificio mi sono comunicato con un'attrattiva e incanto poetico, fra il sussurro della preghiera quieta della natura che si svegliava umida di rugiada. Non dubitate che in quel fervoroso momento, dolce mi fu il ricordo dei vostri cari nomi e di quanti si rammentano di me. ... Domani che è domenica voglio condurre parecchi miei compagni a provare la gioia d'assistere alla messa tra i fiori e le erbe. L'altra notte

fui presente a un terribile combattimento di fuoco incessante e accelerato. Lontano giungeva l'eco grandioso di 'Savoia…' Io però non sparai un colpo. Impressionava la potenza dei riflettori nemici, che proiettavano una viva luce sulle nostre trincee. San Rocco anche quella notte m'ha protetto.[312]

Pepino recalls his prayers immersed in unspoiled nature as something mystical and he expresses his desire to share his faith with his companions. Battles are mentioned, even though they are still distant, and Zanivolti is convinced he has been spared because of the protection of Saint Rocco. The letter shows the lack of interest in military life, and even more, in military career.

Nonetheless, a few things can be observed, namely that Pepino's identity is progressively detached from that of a clergyman, as appeared to prevail at the outbreak of war: an example is the following letter, written on the 1 December 1915 to his sister Maria, and ended by Zanivolti signing off with the self-defining phrase 'Pepino chierico/ Pepino cleric'. Moreover, the letter also represents an example of a shared repertoire of religious phrases, songs, and values that act as identity and communicative anchors:

Mi aspetti a casa a Natale? A cantare il *dormi* o il "Tu scendi dalle stelle"? Oh, ci voglio venire e come. Ma sii buona, non piangere più.[313]

[312] Zanivolti, unpublished collection.

[313] Ibid.

These sweet memories of Christmas carols and religious songs are only the prelude for a dramatic letter in which Zanivolti shares with Maria his fear of being transformed by the circumstances of war, which he describes and frames in religious terms. He speaks of prayers to save 'innocence' from 'corruption':

P.S. Ma tu non sei contenta, dì la verità! Tu avresti desiderato ch'io ti dicessi una parolina tutta tua, tutta per te. Ebbene te ne dirò una tutta per me. Ho bisogno tanto delle tue preghiere, non per salvare questa mia esistenza, ma per salvare la mia innocenza tanto bella, ma tanto in pericolo.[314]

He openly asks her to pray for him, and he argues that he wants to maintain his own identity, that he sees it as being strictly connected with his innocence and purity, which contrast with the brutality and corruption of war:

Prega tu per me, tu che non conosci ancora quanto è brutale il mondo, tu che non sai quanto male, quanta corruzione regna fra gli uomini.
Raccomandami alla Madonna Immacolata. Dille ch'io viva fra le brutture senza insozzarmi, che tratti con i corrotti senza essere infetto della loro malattia, perché voglio tornare come sono partito, perché voglio essere sempre il tuo Pepino chierico[315]

[314] Ibid.

[315] Ibid.

It would be incorrect to unproblematically argue that his faith progressively weakens throughout the conflict solely because of the experience of war because a more accurate analysis reveals that religion appears to be a mooring but also a value to challenge while at war. Zanivolti's spiritual inspiration is thus connected with the experiences he is having and with the context in which he is immersed. A few months before, far from the atmosphere of Christmas and from the sorrow at not having been granted leave to return home for the holidays and immersed in the pleasant social life of Alessandria, Zanivolti shows a different approach to religion. On the occasion of his hospitalisation in Alessandria for a wound received in battle, Pepino is accused of neglecting the religious norms to which a cleric should comply. He thus feels the need to reassure his parents on this issue due to his fear that they might hear rumours about it in Magherno. However, his words seem to suggest the opposite of what he infers, which is demonstrated in the following letter written on 29 November 1915:

Il Cappellano dell'Ospedaletto è venuto a sapere da Canevari che sono un chierico. Orbene, ieri a Canevari ha rivolto questa domanda: "Ma il sottotenente Zanivolti tornerà ancora in Seminario?" Canevari certamente che mi conosce, gli ha risposto quel che si meritava, poi lo ha raccontato a me. Ma io son soddisfatto. Domani lo voglio chiamar da me e farmi spiegare che cosa ha da farmi osservare, quali sono le ragioni che l'hanno indotto a dubitare di me. Certo il fatto di mancare alla Messa e alla Benedizione alla domenica qui all'ospedaletto è una causa.[316]

[316] Ibid.

Later on he tries to reassure his parents about what he actually did while the chaplain was saying mass in the hospital:

invece preferivo alzarmi presto il mattino, andar in Duomo e là confessarmi e comunicarmi, ascoltar la S. Messa ...e poi entrare all'ospedaletto, dando loro ad intendere che sono stato a centellinarmi una bibita spiritosa o a succhiarmi una buona tazza di the al 'Caffè Roma'.[317]

The examples investigated here have, unfortunately only briefly, presented some aspects of the encounter between pre-war religious practices and their re-signification in war. It has also illustrated certain aspects of continuity between family or local traditions and the value attributed to faith and to its language, and the transformation these might undergo through the experience of war. The aim was that of including religion in the discourse on the encounter between the war experience, language and the mindsets connected with both.

Anachronism and misunderstanding in Vivanti's collection

Despite the constant attempt to refer to shared values and cultural frames in order to stay in contact with families back home, it is possible to detect in all the epistolary collections considered in this chapter the difficulty of maintaining effective emotional communication. This is epitomised in the exchange between

[317] Ibid.

Augusto Vivanti and his mother, as explored below. The exchange of letters proves even more relevant because of the mediation carried out by Cesare in order to reassure his son that, unlike his wife Augustina, he is still able to empathise with his condition, even from afar. Before examining that particular exchange, attention should be directed to an early instance of Augusto's resentfulness at his parents' anxiety and excessive interpretation of his words. This is expressed in the following letter, dated 8 November 1915:

Leggo tra le righe un'ansia ingiustificata, un lavoro di interpretazione di tutto quanto scrivo che mi fa male. Ripeto: per norma tua io scrivo la verità, bella o brutta che sia. ...[318]

He then explains that he has quoted a particular article in order to signify his position in an attempt to elude censorship. It is possible to infer that Augusto is disappointed by the fact that his father, generally so well-connected with him, has shown himself to be unable to understand his message:

Infatti ho citato la Domenica del Corriere così amò d'un esempio senza l'intenzione di darvi una fotografia, ch'è l'avrei detto, ho citato il giornale di Sabato, si capiva che il Sabato era quello precedente al giorno in cui scrivevo e che il giornale per antonomasia era il 'Corriere' che tutte le sere comperavi e compererai. Là vi era appunto quella cartina ove erano i luoghi dove mi trovavo e dove non mi trovo. Ti

[318] Vivanti *Scrivimi*. pp. 166-167.

lamenti perchè non dico nomi dei superiori, non entro nei dettagli. A me preme che che quanto scriva giunga e non venga intercettato, che voi sappiate mie notizie con tanto di Mezzabarba.' [319]

References to excessive worrying are expressed more openly in the following letter, written on 10 May 1918 by Augusto in response to his mother's accusations and reproaches. Augusto, immersed in the worries and sorrows characterising life in a war zone, expresses his anger, resentfulness and disappointment at his mother's inability to connect with his feelings. His mother interprets his lack of letters as an expression of spite, leading to the argument they have at the end of his leave before he boards the train. Augusto takes the occasion to pour out his frustration for the excess of love that might become intransigent, not to say suffocating, as if the affection might be a further overpowering factor in addition to the overwhelming experiences of war:

Dubbi, dispiaceri, affanni per nulla, sono dovuti ad un affetto che è così grande da essere certe volte un pochino intransigente.
E dato che siamo sull'argomento, ripigliando il filo del discorso che più volte si è fatto durante la mia licenza, dirò che questi piccoli episodi intimi, rinsaldano in me la convinzione che nel Paese e in particolare nella nostra famiglia, non si ha ancora

[319] The building of the city council in Pavia is called Palazzo Mezzabarba and this probably a way to express frustration at the fact of having to send constant updates that are then shared with many people in Pavia.

[320] Ibid., pp. 322-323.

un concetto preciso e reale di ciò che è la guerra e della vita strana, variabile, facile agli entusiasmi ed agli incoraggiamenti che noi qui conduciamo. ...Bisogna capire i combattenti nelle loro bizzarrie, nelle loro debolezze, nelle loro distrazioni, i loro desideri devono essere un po' rispettati anzi dovrebbero essere indovinati e favoriti come si fa coi bimbi che stanno per guarire da una lunga malattia.

The misunderstanding with his mother gives him the chance to vent his frustration for the lack of awareness of the actual conditions of war and for the incorrect representation of combatants on the home front. Augusto finally reveals his real opinion and mentions his repeated attempts to silence, or at least downplay, his difficulties in order to reproach his mother for her complete incapacity to connect with him. The lack of empathy, Augusto notes, is both a general problem 'in our country' and 'and more specifically in our family':

Se in tre anni di lontananza, nei quali pur nelle alterne vicende, ho sempre saputo tacere certi aspetti di vita, certe debolezze, pensieri e dolori fugaci, dubbi e speranze, ardimenti e timori, coprendo magari tutto ciò con un frase convenzionale per lettera o con un sorriso scettico parlando a quattro occhi, oggi ho scritto quello che sinceramente pensavo, vuol dire che il malinteso accaduto mi ha dato forte dispiacere e che però non è mai venuto meno in me il pensiero costantemente affettuoso per te.

The mix-up was born from an argument that flared after Augusto's mother reproaches him for coming home late on his last day of leave. Then his mother disobeys Augusto's request not to see him off at the station. This annoys him partly because he is still offended with her and partly because he wants to maintain a certain aplomb in a public space before leaving for the front. His mother writes him a letter, apparently to apologise for her behaviour but which, in reality, set in place a moral blackmail which, considering his answer, must have appeared completely out of place, exposed as he is to the dangers of war. In her message written on 3 May 1918, she appears to be self-focused and unable to grasp or adhere to the appropriate communicative circumstances:

Carissimo Augusto, angustiata unitamente al babbo pel ritardo di una tua lettera, ti prego come meglio so e posso di non prolungare oltre la nostra agonia. Cosa ti ho fatto infine per mostrarti specie con me così in collera? Più esamino la mia coscienza e meno trovo un motivo plausibile per cui tu possa serbare rancore, meno che tu abbia voluto dare un'errata interpretazione alla mia venuta alla stazione al momento della tua partenza. Credimi mio carissimo Augusto che sono stata spinta dal desiderio di salutarti un'altra volta avendoti la sera precedente rimproverato per il ritardo, non mi reggeva l'animo di lasciarti partire senza averti visto ancora.[320]

[320] Ibid., pp. 322-323.

After explaining her reasons, his mother goes further by admonishing him for his silence and accusing him of paying too little attention to her emotions. What is striking is that she is so absorbed by her anger that she ventures that she might even die and that, therefore, he would be better off to write to her soon and receive her blessing. This appears particularly out of place given that she is in good health and that it is Augusto whose life is constantly under threat. However, her motherly worry, and her need to have her son near have to be evaluated while focusing on her letter:

Mi pare però che dovevi essere più generoso con me, dovevi scrivermi subito date le condizioni d'animo in cui mi trovavo, e che tu certamente avrai constatato, ti sei fatto un torto a non riparare con una lettera togliendomi la tempesta dall'animo. Pensa che siamo disgraziatamente assai lontani e che, da un momento all'altro potrei ammalarmi ed essere in fin di vita. Vorresti tu lasciarmi morire senza avere la mia benedizione?... Ti lascio piangente pel dolore grandissimo che provo, mentre ti bacio le mille volte mandandoti la mia materna benedizione. Tua desolatissima Mamma. [321]

Of further interest is the fact that Cesare himself feels the need to apologize/make amends for his wife's letter and act as a mediator between her and Augusto. From his letter sent on the same day, we might infer that he was not aware of the one sent by Giuseppina and is, in a way, apologising on her behalf:

[321] Ibid., pp. 322-323.

Pavia, ore 10, 3 maggio 1918

Carissimo Augusto, Questa lettera che mamma ti ha voluto scrivere stamane, dopo che la posta nulla di tuo ci aveva oggi portato, non ha più ragion d'essere, perchè nel pomeriggio d'oggi ho ricevute sei tue cartoline - del 26, 27 e 28 - una per mamma ed una per me, le quali dimostrano che tu avevi scritto, anche a lei, regolarmente e che il ritardo è semplicemente postale e non il prodotto di collera da parte tua, del che io non ho mai dubitato nemmeno un momento solo.[322]

Through this letter Cesare is openly distancing himself from his wife's resentfulness and from the attitude she displays in her aggressive letter. We find something similar at an earlier stage when, following Augusto's departure, he writes that he is sorry that she transgressed Augusto's will and decided to come to the station. This episode indicates that the understanding between Augusto and his mother, at least in this period of the war, is not good. She fails to empathise with his needs. For instance, she reproaches him for coming home late on the last night of his leave, failing to understand that the last night of freedom in his own city might seem, for the young officer, like a dream. Finally, she ignores his request not to say farewell in public, failing to understand his need to appear resolute and undertake the trip with more calm.[323] In Augusto's letter to his mother, mention is also made of the fact that men are not supposed to cry: he writes that men cry when they hear the

[322] Vivanti, Ibid. p. 323.

[323] On the difficulty to go back to war after leave-time in the home village see Candido Meardi's poem in the appendix.

mandolin but he immediately specifies with an hint of irony, '(of course, silently/internally)'.

In his subsequent letter (dated 15 May 1918), Cesare reinforces his view on his wife's behaviour:[324]

Carissimo Augusto, iersera andato a casa a pranzo dopo aver impostata la mia lettera per te, sotto un violento acquazzone, ho trovata la tua carissima cartolina del 9 per me e la tua lettera del 10 per mamma che completamente approvo. Dopo ciò credo opportuno chiudere il pettegolezzo, che mamma ha provocato la vigilia della tua partenza, per un misero ritardo a pranzo, mentre, purtroppo, mille mille cure di ben altra gravità, tengono l'animo trepidante ed ansioso da parte nostra e da parte tua. Ma mamma non ha saputo assurgere alle condizioni speciali dei tempi e dell'ambiente e ricorda ancora te scolaretto di ginnasio in ritardo di mezz'ora per aver fatto una passeggiata coi compagni! Effetto d'anacronismo! Ma, ripeto, l'incidente è chiuso e non parliamone più, perché non ne vale la pena, mentre la tua lettera mette in piena e vera luce condizioni psichiche che, come ti ho detto, teco condivido e che apprezzo pienamente, toto corde, approvo.[325]

This exchange is of interest here in that it represents the successful attempt on the part of Vivanti's father to grasp the psychological situation of his son. Cesare shows an awareness of the difficulty to keep up to date with the evolution of Augusto in

[324] Vivanti, *Scrivim*i, p. 325.

[325] Ibid., p. 325.

such difficult times and expresses his sorrow at his wife's incapacity to grasp it. The asynchronism is a twofold: on the one hand it is related to the difference between peace and wartime (and to the different perception of war from the home front and from the battlefield) while, on the other hand, it has to do with the fact that Augusto is now a man, who has entered war and adulthood and should be treated accordingly.

Language as a source of misunderstanding in war writings

If concepts might become void of their former meaning throughout war, even words indicating basic items could become misleading. This is the case with the phrase 'wool for soldiers', which is misinterpreted by one soldier's family who sent him pure wool instead of woollen clothes. This is provocatively reported by Guerrieri in a letter to his family, written from Marcilliana Monfalcone on 7 October 1915:

Un mio soldato che parla sempre, che nei momenti più terribili parla cogli occhi e coi gesti, irrequieto come l'argento vivo, ieri ha ricevuto anche lui un bello, un grosso pacco. Contento come una Pasqua, lieto di vedere su quella tela bianca ed inceralaccata il suo nome scritto coi grossi caratteri di sua madre, lo ha aperto e dentro indovinate cosa vi ha trovato: tutta lana gressa, lana di cuscino e di materasso, a gruppi, già usata, adoperata. Era stata la sua famiglia che sentendo parlare i giornali, dalla gente, dai comitati di quella famosa 'lana per i soldati' aveva

creduto che si intendesse la lana così com'è e gliene aveva subito inviato un chilo. Fu una risata generale... [326]

Given the degree of frustration caused by the mutual incomprehension that exists between actors on the front and home front, war appears to be an infinite generator of psychological displacement; a statement strongly supported by war writings. Psychological displacement can be defined as the tendency to pour out, most of the time unconsciously, feelings of frustration by directing them towards people or situations which have nothing, or little, to do with what originally engendered the sentiments as the subject cannot or does not dare to direct them to the real target.[327] This section illustrates different forms of psychological displacement in war writings. A series of examples are taken into consideration and compared**.** This approach appears useful in order to frame the observation proposed in this section on both epistolary and personal records as platforms for family 'games'. Applying Petrucci's method to the investigation of epistolary exchanges, and paying due attention to the reciprocity implied in letters, this becomes crucial in order to note certain recurring patterns of cause-effect forms of self-defence on the one hand, and, on the other, of what Eric Berne[328] would call

[326] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 97.

[327] Roy f. Baumeister, Karen Dale and Kristin L. Sommer, 'Freudian Defense Mechanisms and Empirical Findings in Modern Social Psychology: Reaction Formation, Projection, Displacement, Undoing, Isolation, Sublimation, and Denial', pp. 1081-1095, here p. 1093 av. at <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/b235/c245af519920310ed9463f444d616d601b03.pdf>.

[328] Eric Berne *Games People Play* (1964) and *What Do You Say After You Say Hello?* (London: Corgi, 1975) (Andrèé Deutsch, 1974).

'games' – a term which appears to perfectly describe the peculiar epistolary interaction of some officers' exchanges. Even parents show psychological displacement and occasionally express their frustration through demanding and provocative attitudes, the most frequent being the constant request for letters and postcards from their sons. Often, this is not always to be seen as a simple motherly and fatherly concern for their sons' health and well-being (as keenly grasped and reported by many writers).

Of particular interest is the case of officers from interventionist families. In these instances, psychological displacement towards military institutions, or towards the nation, takes the form of a resentfulness which, most of the time, cannot be explicitly revealed to the families. Instead, it might, in the worst cases, manifest itself in minor forms of retribution or even punishment directed at parents who are somehow unconsciously held responsible for having promoted a participation in the war. In the best cases, parents might be considered guilty of not predicting the consequences of war on the lives of their sons. Here, psychological displacement takes the form of harsh remarks made in response to futile attitudes such as a frequent disappointment expressed by many officers towards their mothers' obsession with warm clothes and the like. These attacks directed at maternal care could be both implicit or explicit and could be expressed through irony and sarcasm. Sometimes they are signified by the use of hyperbole or witty metaphors meant to highlight the mutual misunderstanding between the war front,

with all of its new emotional and cognitive experiences, and the home front, which is sometimes perceived to be at a 'frozen in time' by the men at the front. Letters might, in fact, reveal a much sharper critique directed to motherly figures and to their supposed or real concerns. In the following passage, Guerrieri's mother is completely denied the cognitive and emotional skills to put war into perspective and to even imagine what it is like:

> Murlins 8 Aprile 1916
>
> Carissima Mamma,
>
> Ogni giorno, come quando ero a casa, mi perseguiti con quei benedetti indumenti di lana, rincresce anche a me non poterli indossare perché sono belli e buoni, ma credi che non ne ho proprio bisogno. La primavera si fa sentire ormai e il sole riscalda tanto che dall'istruzione ritorniamo discretamente sudati. Te li sogni Mamma anche gli indumenti? Via, scordali, se li avessi sarebbero in questo momento la mia dannazione.[329]

The reasons why most attacks are addressed to mothers rather than to fathers is worthy of further investigation but lies beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it is possible to detect, from time to time, a specific resentfulness towards them. Worth mentioning, as far as a gendered perspective during the conflict is concerned, is the anonymously published war account by the reserve officer Andreas Latzko. He was serving the Imperial and Royal Army on the Isonzo front

[329] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 117.

and pours out his disappointment as being caused by women's conduct more than by the war itself: 'They sent us - sent us! Because every one of them would have been ashamed to stand there without a hero.'[330] What is considered here is rather the substance and the form of some of these comments, which might present an almost benevolent mocking attitude, as is the case with the following passage taken from Guerrieri's epistolary collection in which a shrapnel case is offered to his mother as a gift from war:

Arsiero 24 giugno 1916

Carissima Mamma,

Desideravi tanto un vaso per fiori da mettere in sala, ho provveduto ora con un bossolo di shrapnel raccolto e speditoci fra i tanti altri dagli austriaci; merita di essere osservato perchè i proiettili di grosso calibro per lo scoppio terribile difficlmente rimangono così. Credo che sia un 152 o qualche cosa di simile. [331]

Mothers are more often the target of sarcasm, even in the epistolary collection by Franco Michelini Tocci, who implicitly accuses his mother of not understanding how small the death of a little bird (no matter how dear) appears when compared to the dangers and deaths he witnesses on a daily basis while at the front. The extract is from a postscript to a letter from S. Pietro in Cariano, dated 9 February 1918:

[330] Frevert, 'Wartime Emotions: Honour, Shame, and the Ecstasy of Sacrifice', p. 8.

[331] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 138.

Ho appreso con dispiacere la fuga di Mirino e forse, se il mio orecchio invece di cannonate avesse continuato a sentire metri latini, chi sa che la mia Waterman non avrebbe potuto scrivere qualche cosa di catulliano![332]

Some images are quite vivid, and some attitudes are quite irreverent and aggressive, as is the case in the following passage taken from Guerrieri's epistolary collection. Here, the unpleasantness of the description appears to be an attempt to convey to his loved ones back home the horror and hardship of life in the trenches. The aim here is, in fact, to show how language, the choice of adjectives, the syntax and repetition signal these communication traits. The rather peculiar choice to add details about filthy underwear, along with the hyperbolic description of fleas presented as having an 'admirable skill', underline the bitter sarcasm displayed in this passage:

Zona di Bugni, 3 July 1916 Carissima Natalia,
Per non suscitare nessuna fraterna gelosia ecco a te pure una cartolina in franchigia dove parlerò non altro che di pulci, nascoste con arte mirabile nelle nostre sudicissime mutande che da un pezzo non cambiamo. Se per un momento ci fermiamo eccole tutte fuori in cerca di... cibo e di vivande, eccole tutte a punzecchiarci. Maledetti animalucci.[333]

[332] Tocci, *Fede il Dovere*, pp. 140-141 .

[333] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 145.

The following passage, taken from a letter to his parents, provides an example on how disappointment and resentment is expressed and directed towards the home front in general, but more specifically towards his reading audience: his family. After complaining about the lack of anything to recount to his audience, who he subtly criticizes for its constant demand for news, he starts telling them about the plague represented by the fleas. The letter ends with the expression of a wish that all people who are deeply in favour of war might one day experience this feeling. The aggressiveness lies in the fact that his family is not against war and instead was (and still is) rather interventionist, to the point that his brother, Renato, decides to join the conflict as a volunteer and with his father's 'blessing':

Pendici M. Cimone, 4 luglio 1916

Avete mai provato questa sensazione che per noi è l'unica che ci sia dato di godere? Io l'auguro a tutti i guerrafondai di questa bella cara terra. Un bacio pulitissimo [334]

The sharp sarcasm lies in the adjective which is used, as the apex of a crescendo, at the end of the letter: he sends kisses home but these kisses are the 'cleanest'. This means that by sending his, in reality dirty kisses, he is expressing the desire that his family might, sooner or later, live what he is going through, as this would finally enable them to understand what he is experiencing.

[334] Ibid., p. 147.

Conclusion

This chapter explored different forms of epistolary communication between family members in order to disentangle a few aspects of letter-writing throughout the conflict. The sources investigated suggest that war took communication to another level, stimulating new forms of sharing and new forms of exchanging views on events. It also engendered some significant setbacks in communication and even, from time to time, a sense of resentfulness directed to families of origin. Language, borrowed from shared newspaper articles, or belonging to family interventionist narratives or religious beliefs, became a common background adopted in order to enhance effective communication. The different grasp of, and adhesion to, this shared reservoir of values and images by family members, however, could reveal and/or accompany the dark moments of family epistolary interaction in wartime.

Chapter 4

Military hierarchy and the sense of justice

Introduction

This chapter deals with the redefinition of the sense of justice throughout the conflict and with the distinction between the set of norms and conduct normally accepted by societies in peace time and those which are inevitably imposed on men at war. Even the concept of 'fairness' was redefined throughout the conflict within both home front and war societies. Although an extensive theoretical discussion about justice lies beyond the scope of this chapter, two terms borrowed from Amartya Sen's work proved insightful and thus warrant further explanation. These two terms, which negate each other, are *nyaya* and *matsyanyaya*. The first term, *nyaya*, indicates justice which is meant in its broader meaning (that is considering both short-term and long-term effects), whereas *matsyanyaya*, which is the total negation of the *nyaya*, signifies the opposite of justice.[335] The latter proves particularly insightful while considering officers' reasoning on what is perceived as fair and unfair at war because it helps to further understand the selective acceptance and (implicit or explicit) rejection of certain norms and orders imposed on them by war and by the army.

In order to shed light on this issue and on its repercussion on combatants' identity and sense of belonging to the army (as a broader and as a stricter

[335] Wempe Ben, 'The Idea of Justice by Amartya Sen' in Business Ethics Quarterly Vol. 20, No. 3 (July 2010), pp. 545-552, here p. 547.

community) and to the relatively young Italy, the published letter collections by Lieutenants Campodonico, Guerrieri and Vivanti, and the manuscript notebook by Colonel Gagliani, are considered. These officers' writings have been investigated because they reflect upon justice with a higher level of awareness, deriving from their active role in military courts (Campodonico and Guerrieri, and Vivanti are requested to be military lawyers, whereas Gagliani is invested with the task of acting as a military judge). The published works by Lieutenants Carlo Emilio Gadda, Paolo Monelli, and Antonello Lussu have been explored because they provide epitomizing accounts that foster a further grasp of what combatants belonging to platoons and companies at the frontline perceived as 'fair' and 'unfair'. The published notebook by the volunteer soldier (subsequently promoted to second lieutenant in the First Grenadier Regiment Sardinia) Giani Stuparich appears particularly relevant because it reveals the clash between the ideals behind his voluntary adhesion to war and the actual encounter with badly-organized combat and nonsensical orders. Even Lussu reflects extensively on this. The issue of institutional justice and that of fairness, however, are covered implicitly and explicitly, consciously and unconsciously by all the sources addressed in this thesis and represents a variety of attitudes that can also be found in other primary sources. These have been excluded from this chapter in favour of a deeper analysis of a smaller selection of writings.

The sense of justice in war

In spite of the level of violence suffered by combatant soldiers and officers throughout the conflict, and despite the treatment reserved to them by the Italian military system (lack of recognition, harsh punishments, violent repression of dissent), it would be misleading to argue that officers perceive that a sense of justice in war is entirely absent. The sample of officers' writings examined in this thesis, in fact, witnesses that officers experience a shared sense of fairness within their small military group. This compensates for what is perceived to be the unjust treatment reserved to men (intended as both individuals and men in uniforms) by the military system operating within the dehumanizing and depersonalizing mechanism of war.

In this respect it is useful to consider episodes officers are confronted with that they believe to be totally unfair. While they might not protest openly, in spite of their frustration, at home leave that is denied or at a lack of personal recognition, they might take a stance when requested to do something they consider inconceivable. Officers may, for instance, refuse to obey an order to attack if the circumstances appear completely adverse and if they think that obeying the order will lead to the unnecessary death of their men without a proportionate military gain. These refusals to obey orders are nonetheless acts of rare courage given the terrible consequences and punishments they could provoke. Even so, this

behaviour is documented and it is interesting here to examine the passages concerning this matter.[336]

While most officers react, privately through their writings, to what Amartya Sen defines as *matsyanyaya*, namely total injustice, some officers openly refuse to respond to orders received if they think that these are utterly wrong and would lead to a futile loss of life. This is the case of the artillery officer described in his diary by Giani Stuparich. In this case, a captain, is ordered by a general to send his men to place artillery pieces at the frontline under a terrible artillery bombardment during the assault conducted on 22 June at Rocca di Monfalcone where the first battle of Isonzo was going to begin. In the end he reluctantly sends two men:

Il capitano espone pallido le difficoltà e quasi impossibilità di piazzare i suoi pezzi in linea sotto questo bombardamento. La voce del generale stride: Tra un colpo e l'altro ci sono sempre almeno 7 minuti, faccia lavorare i suoi uomini 5 minuti ogni volta.[337]

Afterwards and with the two men seriously wounded as a consequence of the order obeyed, the captain pours out his utter frustration and declares his refusal to carry out any further unjust (and useless) order as follows:

[336] For a further discussion on the objections of orders in relation to the British army on the Somme see John Keegan *Il Volto della Battaglia* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2010) (1976) p. 275.

[337] Stuparich, *Guerra del '15*,p. 62.

Han voglia di dare ordini! Vengano a provare loro! Impossibile piazzare pezzi sotto questo fuoco. M'han fatto ammazzare due uomini! Ho sospeso i lavori; fucilino pure me, non mi regge il cuore di veder morire così inutilmente i miei uomini! [338]

The reported passage provides an insight into how officers themselves deal with their own inner conflict, and their feeling of being caught between the devil and the deep sea. They also feel the pressure of finding themselves caught between the sense of comradeship that binds them to their men, promoting an idea of fairness which is held within the small group they command, and their parallel duty to adhere to the structures and orders imposed on them by the military system and particularly by the higher-ranking officers and generals who dictate guidelines and often ineffective military strategies from afar.[339] Even when they fail to contest openly the order received, the sense of belonging to the small military community is often much stronger than any adhesion to the abstract rules imposed by the military system involved and by the mechanism of war. These, in fact, are increasingly perceived as distant from both the men and from the actual circumstances of war.

On other occasions, attempts by a lieutenant to question a higher-ranked officer's order fails, as is the case with Lussu when he tries to express his doubts about the feasibility of the action ordered by a colonel. He explains to the colonel

[338] Ibid.

[339] Wilcox, 'Leadership, Command Culture and organization', in Idem, *Morale*, pp. 21-43, here p. 41.

that sending men over the wire after dawn would lead to certain, futile, death as they would be visible to the enemy:

Gli Austriaci ci attendono ai varchi e tireranno a bruciapelo su quanti si avvicineranno ai reticolati, con pinze o senza pinze. [340]

To such a remark the Colonel replies: 'Qui comando io e io non ho chiesto la sua opinione'./ 'I am in command here and I did not ask your opinion'[341] and, in so doing, reveals his distance from the needs of the combat soldiers and subaltern officers as well as his negligible grasp of the circumstances of the war.

Of great interest is the resilient solution described by Lussu and adopted by Captain Zavattari when he is ordered by a general to shoot one of his men. The poor soldier was simply guilty of repeating an order when he shouted 'zaino a terra' (backpack down). However, his shout was mistaken by the general as a sign of fatigue and defeatism. Captain Zavattari's behaviour on this occasion is worthy of attention because he opts for something between openly refusing to follow an order and the passive acceptance of it. In fact, he pretends to carry out the hideous task. In describing Zavattari's response, Lussu feels the need to provide some context on his civilian background:

[340] Lussu, *Un Anno*, p. 87.

[341] Ibid., p.87.

Il capitano Zavattari era un ufficiale di complemento. Nella vita civile, era capo divisione al Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione. Era il più anziano dei capitani del reggimento. L'ordine di far fucilare un soldato, era un'assurdità inconcepibile. Con parole misurate, trovò la maniera di dirlo al generale. Lo faccia fucilare all'istante- replicò il generale senza un attimo di esitazione.

The attempt to openly question the general's decision appears useless to Zavattari because of the general's completely different perspective and his minor grasp on what it really meant to gain and maintain the affection and respect of the regiment's fighting soldiers:

'Ma come posso far fucilare il soldato, senza una procedura qualsiasi e senza che egli abbia commesso un reato?' Il generale non aveva la sua stessa mentalità giuridica. Quelle argomentazioni legalitarie lo irritarono. [342]

It is interesting to explore further this mention of the 'same legal mindset'. The general cannot even be excused for his decision, in that he sentences the soldier to death even if he has not committed any crime, thus committing what to any man of the company would appear to be an absurd and useless. Zavattari proves to be incredibly spirited in that as soon as he realizes that it would be totally useless to contradict the general's inhuman resolution, he thinks of an expedient to save his

[342] Ibid., pp. 58-59.

soldier's life. He pretends to order the shooting and then uses the corpse of another soldier and places it onto a stretcher:

Il capitano raggiunse nuovamente la testa della sua compagnia che, ferma, aspettava ordini. Fece fare, da una squadra, una scarica di fucileria contro il tronco d'albero e ordinò che i portaferiti stendessero su una barella il corpo dell'esploratore morto.[343]

The general, satisfied by the event, confirms his distance and almost crazy attitude by saluting the soldier's corpse with the rhetoric reserved to those fallen for the fatherland:

Salutiamo i martiri della patria! In guerra, la disciplina è dolorosa ma necessaria. Onoriamo I nostri morti! [344]

The flipside of the coin is the cruelty which soldiers are capable of demonstrating towards higher-ranked officers, such as the general described above. This is witnessed by the passage reported below and taken from Lussu's account:

Da un momento all'altro il generale poteva precipitare nel vuoto. Molti soldati vicini lo vedevano, nessuno si muoveva. Io li vedevo tutti distintamente: qualcuno

[343] Ibid., pp. 59-60.

[344] Ibid., p. 60.

ammiccava, sorridendo. Ancora qualche istante e il mulo si sarebbe liberato del generale. Dalle file della nostra sezione mitragliatrici, un soldato si lanciò di corsa sul generale e arrivò a tempo per trattenerlo... Il soldato, in piedi, guardava intorno, soddifatto. Egli aveva salvato il generale. Quando i suoi compagni della sezione mitragliatrici lo raggiunsero, io assistetti ad un'aggressione selvaggia. Con furia gli si buttarono addosso, tempestandolo di pugni. Il soldato fu rovesciato per terra. I compagni gli furono sopra.[345]

Due to the common hatred for the general, the poor soldier's naive act of bravery is universally judged as stupid and out of place. It is even seen as a betrayal of the rest of the unit, one which was suffering terribly under the general's harsh command. The term 'universally' is adopted here to define the overall feeling within the micro-cosmos of the company. Lussu himself silently assists the event without taking any action to save his general's life and he notes that even the unit's officers did not intervene for a long time, not even to avoid the lynching of the inconvenient 'hero'.[346] A further validation of the widespread belief that the soldier had done something wrong comes from Lieutenant Ottolenghi, who is fearless in expressing his opinions even if they are in deep conflict with his role in the army. He addresses the hero as follows:

[345] Ibid., pp. 64-65.

[346] Ibid., p. 65.

Imbecille! Oggi tu hai disonorato la sezione!... Che cosa dovevi fare? Tu dovevi che hanno fatto gli altri. Niente. Niente dovevi fare! Ed era anche troppo. Un asino simile io non lo voglio nel mio reparto. Ti farò cacciare dalla sezione... Voelvi fare qualcosa? Ebbene, dovevi, con un colpo di baionetta, tagliare le redini e far precipitare il generale... Si imbecille, dovevi lasciarlo morire. E se non moriva, dato che tu volevi fare qualcsa a tutti i costi, dovevi aiutarlo a morire. Rientra alla sezione, e, se i tuoi t'ammazzano, te lo sarai meritato.[347]

Also worth noting is the fact that some officers, who often protest in private writing, do not a take a stance when in a real situation. This, for instance, is the case with Gadda and Monelli, who never contrast the orders received, no matter how wrong or ineffective they are. However, they then pour out their frustrations in their notebooks. The attitude towards men that emerges from the writing considered confirms the argument proposed by Wilcox that young, educated junior officers embraced their role enthusiastically and tried to boost group cohesion. The proximity to their men was, at times, perceived negatively by the conservative military authorities.[348]

[347] Ibid., p. 66.

[348] Wilcox, 'Leadership, Command Culture and organization', pp. 39-40.

Between military and civilian identities

Due to the ever-changing situation, the incredible displacement of troops, and to the military emergency characterizing it, war impacts massively on justice. On the one hand, it requests a re-organization of the legal system in response to military action, as is the case with the emergence of military courts and their parallel justice. On the other, war imposes a rethinking of what could be defined as a shared sense of justice. The impact is thus twofold as it involves both the institutional level of justice and its practical outcomes, but, more than that, it also influences the ways in which a sense of justice is framed and envisaged by men at war. This is dealt with directly in a passage reported below and taken from Guerrieri's epistolary collection. In it he complains about the obsolescence of legal codes and of their recognized norms and of what they consider to be right or wrong. Civilian legal codes with their laws, according to Guerrieri, are not applicable given the mental and physical condition of men at the frontline. This is not solely because war zones are under military justice which imposes its own set of rules and regulations. What Guerrieri suggests is that, due to the nature of the war, the very assumptions determining what criminal conduct consists of need readdressing.

On 4 October 1915 Filippo Guerrieri clearly expresses the transformation of the meaning of justice in the context of the front compared to prevailing assumptions at home and the sense of disorientation resulting from it:

E voi in Italia nella pace parlate pure di morale e di rispetto, di sentimenti buoni, tutta roba ridicola e che fa ridere, ridere, ridere... Povere leggi e poveri codici penali

come siete lontani da noi e come siete una cosa vana, l'omicidio non è più una colpa, ma una frenesia; il furto è un diritto come quello di proprietà, l'ammazzare è un dovere come quello di vivere. [349]

This passage shows the different nature of the sense of justice in peacetime and in war, on the home front and the war front. Guerrieri explains that the latter shows completely different traits which puts into question certain previously shared legal norms (such as the universal condemnation of murder and killing). The peacetime legal mindset is completely inadequate for the new context, to the point that he expresses pity for them while also addressing a sharp critique to all those who still uncritically utter false words, such as 'respect' and 'morality'. At stake here, however, is more than a right-duty system, it is rather the basis upon which human beings generally build their life and identity.[350] In fact, on the one hand, the creation of a military legal system with its completely new set of legal norms applied in specific circumstances, and in specific parts of the nation, inevitably engenders and exacerbates what Zerboglio defines *aporia del diritto*.[351] By this term he refers to those circumstances potentially inherent to all legal systems, in which a set of norms is not recognized as valid or useful and consequently fails to meet the actual needs of the people it represents.[352] This happens, for instance, when a law

[349] Guerrieri, *Lettere*. p. 94.

[350] Sergio Cotta, *Soggetto umano soggetto giuridico*, (Milano: Giuffrè, 1997).

[351] Adolfo Zerboglio, *Appunti sulla giustizia militare in tempo di guerra*, in "Rivista di diritto e procedura penale", vol. VI, 1915, pp. 449-459, here, p. 453.

[352] Ibid. p. 453.

is outdated and no longer meets the new needs and expectations of a society, or, conversely, when a new law is introduced and, for a while, fails to be understood and accepted. Consequentially, at various stages of the conflict, old and new laws (and their languages, concepts, and rhetoric) might fail to be recognized by different sections of society, depending on their degree of involvement in the conflict. This issue causes an unforeseen divide between the set of norms accepted and recognized by civilians, and those imposed on men at war, thus making the laws operating in both circumstances mutually unintelligible, exacerbating the war/home front divide and engendering a wound within the country.[353]

Redefining a sense of what is just and fair thus becomes crucial to men at the frontline. This, indeed, could be seen as a vital coping strategy for soldiers exposed to the horror and cruelty of war. The negation of previously universally accepted values and concepts connected with the sense of justice causes a series of self-representation and self-projection problems at both an individual and a collective level. The clash between civilian and military identities is addressed extensively by Filippo Guerrieri who openly considers the issue of identity *vis à vis* the conundrums: inconsistencies of institutional justice (both military and civilian) inherent to the experience of war. He recounts this in the following passage as he addresses the horrible metamorphosis which is requested of men by the new conflict:

[353] Antonio Gibelli, *L'Officina della Guerra* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991).

Un colpo di baionetta librato di notte alle spalle di una vedetta nemica sorpresa nel sonno e nel silenzio, vedetta che è una persona come noi con gli stessi affetti e gli stessi pensieri, che ha padre e che forse è pure padre, diventa un bel gesto, un atto nobile che rende degno di premio e incorona di gloria colui che lo compie. [354]

The irreconcilable division between family and military identity is a recurrent theme in war writings and can also be detected in certain letters censored throughout the conflict and included in the interesting work accomplished by Forcella and Monticone concerning trial sentences and entitled *Plotone d'Esecuzione*. A sentence pronounced by the special military court of the third Army in Vestone, on 18 February 1918, quotes and examines the disparaging letter written to his girlfriend by Second Lieutenant E.R. from the 14th battalion:[355]

Invece ancora mi cristallizzo a dare ordini sempre uguali a gente più stanca di me, che come il solito non fa o fa male, devo fare i soliti rimproveri, le solite minacce a dei padri di famiglia. Questi soldati non valgono nulla come tali e meriterebbero di essere trattati come bambini, eppure sono padri di bambini e forse buoni padri [356]

War is frequently described as something that transforms men into something else by demanding an incredible performance. This leads to two serious problems. First,

[354] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 94.

[355] Enzo Forcella and Alberto Monticone, *Plotone d'esecuzione I processi della Prima Guerra Mondiale*, (Roma: Laterza, 2014), p. 275.

[356] Ibid.

that war imposed an unprecedented identity challenge to men in uniforms. Second, that in spite of the sacrifice demanded of them, there is also a high level of military inefficiency within the mechanism of war. The identity-problem produced by war is exposed by the judge in another passage of his sentence describing E.R.'s letter:

Egli ricorda sè stesso studente in tristi condizioni finanziare, costretto a lustrarsi le scarpe da sè, mangiar male, a fare l'istitutore per guadagnare qualcosa, che andava a trovar la fidanzata in abito dimesso; ma tuttavia egli era allora fiero ed era un "gigante" in confronto all'attuale sottotenente "agghindato con cura ma sotto una veste che nasconde la verità e non sa provare nessun nobile sentimento" [357]

It is striking that E.R. is granted the suspended sentence through a series of arguments that justify his defeatism as an innocent outburst while similar cases were judged and punished quite severely. The second problem, connected to imposed military life, is caused by the fact that there is scarcely any attention paid to how men are selected for specific tasks. Consequently, they might reveal themselves to be unsuitable for them. This is also exposed sarcastically in Guerrieri's letter, dated 23 March 1916, which reflects on the tasks uncritically assigned to members of the military regardless of their qualities:

Lo volete proprio sapere? Mi hanno fatto direttore di mensa. È tutto dire, la vita militare perfeziona e completa l'uomo, lo rende con la massima facilità riducibile

[357] Ibid., p. 275.

all'esercizio di qualsiasi professione, da quella del difensore a quella del cuoco, dallo stratega al pulitore patentato e costruttore di latrine da campo.[358]

Instances of war necessitating improvisation is also mentioned by Augusto Vivanti who communicates to his father Cesare that he has been asked, with no notice and, what is worse, no preparation, to replace a lawyer in an ordinary court trial:

Una cosa che ti farà piacere: ieri sono stato al tribunale di guerra per la perizia di cui ti ho parlato. Il presidente, mancando l'avvocato per gli altri processi mi ha requisito così ho dovuto difendere in 7 processi. Ho iniziato con un'assoluzione e finito con due ergastoli. Non so la figura che ho fatto alla sbarra, sarà stata più che meschina ma ad ogni modo mi son fatto un'idea dell'ambiente (in un tribunale ordinario non ero mai stato) e qualche conoscenza tra gli uomini.[359]

The improvised and ever-changing identities imposed on men in uniform gives soldiers a sense of uncertainty in relation to the role assigned to them and to the overall system in which they operate. Moreover, trench warfare forces the men to conduct a life that is far from heroic. The conditions also affect the men's appearance. This situation is complained about in many letters, as is the case with the one written by Second Lieutenant D.F. and examined by the military court on 29 July 1916:

[358] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 112.

[359] Vivanti, *Scrivimi*, p. 294.

Dobbiamo fare i reticolati e abbiamo poco filo, senza chiodi per fermalo, senza accetta per tagliare i pali (il fante prodigioso fa i pali colla baionetta, ferma il filo con le sue stesse spine fatte entrare nella corteccia): dobbiamo scavare trincee ma la roccia è dura e il piccone non la intacca: occorre gelatina per saltare mine: non ce la danno perché dovrebbe venire con un plotone di minatori, ma non si vede mai. Bisogna rialzare i parapetti con travi, ma i travi non si tagliano con la baionetta, ed in tutta la compagnia abbiamo n.1 sega. Servirebbero i sacchi di terra e ce ne danno 150 per una linea di quasi un Km! [360]

The denial of recognition

If the conflict and the daily routine at war are different from what was envisaged far from the battlefield, even the role assigned to members of the military by institutional and home front narratives contrasts deeply with that actually reserved to them at war. Such a discrepancy leads officers to self-reflect and to a sometimes clear perception of the fragility of identity and, eventually, to an inevitable redefinition of the sense of justice in wartime.[361]

Bateson's 'Double Bind Theory' appears useful in observing what officers write about the discrepancy between the heroic narratives accompanying military

[360] Forcella and Monticone, *Plotone*, p. 60.

[361] Gibelli, *La Grande Guerra degli Italiani*, p. 103.

mobilization and the actual recognition and treatment reserved to men at war. Similar to a double-bind relationship, the interaction of soldiers/army and soldiers/state at war is characterized by a long-lasting, self-perpetuating distorted communication marked by an inconsistency between words and facts, claimed intentions and actual behaviours. At times, these contrast to the point of negating each other, thus creating an absurd oxymoronic trap that becomes an additional challenge for soldiers' endurance and mental well-being. Adding to the level of discomfort pertaining to this condition is the coercive nature of life in the army that makes it impossible for soldiers to withdraw from this communicative circumstance.[362]

The ways in which officers reflect upon the violence implied by the double-bind interaction they suffer throughout the conflict differ depending on their background, on the circumstances of war and on the type of writing (and consequent audience envisaged for it). What is important to consider, however, is the real, factual discrepancy during WWI between the projected heroic identities ascribed to soldiers and officers and the actual rights and merits they are recognized by military institutions. This becomes clearer when considering the system of recognitions in which the percentage of reserve officer promotions due to war merits totalled 657 in three years and a half of war, that is 1 for every 100 reserve officers.[363]

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[362] Max Visser, 'Gregory Bateson on Deutero-Learning and Double Bind: A Brief Conceptual History', in Journal of History of the Behavioural Sciences, vol. 39 (3) Summer 2003, pp. 269-278, here p. 273.

[363]Giorgio Rochat, 'Gli ufficiali italiani nella Prima guerra mondiale' in Giorgio Rochat *L' esercito Italiano in Pace e in Guerra* (Milano: RARA, 1991), pp. 113-130, here p. 121.

Given that the institutions, in facing up to the actual circumstances of war, were more interested in the heroic and patriotic narrative, rather than in the adoption of efficient strategies, is proved by the policy concerning the awarding of medals and promotions. The fact that, among reserve officers, silver medals were far more frequent than promotions demonstrates the fact that these officers were seen as heroic examples to be celebrated through medals rather than rewarded with a promotion to higher ranks. Promotions and high responsibility were initially reserved to career officers.[364]

Given the unreliability of the narrative put forward by both governmental and military institutions, and especially what Barbagli defines the 'famiglia coniugale intima',[365] family assumes the role of identity anchor throughout the conflict.[366] This unit already plays a crucial role in identity formation as both an institution and as a social group within which learning, practising and developing values and attitudes takes place, or, according to Erving Goffman, within which one's core relational identity is built.[367] According to Goffman, identity is, in fact, constructed through an interaction with others and, therefore, there is no such thing as a fixed identity displaced in all contexts but rather a series of identities pertaining to different circumstances. Even though, accepting Goffman's theory,

[364] The acronym 'SAP' stands for 'servizio attivo permanente/ permanent active service'.

[365] The term borrowed from Barbagli defines the family built through marriage and presenting evolving roles which are defined on the basis of bonds rather than rigidly set as was the case with the patriarchal family.

[366] Marzio Barbagli, *Sotto Lo Stesso tett*o (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984).

[367] Erwing Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in everyday Life* (London: Anchor 1959, New Ed. Penguin Books, 1990).

one might see identity as dynamic and relational, the interaction with the family of origin certainly impacts on those core elements that remain as structural; somehow fixed traits of the personality. In the pre-war period, the family also had a role in ensuring adhesion to the ideals of patriotic and nationalist interventionism.[368] In his collection of letters, Guerrieri feels the need to critically disclose the contrast between the values and identity patterns normally recognized and appreciated in pre-war time and still operating on the home front, with the necessarily different perspective and grasp on life one is forced to acquire while at war. Since Guerrieri is already part of the 'game' (he was a member of the military even before WWI), ambition is not new for him. Military life was already part of his understanding as he had taken part in the war in Libya (in Derna), after which he became a lieutenant. The decision to focus mainly on Guerrieri in the present section is due to the idea that following the progression of his exchanges might be fruitful for a further understanding of the evolution of disillusionment and for a closer investigation of the way in which frustration and resentment broaden and become more intense, and extended beyond the private sphere.

These feelings become evident in many circumstances, one being where offices fail to be recognized for their deeds. This represents a challenge both for the officer involved and for his family, but most of all, for the communication between

[368] On the role of middle-class and upper middle-class families in promoting a certain kind of nationalism and subsequent interventionism, see Fabrizio Dolci and Oliver Janz, eds., *Monumenti di carta. le pubblicazioni in memoria dei caduti nella Grande Guerra* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura Roma, 2003).

them. It is exemplified by a series of letters, both to and from his parents, that deal with the failed award of a medal and a failed promotion to effective captain in recognition of his contribution in capturing the peak of Monte Cimone. The first is the letter written on 19 July 1916, presenting a long account of the heroic action carried out between 26 and 30 June (dealt with more in depth in the chapter 'Writing battles'); of interest is the fact that the disillusionment at the possible recognition of a reward for his efforts is already expressed. The following letter, sent to his father, is of interest in that it not only addresses the injustice pertaining to the system of recognition of merit adopted by military institutions, but also explicitly mentions the sense of belonging to and the comradeship within, the small military community. It also reveals the deep sense of justice characterizing it, in contrast with the broader military organization.[369] Filippo's merits are, in fact, deeply appreciated and recognized by his superiors, and by the comrades who knew him personally. This fact is enough to keep him doing his duty, out of a sense of justice and the set of values he shares with them (but apparently not completely grasped by his family back home who are waiting for his promotion). The dichotomy between the understanding and empathy experienced within the company and the neglect encountered within higher hierarchies, is a common denominator of many writings. This underlines an impossibility of communication even among 'war practitioners' belonging to different squads. The company thus becomes a vital comfort-zone and identity anchor in war:

[369] Neil Greenber, Matthew Gould and Victoria Langston, 'Culture: What is its Effect on Stress in the Military?' in MILITARY MEDICINE, 172, 2007, pp. 931-935, here p. 932.

Campiello 20 settembre 1916 Caro Babbo, triste poi no, indignato si e tanto, ma non occorre nè reclamare nè cercare di andare in alto per avere giustizia, me l'hanno già usata i miei superiori e i miei colleghi del reggimento. Quando ho rinunciato al grado di capitano il colonnello per forza mi ha fatto rifare la domanda per passare a effettivo, ho rifatto la domanda, ho letto le note che vi sono state apposte da quella del Comandante di Battaglione a quella di Divisione è un chiaro riconoscimento del mio merito, sono note caratteristiche che possono destare invidia a chiunque, sono un magnifico elogio del mio ardimento e della mia capacità. Credi Babbo che questo mi ha fatto piacere, mi ha largamente ricompensato della mancanza di Monfalcone. Non mi aspettavo mai una così ampia riparazione. [370]

Also of interest here is the evolution of the mood in these letters, from 17 September to 20 September Guerrieri shows how to relieve an open wound.[371] He shifts from complete disillusionment (in the first letter), to anger and frustration (in the second) to a milder evaluation of his condition, and finally to the resolution to keep doing his job and defending his honour and values in spite of the difficulties and despite the evident injustice which had been reserved for him. Guerrieri's is an example of the existence of a sense of fairness and the search for 'stroking' within the small military group. This is stated in its extended meaning, as suggested by Eric

[370] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 176.

[371] Ibid., pp.175-177.

Berne, who sees it as an act of recognition that is demanded by children but, in metaphorical terms, is also sought by adults within their community.[372] Looking around, in fact, Guerrieri was comforted by the affection and respect of his military family, one to which he felt a strong sense of belonging.

In the case of officers' recognitions, medals and promotions would serve as strokes, but, given that they often fail to be rewarded, officers sublimate their need to be 'stroked' through recognition from their squad. This form of compensation, however, is not possible for families back home and this partly explains why Guerrieri's father seems to recover less quickly from the bronze medal not awarded to his son for the assault on Monte Cimone. This sentiment emerges from a letter in which Filippo is explicitly trying to comfort him, suggesting that he stops thinking about the matter. In spite of being the one who suffered directly, Guerrieri feels the need to defend his father from the narcissistic wound of the prestige denied. This idea is reinforced by the reading of another letter sent on 5 October, from Lughi:

Non so quando potrò venire in licenza, però lo spero e presto. Il Babbo cammina troppo anzi vola quando spera nella promozione a capitano effettivo, sarà la realtà meno, molto meno (grande) del suo paterno sogno. Ad ongi modo, Babbo sii anche tu contento come lo sono io.[373]

[372] Eric Berne, 'Introduction' in *Games people play*, pp.5 -20, here p. 15.

[373] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, pp. 182-183.

Defining the borders of what is and what isn't acceptable is crucial to contrast the dehumanizing impact of war on men and on their identity. This is also why the squads and companies become comfort zones and the order to leave them for a new group is often referred to with anxiety by officers. After having recreated a micro-society where moral norms pertaining to both military conduct and human behaviour have been agreed, they have to face new uncertainties and start everything from scratch.[374]

The Italian army was largely uninterested in this source of unit cohesion which, in other states, was seen as an important element in building morale. More than this, it prevented military units from being recruited on a regional basis. Vanda Wilcox proposes the idea that this decision might be connected both to a widespread diffidence towards the masses and as a result of banditry in the south.[375] The scars of the phenomenon of *brigantaggio* throughout the Guerra del Mezzogiorno was still a burning scar from the post-unification era.[376] This shortsightedness of the Italian army leads even a convinced, committed and disciplined officer such as Piero Jahier to momentary disappointment when he is moved to another group. This after having formed his recruits into what he describes as a 'new family'.
In his entry 'e così a un tratto', Piero Jahier laments the sudden order to leave his family-company without even having the chance to bid farewell to his comrades-

[374] Even Antonio Vitelli in his unpublished notebook *Doss Remit* expresses anxiety at having to leave the old company.

[375] Wilcox, 'Leadership, Command Culture and organization', in, Idem, *Morale*, pp. 21-43, here p. 24.

[376] Pinto, *La Guerra per il Mezzogiorno*.

soldiers. His faith in the fatherland is undermined because of the little attention paid to the bonds created at war, and to the fact that these are important to the cause of war itself.[377]

The lack of a fair treatment reserved to combatants is to be found frequently in Guerrieri's correspondence and, given his legal background, there is a strong connection with legal language. This is adopted to express more effectively the conundrums detected in war. Frequent are sentences, such as the following passage, taken from a letter written from Trincee Le Fratte-torrente Ghelpach on 17 September 1916: 'è una cosa solita l'ingiustizia'.[378]

All in all, it is possible to highlight an evolution in his disappointment which begins with the idea of having suffered personal damage, then evolves into the certainty at having been misled, somehow not respected and even, to a certain extent, 'abused' by the system to which he belongs. If it were not for the consolation and the satisfaction provided by the small family group at arms he would have probably given up. While the sense of injustice and abuse suffered by the experienced Lieutenant Guerrieri is expressed less explicitly, it is buoyantly compensated by the comfort provided by the comradeship of his squad. Unlike Guerrieri, the sense of abuse appears to prevail and is openly declared by C.A., an officer candidate in the 112th infantry. In the following passage, reported within a

[377] Jahier, *Con me e con gli Alpini*, p. 159.

[378] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 175.

sentence of the military court of the 25th Army and pronounced in Marostica on 22 January 1918, we can read:

Maledetta la guerra, maledetto chi la pensò, maledetto chi nel primo la gridò. Sono stanco di questa schiavitù militare, di questa ubbidienza umiliante e misera, stomacato dagli abusi che si commettono sotto l'ipocrita spoglia della dsiciplina. Avevo un altro concetto della vita militare prima della guerra, credevo vi fosse tutta gente compita, invece c'è la feccia, la melma, il fior fiore dell'imbecillaggine, il rifiuto della società civile, gente che non ha coscienza che non può avere larghe vedute[379]

The recognition of responsibilities, however, soon becomes broader for Lieutenant's Guerrieri and he begins to direct his sense of frustration at the huge unrecognized sacrifice to the whole society, one which is described as profiting from war while honourable men are exposed to daily sacrifices in the trenches or, worse, are wounded on the battlefields. This transforms his growing resentment against injustice in wartime into a general sense of resentfulness which is now directed to people on the home front. This leads him to the extreme of expressing happiness and satisfaction at the terrible news, written by his father, that enemy aeroplanes are flying over the city of Spezia. In a letter to his parents, written from Costa di Sotto on 16 July 1916, these feelings are poured out:

[379] Forcella and Monticone, *Plotone*, p. 236.

Carissimi

...Ho sentito da Fernanda che anche a Spezia gli aeroplani si sono fatti vedere e che sono passati da Monti, ecco una profezia del babbo avveratasi. Sono sicuro che l'effetto alla loro vista non sarà stato troppo buono perché le bombe non piacciono a nessuno tanto meno a quelli che dormono i saporitissimi sonni di Spezia, ma io ne ho provato piacere, così avranno una pallidissima idea di quello che è e che fa soffrire la guerra anche i famosi *urloni* di strada e da caffè. E la mamma? Scommetto che ha fatto subito il proposito di recarsi al rifugio di *Porcilia*, lei di eroismi non ne vuol sapere e fa bene... tanto non contano nulla.[380]

The sense of betrayal is so overwhelming that the responsibility of it is now, for a while, attributed to the whole society. Even the communication with his parents becomes more difficult in that it is difficult to share this failure with them and it appears easier to distance himself from them as well as from the rest of the guilty home front.

Legal mindset and language

This section deals with the men's redefinition of a sense of justice at the frontline during WWI *vis à vis* the reorganization of justice throughout the conflict.[381] During war, military justice is restructured in order to provide a further degree of discipline

[380] Guerrieri, *Lettere dalla Trincea*, p. 151

[381] See Giovanna Procacci, 'La società come una caserma', in Bruna Bianchi, ed., *La violenza contro la popolazione civile nella Grande guerra. Deportati, profughi, internati* Milano: Unicopli, 2006), pp. 283-304.

among men in uniform.[382] This is witnessed by the number of proceedings reported by Forcella and Monticone stating that out of 5.2 million Italians who served between 1915 and 1918, there were 870,000 charges communicated to the judicial authorities.[383]

Also relevant is the importance attributed by the army and the governmental institutions to the control of correspondence as a source of information on both conduct and morale.[384] Postal censorship is defined by Forcella as one of the crucial invisible collaborators of military justice, namely the channel through which many combatants are prosecuted.[385] Even in this respect, though, as is the case with the organization of military effort, there is a disproportion between the expectations and the outcomes of the censorship activity given that the numbers of letters checked amounts to only 2% of those exchanged.[386] Moreover, a contradiction can be detected in this will to check soldiers' post: that, in spite of the

[382] Carlotta Latini, 'Una giustizia "d'eccezione" Specialità della giurisdizione militare e sua estensione durante la Prima guerra mondiale' in DEP (Deportate Esuli Profughe), pp. 67-85, N 5-6 12/2006 av. at <https://www.unive.it/pag/31513/?L=1 A.> and Zerboglio, *Appunti sulla giustizia militare in tempo di guerra*, in "Rivista di diritto e procedura penale", VI, 1915, p. 453.

[383] Enzo Forcella 'Apologia della Paura', pp. 7- 23, in Idem, *Plotone d'Esecuzione* (Laterza: Bari, 2014) (1968), p. 14.

[384] Giovanna Procacci, 'Stato di guerra, regime di eccezione e violazione delle libertà. Inghilterra, Germania, Austria, Italia dal 1914 al 1918', in Bruna Bianchi, Laura De Giorgi, and Guido Samarani, eds., *Le guerre mondiali in Asia orientale e in Europa. Violenza, collaborazionismi, propaganda* (Milano: Unicopli, 2009), pp. 33-52.

[385] Forcella, 'Apologia',. p. 19.

[386] Ibid., p. 22.

desired overseeing of soldiers' morale, spontaneous writing was inhibited by military and postal censorship.[387]

More than providing an overview on the issue of formal military justice throughout the conflict, the present section examines the ways in which justice and injustice, intended as shared and socially determined categories, are reframed, re-envisaged and reconstructed within smaller military communities while at war. In order to address this topic, a series of accounts taken from the sources considered have been examined. A further attempt is made to connect this with the broader theme of the sense of belonging to the military system and, more specifically, to the Italian state.[388] Attention is directed to the emergence of a common sense of fairness: that separates what is right from what is wrong. This becomes a vital shared language, as did the new family lexicon investigated in the previous chapters.

The distinction between the individual and the soldier subject to military discipline and the violence of war can be investigated further by considering the accounts provided by a selection of officers employed in military courts as lawyers or judges, as well as by witnesses of sentences and executions. From these it emerges that an extreme divide exists between the different worlds; between the life soldiers knew before and the world invented and imposed by the army during

[387] Ibid., p. 21

[388] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York, 1991).

war.[389] This gap drives even the most respectful members of the military to express their doubts and empathize with those who violate the rigid rules governing military life. Regardless of whether doubts and discontent are conscious or unconscious, explicitly uttered or concealed, directed to the 'frustrator' or to third parties, one fact remains: that the distance and incompatibility between what is recognized as fair by civilian society is far removed from what is imposed on soldiers at war. The awareness of this irreconcilable gulf, made worse by the constant exposure of combatants to impossible circumstances and extreme danger, requiring high levels of endurance, is a generator of massive frustration and leads to psychological displacement in the best case scenarios and to war neuroses in the worst.[390]

Observing the way in which justice is treated in war writings provides those who are familiar with law, military courts, and legal practice before and during war, with the opportunity to grasp some aspects of communication in war which would otherwise remain concealed. The difference between the human and the legal subject (and even more the military one) permeates the descriptions of many official trials but also of some executions, as is the case with the passages presented below and taken from the diary of Colonel Pasquale Gagliani.[391] Writing

[389] Haltiner Karl, 'The Hybrid Soldier, Identity Changes in the MIlitary', in Gerhard Kümmel, Giuseppe Caforio, Christopher Dandeker, ed., *Armed Forces, Soldiers and Civil-Military Relations* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2009), pp. 75-82.

[390] On this issue see the film *Scemi di guerra, La follia nelle Trincee* available at <http://www.fctp.it/movie_item.php?id=544>.

[391] Pasquale Gagliani was infused by a monarchic feeling his faith to the national cause and his interventionism should be framed accordingly.

is often the place in which the tensions between a harsh judicial system and the feelings of the officers emerge and this is a particularly interesting aspect in Gagliani's notebook as its frustration is evident despite his attempt to remain sober and controlled.

Gagliani's legal activity in war exposes him to the unsolvable conundrums of war and its 'justice'. His description of a trial sheds further light on the mismatch between war rules during conduct and the emotions inevitably inherent in life:

30 agosto sono giudice in un tribunale speciale contro due capitani della 124a fanteria imputati di rifiuto d'obbedienza per una cosa avvenuta nella notte tra il 29 e il 30 giugno contro la trincea dei Monticelli Rossi mentre le loro compagnie erano entrate nella trincea nemica[392]

Gagliani, however, avoids expressing any moral judgement upon this case, not only out of embarrassment 'Dallo svolgersi dei dibattimenti vengono fuori particolari che è meglio tacere!.. '/from the evolution of the debates some details emerge which are far better to omit!...' but also because he seems moved by life clashing with the rigid rules of war.[393] The suspension and omission characterizing his description of things with which he is not comfortable should be interpreted (apart from the obvious military taboo accompanying homosexuality) in light of his high rank and

[392] Pasquale Gagliani, MS diary. Parts of it have become available after my visit in the archive of Pieve Santo Stefano and could be accessed in digital form at <http://espresso.repubblica.it/grandeguerra/index.php?page=estratto&id=447>.

[393] It is my guess that Gagliani's criticism is directed to homosexuality.

his activity in the military courts, on the one hand, and of his character (sober and upright), on the other. Whenever something unexpected happens he, who is used to predicting events and building strategies to face them, appears disoriented. From his writings one could suggest that he feels challenged by the unexpected and even more, as he himself states, by unthinkable behaviours as these somehow challenge his plans and his assumptions. It is not only the breach of the military code but rather the violation of an existential set of norms and values which he had embraced so completely. The worst crime is that attributed to the older of the two as he is married and has the rank of captain. This captain's military degree and status of husband makes Gagliani's judgment even more severe. This, however, does not prevent him from expressing his sorrow for the fact that two lives have been somehow destroyed. However, is the destruction to be intended as a physical or moral destruction resulting from the recognition of, according to the code of the time, a dishonourable crime?

Diary entry of the 31st of August 1916: continua la causa e poi ci riuniamo in camera di consiglio: lunga discussione da cui scaturisce una sentenza giudicata da tutti molto giusta: il capitano ... è condannato a 20 anni di reclusione e l.... a 5 anni. Due esistenze distrutte!'

His need to record that everyone considers the sentence fair clashes with his own conclusion that two lives have been destroyed. He recognises the difficulty of the role he is assigned: 'é uno dei più dolorosi doveri a cui è chiamato un ufficiale:

quello di dover giustificare due suoi colleghi.' /it is one of the most hurtful duties to which an officer is called: having to judge two colleagues of his'.

At times some military *dictats* and norms pertaining to martial law are perceived as being too rigid or unjust, even by professional officers who are called to both respect and apply them to their soldiers. Officers with a legal education, like Filippo Guerrieri, as well as older officers who contribute to military courts, such as Campodonico and Gagliani, are particularly receptive to the clash between ordinary laws, which are still valid in the society of the home front, and the legal framework operating at war. No matter how epitomizing, Gagliani is not an isolated case as there are other instances where officers do not try to solve the dichotomy between their adherence to military rules and the emotional reaction to the condemnation of colleagues or soldiers who break them. The coexistence of belief in military justice and human pity is also to be found in the way in which the final decision is described. This is, for instance, the case with the trial and execution portrayed by Lieutenant Gioja and investigated by Fabio Caffarena.[394] He describes a trial of two soldiers accused of desertion, one of whom is condemned to death and the other to 20 years' imprisonment. After portraying in detail the evolution of the trial and the attitudes of both court and bystanders, Gioja depicts the execution.[395] Notably, the passage ends with the word 'just' which is the one pronounced by everyone ('all of them') to define the sentence. This clashes, however, with the impression

[394] On Lieutenant Gioja's diary, see Fabio Caffarena 'Il Fronte delle parole Scritture della Grande Guerra' in *Storie di Gente Comune nell'archivio ligure di scrittura popolare* eds. Pietro Conti, Giuliana Franchini, Antonio Gibelli, (Aqui Terme: Editrice Impressioni Grafiche, 2002), pp. 81-111, here p. 94.

[395] Caffarena, 'Il fronte delle parole', p. 96.

engendered on both onlookers and on other soldiers (such as the one who faints before the shooting) and with somewhat emotional phrases adopted in the description by Gioja himself such as 'from then on he never saw the light'. As suggested by Caffarena, on soldiers' acceptance of the execution as a 'just' decision it is right to have some doubts.[396]

In this respect, the letter reported in the sentence pronounced by the military court of the 27th Army on 14 January 1918 deserves particular attention because it provides a perspective on military justice of a simple soldier, A. C., from the province of Milan:

Dopo più di due anni di guerra ove si è perso molti soldati, rovinate famiglie, rovinate le proprie posizioni e sprecato molto denaro, in poche ore si è perso tutto e qualche cosa di peggio, e per sciocchezze che meriterebbero qualche anno di carcere oppure inviarli in trincea vengono fucilati e di questi casi ne succedono ogni giorno. Si discute di fucilazione come fosse di uccidere un pollo.[397]

Of great interest is the ways in which death by shooting is described by Paolo Monelli, in that it contrasts deeply with the passage by Gioja. Monelli first refers all details of the event, putting the accent on the difficult position of both lieutenant and of the assistant major:

[396] Ibid.

[397] Forcella and Monticone, *Plotone*, p. 255.

Toccano all'aiutante maggiore i compiti più odiosi, persuadere i due che sono vane le speranze che hanno portato trepidamente con sè per tutta la strada (i carabinieri, buoni diavoli, non avevano core di disilluderli); e mandare a chiamare il prete e medico; e tirar fuori il plotone d'esecuzione; e intanto far chiudere in una baracca questi due morituri così diversi da quelli che buttiamo fuori dalla trincea i giorni di battaglia- che appena si son ritrovati con il loro battaglione hanno urlato, pianto, chiamata la famiglia lontana, implorato pietà e perdono. [398]

Then he describes how challenging for everyone within the company, both soldiers and officers, is putting such a sentence into practice. To do so, he mentions the attempt on the part of the assistant major to give the orders in a 'bitter tone', and the consequent reluctance of soldiers to shoot:

Il plotone d'esecuzione s'allinea, sbigottito, occhi atoni sull'aiutante maggiore che con voce che vuole dunque far suonare aspra spiega la necessità di mirare bene per abbreviare l'agonia a gente irrimediabilmente condannata. Nel plotone ci sono amici, paesani, forse anche parenti dei due condannati. Commenti sommessi nell'allineamento. ''Silenzio!' grida l'aiutante. L'aiutante maggiore ha già spiegato: io faccio un cenno con la mano, e allora fuoco. Ecco il cenno. I soldati guardano l'ufficiale, e non sparano. Nuovo cenno. I soldati non sparano. Il tenente batte

[398] Monelli, *Le Scarpe al Sole*, p. 144.

nervosamente le mani. Sparano. Ed ecco il corpo investito dall raffica si piega scivolando un poco lungo il tronco dell'albero, mezza la testa asportata.[399]

The only reason that convinces the officer to incite his men to fire immediately and effectively is that of sparing the men a longer (and useless) agony, and, the text seems to suggest, to himself as he was forced to undertake such a challenging task. Monelli then pours out his disappointment at the decision taken from a distance and blames the judges who are described almost as shirkers. The sense of justice itself is questioned by Monelli, who, similar to Guerrieri, reflects upon the distance between the concepts and ideas put forward by legal codes (in this case even military ones) and their concrete consequences:

La giustizia degli uomini è fatta. Questioni, dubbi s'affacciano alla mente riluttante e li respingiamo con terrore perchè contaminano troppo alti principi: quelli che accettiamo ad occhi chiusi come una fede per timore di sentir fatto più duro il nostro dovere di soldati. Patria, necessità disciplina - un articolo del codice, parole che non sapevamo davvero cosa volessero dire, solo un suono per noi, morte per fucilazione, eccole chiare comprensive dinanzi allo sgagliardamento della nostra mente. Ma quei signori ad Enego, no, non sono venuti a riempirsi di polpa quelle parole della loro sentenza. Comandanti di grosso carreggio, comandanti di quartier generale, colonnelli della riserva, ufficiali dei caribinieri: ecco il tribunale.[400]

[399] Ibid., pp. 144-145.

[400] Ibid., p. 145.

It is part of officers' and soldiers' life to realize what certain words and concepts included in sentences and uttered by military justice actually mean. In spite of their commented editions of penal codes, the judges who write 'death by shooting' do not know what this actually means for both the individual being sentenced and for those in charge of ordering the shooting.

Gagliani, himself a colonel in the army and a judge in the trial, represses his doubts and substitutes them with suspension and exclamation mark. Gioja, mixes his own view on what happened with both the ordinary military view on the event and other soldiers' reactions to that, as if he were unable to distinguish among them and express clearly how he feels. Monelli expresses his frustration for being caught between two irreconcilable networks, namely the distant one represented by the broad overarching military system and the small community of the squad, by attacking the judge who pronounced the death sentence.

Writing thus becomes both an attempt to find a voice, and become a witness and, absurdly, a document revealing the ambiguity and limits of the conscious, or unconscious, act of witnessing. What emerges in several officers' writings is a difficulty to reconcile what they have abstractly studied at university or what they had been practising before the war in the military academy, with what is the new 'justice' and legal code inherent to wartime and, more specifically, the

discipline of military life.[401] The awareness of the divide engendered by this completely new warfare is implied in many writings, both by those explicitly addressing the theme of 'injustice' as a new existential condition at the frontline, and by those describing the epitomizing examples of dark moments of military justice in war as military decimations or excessive punishments.

In some cases, the legal know-how and mindset resulting from the involvement in military courts influences the responses given to the request for information, at times perceived as harassing by some officers. The following passages by Campodonico and Guerrieri (both from interventionist families) deal with the issue of writing home and can be easily compared. Here, Angelo Campodonico explicitly reproaches his parents for their constant request for news and descriptions:

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...Comincerò col domandare a mio padre quali sono le domande categoriche a cui vuole la risposta, e che in ogni lettera mi ricorda; benché io voglia soddisfarlo non mi è possibile, s'egli non mi invia una lista di tali domande a cui possa rispondere capo per capo. Io passo il mio tempo splendidamente, divido le mie cure fra le armi e le leggi, in cui sono diventato veramente perito. Non vi domando se godete buona salute perché dovete goderla per forza. I pacchi li ricevo regolarmente.[402]

[401] On the dichotomy between ordinary justice and military jurisdiction, see E. Battaglini, *Lo stato di guerra in rapporto alla giurisdizione militare e all'aggravante del tempo di guerra* in *La Procedura Penale Italiana*, No. 1, 1915, pp. 123-132.

[402] Campodonico, *Lauri*, p. 115.

What is striking about Campodonico's letter is the dryness and the detachment infused in the letter, as if it were a formal communication sent by a lawyer to a counter-party. Even the progression of arguments is reminiscent of a legal defence. Something similar is apparent in the letter sent home by Filippo Guerrieri, in which he also ventures an explicit comparison between the family and an accusing court and reinforces this idea by using legal phrases to defend himself from their accusations:

Murlins 19 April 1916 Ma a questo punto mi pare di sentirvi a gridare in coro la fatale accusa - ma perchè allora non scrivi? o perchè scrivi solo a Ferrara e a Bassano? - Via voglio giustificarmi anche da lontano; tutto quello che ho detto vale in linea generale, non si fa nulla in massima, ma alle volte arriva una fila di ordini serrati, categorici che fanno perdere la testa e fanno stancare le gambe... [403]

In the following passage, Guerrieri's understanding of the law and his contribution to the tribunal's activity, is reflected in the structure of his letter home, one which is built like a legal defence. From the legal form, he borrows both content and structure in order to describe and respond to the critiques which he imagines are directed at him by his family as a consequence of his lack of writing:

[403] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 120.

Mi sono giustificato abbastanza? Lo spero e al tribunale vostro riunito ogni sera a tavola così pronto all'accusa, chiedo un'assoluzione, non per mancanza di prove, ma per inesistenza di reato.[404]

The legal framework is adopted here to make a point about his condition in war and also to create a division of perspectives between those, like him, who live in war, and those who envisage war from home. Guerrieri mentions the fact that his family audience is constantly awaiting news and novelties; he compares them to a legal court ready to accuse him for futile reasons rather than make an effort to understand the difficulty he faces at the front. He addresses his family as if it were a court passing judgement and finally requests absolution from it. Legal language permeates this passage, as signalled by phrases as 'accuse', 'acquittal', 'lack of evidence' and ‘non-existence of the crime’.

Italy between ambivalence and 'double bind'[405]

For the officers considered in this thesis, educated and belonging to the upper-middle classes and mostly to self-mobilized interventionist families, the concept of fatherland is one they have been taught at school and have absorbed within their family and social context. Along with the national mottos of a relatively young fatherland, these officers have taken in the need to redefine their own individual identity in connection with their national commitment to defend and sustain the

[404] Ibid., p. 121.

[405] Marco Deriu, ed., *Gregory Bateson*, (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2000).

newly born nation. The clash between projected and actual identities, intended here as both collective (that of the imagined community) and as an individual identity, is explored in this section. This discord is a further challenge experienced by Italian officers at war and it is made worse by interventionist rhetoric and military communication.

If the earlier section was significant in order to suggest the process of how frustration, resentfulness and psychological displacement are elaborated, there are many other examples that bear witness to a much more complex set of feelings. These are worth investigating further and as they are directed to the nation rather than the family. The sense of injustice and betrayal experienced at war, and the somewhat ambivalent attitude which Italian institutions had towards their supposed heroes, not only emerges clearly from many writings but remained ingrained in the understanding and perceptions of many Italians long after the war.[406] Bateson's double-bind theory is particularly insightful in examining some communicative dynamics pertaining to Italy in WWI. Double bind can be explained as the communicative problem (resulting from deep emotional blocks and distortions) that lead to relational failure and to inevitable frustration. Examples of the ambivalent circle engendered within Italy during war are quite vast and involve all sorts of private writings and different kinds of observations and thoughts. This concept is explored here to show a strong connection with the sense of exasperation experienced by officers at the front line.

[406] Mario Isnenghi, ed., *I luoghi della Memoria* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2010) and Antonio Gibelli, 'Pratica della Scrittura e mutamento sociale', in *Materiali di Lavoro 1-2 1987 Per un Archivio della Scrittura popolare*, (La Grafica: Mori Tn, 1987), pp. 7-20.

Not everyone grasped the contradictions of war from the outset but some officers spoke of an ambivalent attitude on the part of Italy and came to define it as an evil mother.[407] Italy, with its government and its institutions, is perceived as an ambivalent and cruel mother asking her children to die for her while providing them with completely inadequate protection. This is the case in many letters by Giuseppe Zanivolti who describes the sacrifice and slaughter requested from soldiers as useless. He also refers to the completely inadequate treatment provided to combatants by the military system, Italian governmental institutions and the press. Explicit reference to the double standard of parenting which characterizes Italy is made by Zanivolti who refers to it as a 'madre matrigna.'/evil mother (literally: step mother). Worth noting is that not only is the mother evil but *matrigna* in Italian also means 'step mother'. It could be suggested that Zanivolti fails to recognise Italy as his real mother, and possibly as his nation. Alternatively, we could venture that such cruel behaviour could not be assigned either to a mother or to one's fatherland.

Both Guerrieri's and Zanivolti's writings present all assumptions concerning the heroic and sacred sacrifice for the fatherland, and the status soldiers and officers, as void propaganda talk which is no longer valid at war. Instead of being rewarded or celebrated as heroes for the risks they undertake, soldiers and officers are illogically exposed to machine gun fire and the harshness of trench warfare, while no attention is paid to their needs. In his letter written on 22 September 1916

[407] Zanivolti's unpublished collection.

from the hospital in Forlì, where he is recovering from a wound, Zanivolti records the phrase pronounced by his captain: 'Zanivolti, mi si spezza il cuore… Questa non è un'avanzata, è un macello'/ 'Zanivolti my heart breaks… this is not an attack, it is a slaughter'.[408] The use of the word 'slaughter' is recurrent in many disparaging letters reported in military sentences, as is the case with the following letter written by F.P.G, a 24 year-old soldier from the province of Turin, on 12 December 1917:

A proposito di quello che voi mi dite di combattere fino all'ultima stilla, questo tutto sta bene, ma capirete zio che il soldato italiano ha fatto troppo fino a ora, perché non c'è nazione che tratta il soldato male come l'Italia. Di più bisogna capire che questa ritirata non viene dal soldato. La causa è dei cani più grossi. Ora immaginate voi che amore può avere il soldato nel credere che non è una guerra di liberazione, tutto quello che si vede è un gran macello...[409]

To use a euphemism, Italy does not come out positively from this soldier's account. On a lighter note, there are also cases in which, ironically, the equipment provided by the fatherland to their soldiers is to be pointed out.[410] A relevant example is that provided by Jahier in his first notebook under the title 'Le scarpe della patria'[411] in

[408] Letter analyzed more in depth in chapter 6.

[409] Forcella and Monticone, *Plotone*, p. 259.

[410] As a counter example, see the attention directed to this issue by the British army with its routine foot inspections for soldiers, also mentioned by John Keegan *Il Volto della Battaglia*, p. 237.

[411] Jahier, *Con me e con gli Alpini*, p.33.

which he reflects upon the military boots offered by the fatherland to its beloved soldiers and heroes, footwear that is low in quality and proves to be completely inadequate. Jahier's passage compares the total inadequacy of the military boots to the high-quality shoes previously worn by mountain populations (who were then also obliged to wear the military kit). Before, these soldiers used to have great shoes that they could even pass own as secondhand shoes to someone else:

Eppoi son stati tentati dalle scarpe nuove che dà la patria. La patria - che è tanto potente - avrà preparato scarpe migliori del loro ciabattino. Ma quelli che han confidato nella patria si sono sbaglaiti; quelli che confidavano nel cibattino han fatto bene. [412]

After having described the shoes made by the cobbler as good in that they were comfortable and kept the feet dry 'Levano il piede ascutto di dentro l'onesta scarpa puntuta del montanaro'/'They take out their feet dry from the honest mountain-shoe', Jahier compares them with those provided by the military system:

La scarpe che la patria ha dato invece sono massa grame. Oh se bagnassero soltanto d'acqua! Ma mordono con gli acidi di conciatura. O se bagnassero solo quando piove! ... O se sciupassero solo i piedi! Ma sciupano le calze col tannino.

[412] Ibid., p. 33-34.

Sapete che una calza dura una marcia al soldato? Si nutre di calze la scarpa americana. [413]

This passage showcases the use of opposites "right"/"wrong" "wet"/"dry" "honest" /"bad" to highlight the contrast between the two items described. In order to do so, the syntactic structure is built around adversatives. These opposites, adversatives and exclamations, however, are not solely adopted to underline the low-quality military shoes but rather to address a much more relevant issue, namely that of the discrepancy between expectations and actual circumstances of war, between promises and facts, between hopes and delusions. In the following passage, Jahier expresses what he would like to think and say to his soldiers and what he is obliged to do instead in order to find a diplomatic way to push them to accept their actual condition:

Guardo con tristezza le scarpe della nostra potente patria: le mie e le loro, qui su questo prato d'Italia dove vorrei spiegare perché la scarpa d'Italia è la migliore. Poi dico: ragazzi sopportiamo perché è la nostra Patria. Facciamo conto di essere un po' maltrattati da nostra madre. Rimediamo col grasso rimediamo con la cura. È un po' giovane la nostra patria. Quando si è giovani pare di fare più presto a non seguire la strada. [414]

[413] Ibid., p. 34.

[414] Ibid., p. 36.

Of crucial importance here is the adverb 'then' which, as was the case with the repeated 'when' in Zanivolti's letter to his cousin, expresses a divide, which here is not only related to time. This 'then' introduces what Jahier ends up doing as a consequence of the awareness of the bad quality of military equipment, and mistreatment reserved by the fatherland to their 'sons-soldiers'. Italy is personified as a bad mother, requesting the impossible, never keeping its high and pompous promises. Jahier tries to defend her by saying she is 'young' and therefore inexperienced, and prone to making mistakes.

The passage about shoes ends with the following thought, which clearly expresses the double-bind attachment to this dear but nonetheless damned Italy: 'Cara porca Italia che coi piedi in molle vuoi farci morire! /Dear damned Italy, that wants us to die with wet feet'[415]

While Jahier, in spite of his military degree and role, explicitly hints at the unreliability of the messages sent by the government, the crown and the military system to the Italian population, and even more to those who are going to sacrifice themselves for 'fatherland', many officers do not. One example is Pasquale Gagliani (who avoids the direct critique and substitutes it with suspension) or with Campodonico, or Michelini Tocci who, infused with nationalism, direct their anger towards internal enemies but do not dare to criticize military institutions.

Even Guerrieri tells his family about the completely unsuitable uniforms given to the troops. The whole passage is built upon a brilliant use of hyperbole: the uniform is described as 'very comfortable' and it has been offered by the

[415] Ibid., p. 37.

government 'with unusually generous width'. This is a pun in that it refers sarcastically to the fact that the uniforms are, in fact, very tight and that the government clearly does not spend much on its soldiers:

(Palmanova, 20 Luglio 1915) Oggetto di risate e di divertimento è per noi ufficiali la nuova divisa che, con inconsueta e magnanima larghezza, il governo in vista di quel pochino che contiamo per lui ci ha regalata. È una comodissima, per modo di dire, divisa da soldato che deve andar bene a tutti, ai grassi e ai magri, ai piccoli e ai grandi, così che il corpo grossissimo del mio comandante di battaglione si trova rinserrato dentro un giubbino che malamente si adatterebbe ad un magro comandante di plotone e la sua testa, sproporzionata al resto del corpo, cerca invano di rifugiarsi sotto un berretto minuscolo ed una fanciullesca visiera. Vestiti in tale maniera se evitiamo molte pallottole austriache facciamo però, lontano dalle trincee, ridere molto. Così, completamente trasfigurati abbiamo l'aria di tanti coscritti timidi e paurosi, perdiamo un po' l'autorità esteriore per conservare intima la fiducia dei soldati in noi...[416]

The humour, however, does not forget to reveal the tragic condition to which men are reduced and it serves to underline it even more effectively by revealing its grotesque features. The fact of being 'transfigured' not only makes officers appear as 'newcomers' but actually seems to prevent them from getting organised and

[416] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 77.

asking for more respectful treatment. Humour and sarcasm thus act as coping mechanisms for the impossibility of protesting at this treatment.

As opposed to this, there are also some writings that present the plight of officers in a less humorous way and without such light irony. This is the case, for instance, with Carlo Emilio Gadda whose criticism towards the fatherland for the inadequate equipment provided to soldiers at war is of the utmost violence. Of further interest is the fact that, at this stage of war (1915), he excuses his troops' lack of discipline and blames the military system and the government. His writing displays a change in perspective after he is caught and taken prisoner at Caporetto. After this, his opinion on indiscipline becomes more severe, as we will see in the course of the thesis:

come scuso, io, i loro brontolamenti, la loro poca disciplina! Essi portano il vero peso della guerra, peso morale, finanziario, corporale, e sono i peggio trattati. Quanto delinquono coloro che per frode o per incuria li calzano a questo modo; se ieri avessi avuto dinnanzi un fabbricatore di calzature, l'avrei provocato a una rissa, per finirlo a coltellate... Mi auguro possano morir tisici, o di fame, o che vedano i loro figli scannati a colpi di scure. Non posso far nulla: sono ufficiale, sono per giuramento legato a un patto infrangibile di disciplina; e poi la censura mi sequestrerebbe ogni protesta. Se veniva il Semenza a trovarmi, gli consegnavo un pacco di articoli anonimi (non è una viltà l'anonimità in questo caso) a qualche

giornale democratico: poiché quest stato di cose non dovrebbe essere oltre tollerato. [417]

The complete sense of injustice witnessed by the lack of care for the men at war is ascribed by Gadda to the higher level of Italian society and of military hierarchies, blamed for their distance, negligence, and fake blindness to the problems of soldiers and to the necessities imposed by war and by combat:

Chissà quelle mucche gravide, quegli acquosi pancioni di ministri e di senatori e di direttori e di generaloni: chissà come crederanno di aver provveduto alle sorti del paese con i loro discorsi, visite al fronte, interviste, ecc. Ma guardino, ma vedano, ma pensino come è calzato il 5.º Alpini. Ma Salandra, ma quello scemo balbuziente d'un re, ma quei duchi e quei deputati che vanno a 'vedere le trincee', domandino conto a noi, a me, del come sono calzati i miei uomini.[418]

Gadda not only feels the deep injustice at the lack of attention reserved by the Italian institutions, society and military systems to the basic human needs of men at war, but also raises the central issue of shirkers. While Lussu defines them as anyone who is in a less advanced fighting position, Gadda describes shirkers as anyone who is ready to profit from war at the expense of the soldiers' lives. This issue deserves far greater analysis but this lies out of the range of the present

[417] Gadda, *Giornale*, p. 35.

[418] Ibid., p. 35.

chapter. Shirkers, which will be considered more in the depth in the chapter on Caporetto, are mentioned here in that they embody the quintessence of injustice inflicted on men at war. Gadda lists those that he considers responsible for this and, among them, we find high institutions, the upper ranks in the military system, and all those who lead and govern the country. Through his condemning remarks, he openly insults them. What is denounced by Gadda is the violation of the basic principles that guarantee the fair treatment of faithful men at arms by their fatherland.

In conclusion, the sense of disillusionment with the fatherland raises the question of the nation as an 'imagined community' which, throughout the conflict, mismatches the expectations set in pre-war time and at the outbreak of war. In most cases, this is expressed implicitly or explicitly in writing, but that does not lead to a lack of individual commitment to war.

Conclusion

Virtually all the officers considered in this thesis use their writing to address (consciously or unconsciously) the deep tensions between the constraints of the army and the nature of war and their intrinsic personal responses. More, the nature of the military system seems, to most of them, oddly removed from and ill-adapted to the actual war that they and their men face. Stating that officers think that a sense of justice and fairness is non-existent during war would be misleading. Nonetheless, it is true that many officers see injustice as a component inherent to the military system with its rigid rules, its arbitrarily granted privileges, and its

regulations imposed with little attention paid to the needs of men and to specific units. A sense of fairness still exists but it is relegated to the small military group where it has been built, brick-by-brick, through a common set of actions, experiences, and difficulties (and based on a shared language).

Neither the sense of belonging to the small military unit, perceived as a new family, nor the complaints about food shortages, military equipment and poor treatment reserved to men are specific to the Italian army in WWI as testified by the wide literature on the topic.[419] Nonetheless, reassessing the coverage of these issues in these fifteen junior officers' war writings throughout the war assumes an important role for a further understanding of both the evolution of language and mindsets in war-time and for a deeper grasp of the emotions accompanying and nurturing the sense of belonging to the smaller and broader communities and the subsequent level of adhesion to the cause of war.

Regardless of the fact, as argued by Wilcox, that other countries pay more attention to unit cohesion, even in the writings considered it is possible to detect a sense of belonging to the small group.[420] This is particularly evident in those officers who serve in the Sassari Brigade (Lussu) and in the Alpini (Monelli, Jahier and Tocci), which presented a greater homogeneity as they could be recruited

[419] Touching upon the issue of sense of belonging to the military unit is discussed in Natalie Petiteau, 'Survivors of War: French Soldiers and Veterans of the Napoleonic Armies', in Alan Forrest, Karen Hagemann and Jane Rendall, eds., *Soldiers, Citizens and Civilians Experiences and Perceptions of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1790-1820* , (Basingstoke Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 43-58.

[420] Wilcox, 'Leadership, Command Culture and organization', p. 24.

regionally. Cohesion was used as a preventive antidote by the British army whereas Italian army adopted the measure of harsh military punishments.[421] However, it is also mentioned frequently by officers such as Zanivolti, Cambini and Guerrieri, who belong to other units. More problematic is the integration described, or omitted, by volunteer officers like Stuparich or Valentini, because of ordinary conscripts' diffidence towards volunteers.

This sense of belonging to the smaller community which so strongly contrasts with the more strained sense of association with the broader community, can be observed from different perspectives. If the brief experience of Italy as a nation certainly plays a crucial role, even more relevant, and partly connected to the Italian tradition, is the fact that men have strong bonds with their smaller communities of origin. Therefore, this clear sense of belonging is recreated within the small group, even when this is not recruited regionally, that comes to share a specific set of values, opinions, and rituals, along with specific perspectives on war practices, duties and rights.

Some officers - Guerrieri and Zanivolti - condemn the unfair treatment imparted by Italy to its 'sons' and question the validity of the massive sacrifice imposed by war. Gagliani's omission reveals his emotional difficulty but this does not challenge the validity of the military cause and the righteousness of the harsh sentences emanated by the military court. For other officers, however, as Gadda, Jahier and Monelli, witnessing complete injustice results in a momentary challenge to their previous assumptions on war, but does not

[421] Ibid., p. 32.

undermine their original patriotic beliefs. Nonetheless, their own sense of powerlessness experienced within the military system and the frustration caused by the divide between actual war and its misrepresentation on the home front, leads to a deep sense of disillusion with the state, the government, and the army. More worryingly it fixes a paradoxical communication that will prove difficult to dismantle.

Chapter 5

Landscapes of war

Introduction

What makes the topic of landscape significant for the present work, regardless of whether this is evoked in positive or negative terms, humanized, or simply described as it really is, is that its presence in war writings affects its form and enables a further observation of language and communicative strategies adopted in war diaries, notebooks and epistolary exchange. Landscape, in fact, far from representing something separate from the war experience and from its re-elaboration in writing, constitutes part of both and, as such, contributes to the emergence of a new language and of new writing attitudes and styles.

This chapter thus directs attention to officers' descriptions of landscapes in war writings, to the way in which they enter the writing structure, to the characteristics they instil in it, and to the deep influence exercised upon them by the experience of war. It also examines those descriptions which concern life at the front or in the trenches, directing attention to those passages which deal with landscapes, in the rear area, and on the home front during leave or hospitalization, in the attempt to find war as a common denominator and strong influencing factor for descriptions. In so doing, different perspectives are represented and contextualized and the idealization characteristic of some officers' accounts is also

considered.[422] The word 'landscape' needs further attention in that it has to be understood here as a macro term which in its indefiniteness, includes both front and home landscapes, described in both objective and subjective ways, in their concrete and in their supposed qualities. Another, less conventional, landscape which is taken into consideration here is that pertaining to the bulk of ego-documents investigated: landscape not only enters war writings with words but also invades them with images (in the form of pictures (Lieutenant Campodonico) or drawings (Carlo Emilio Gadda and Enzo Valentini). At times it also penetrates them physically in the form of dried flowers and leaves kept as memory of a particular place (this is epitomized in Valentini's collection).

These war ego-documents[423] thus come to build another landscape — which is that of a war recorded through paper and ink — recounted, as in a *carnet de voyage*, in every possible way. Examples are the pasting of objects into diaries, and pieces of paper, pictures, and bullets taken from the battlefield.[424] The experience of landscape in war inspires new narratives to men at the front and engenders a

[422] For a broader discussion on the difference between officers' and soldiers' accounts is Massimo Quaini '"Bruti Posti" contro "Valli ridenti". La percezione del paesaggio nei soldati e negli ufficiali della Grande Guerra' in *Movimento Operaio e Socialista* 3, 1982, pp. 461-470, here p. 461.

[423] On the term and notion of ego-documents see Rudolf Dekker ed., *Ego-documents and History. Autobiographical Writing in Its Social Context since the Middle Ages* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2002) and Antonio Castillo Gómez, 'De la suscriptión a la nacesidad de escribir', in idem, ed., *La conquista del alfabeto. Escritura y clases populares*, (Gijón: Trea, 2002), pp. 21-51.

[424] Great examples of modern *carnets de voyage*/travel notebooks are available on the website dedicated to the multifaceted inspiring work by Stefano Faravelli av. at <http://www.stefanofaravelli.it/>.

specific kind of ego-document style, characterized by forms which justify a comparison between these documents and proper travel writing.

The terms 'envelopment' and 'envelope', as applied by Lars Frers as useful categories with which to describe the ambivalent and complex experience of space, are adopted in this chapter to shed further light on the encounter with landscape throughout the war experience. By 'envelopment', Frers defines that specific attitude characterizing a selective interaction with the surrounding space, whereas the term 'envelope' refers to a filter that one can, most of the time unconsciously and virtually place between himself and the outer space. These concepts (envelope and envelopment) are of interest in that they refer to the complexity of the experience of space, its nuances and oscillations over time depending on the different actual or subjective elements attached to each circumstance. Thus, this enables a deeper understanding of the experience of war.[425] Landscape is sometimes a safe envelope offering protection from war; at other times landscape is so deeply affected by war that it becomes the opposite of an envelope, therefore making exposition to war greater. Frers, however, describes the envelope as a more porous than thick, changeable rather than a constant filter, and underlines its selectivity in letting experience in or preventing its entry.[426]

With a few exceptions, this chapter mainly analyses letters. A few passages from the private records of Engineer Lieutenant Spina and Lieutenant Gadda are

[425] Lars Frers, 'Perception, Aesthetics, and Envelopment - Encountering Space and Materiality', in Lars Frers and Lars Meier, eds., *Encountering Urban Places: Visual and Material Performances in the City* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) pp. 25-45, here p. 35.

[426] Ibid., p. 35.

mentioned as they provide further insights on specific themes concerning the different kinds of representation of landscape. The volunteer soldier Enzo Valentini's collection is considered because, due to his personal interest in botany and zoology, his letters come to resemble a travel diary filled with drawings, pasted flowers and small leaves collected in the mountains during the war.[427] He also envisages his letter collections as a diary to be consulted at a later stage with his mother, which is what one would normally do with a photo album.[428] Drawings are also to be found in the notebook by Carlo Emilio Gadda in his attempt to fix his own experience of war and space on paper. Jahier is mentioned for the importance of the naming of the positions at the front whereas some passages by Engineer Lieutenant Spina are mentioned for their observation, respectively on the responsibility attributed to the weather and for the lack of life in the countryside as a result of war.

The main focus, however, remains that on landscape as a further way to bridge the divide between the home/war front, or, eventually to give an account of it. In order to develop this investigation, the rich letter collections by Giuseppe Zanivolti, Filippo Guerrieri, and that by the Vivanti family, have been investigated.[429] A particular role in this chapter is ascribed to the collection of letters by Angelo Campodonico for the appropriation of landscape which appears to

[427] Fabrizio Rasera and Camillo Zadra, eds., *Volontari Italiani nella Grande Guerra*, (Rovereto: Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra, 2008).

[428] Valentini, *Lettere*.

[429] Vivanti, *Scrivimi*.

be dominated by his overarching figure.[430] The letters by Guerrieri offer the chance to explore the physical encounter at the front where Guerrieri's father travels to visit his son, whereas the letters by Cesare Vivanti offer an insight into a father's attempt to virtually bring his son back home through a detailed description of the elements of continuity and discontinuity of life in Pavia throughout the conflict.[431] The letters by volunteer soldier, Enzo Valentini, have been considered for their perspective on the role of landscape description, which, in Valentini's case, represents both a further occasion of proximity with his maternal audience and a signalling of distance from his paternal figure. [432]

Encountering the front: men, landscape and writing[433]

Encountering places in everyday life, one engages the place with all senses, interacting with others, with the materiality, and with the atmosphere of the place.[434]

This exposure to the encounter with space is particularly evident and challenging at the front. It would be difficult to address the issue of the perception

[430] Campodonico, *Lauri*.

[431] Vivanti, *Pavia in Grigioverde. Avvenimenti e Cronache della Città negli Anni del primo Conflitto Mondiale*, (Pavia: Boerchio, 1968).

[432] Son of the interventionist mayor of Perugia, Valentini volunteered for war and was assigned to the 51th infantry regiment 'Cacciatori delle Alpi' which covered the Marmolada front where he was fatally injured by shrapnel on 22 October 1915.

[433] On the concept of 'encounter' see Joseph Clarke and John Horne, eds., *Militarized Cultural Encounters in the Long Nineteenth Century*, *Making War, Mapping Europe*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[434] Frers & Lars Meier, 'Encountering Urban Places - Visual and Material Performances in the City', in Frers and Meier, Idem, pp. 1- 5, here p. 1.

and description of landscape in war without mentioning *I Fiumi* by Giuseppe Ungaretti. His poem, in fact, seems to suggest a merging of humans with nature enabled by war and its uncommon routine of life. In the following passage, taken from the poem *I Fiumi*, Ungaretti describes not only the physical but also and more specifically, the emotional exposure which war engenders:[435]

Questo è l'Isonzo/ E qui meglio / Mi sono riconosciuto / una docile fibra / Dell'universo

If an ordinary person in a normal context told a friend or a doctor that he feels like 'a fibre of the universe', he would no doubt be considered as a potential psychotic, a highly traumatized person, someone on drugs or with a mystic delirium.[436] But war is different and life in the trenches creates a concrete and real osmosis between men in their uniforms and the surrounding ground in which they operate.[437] The role of landscape is of key importance and the descriptions pertaining to it are quite frequent. But what rhetorical devices and communicative strategies are adopted by officers and soldiers to describe the landscape of their war and the relation they have with it? The first and most important strategy that is possible to note is the personification of landscape to which a whole series of

[435] Antonio Gibelli argues that 'l'equilibrio sensoriale è rotto mentre un episodio di dissociazione interviene/the sensory balance is broken while an episode of dissociation happens' in *L'Officina della Guerra*, p. 164.

[436] Annacarla Valeriano, *Ammalò di Testa Storie del Manicomio di Teramo* (1880-1931), (Roma: Donzelli, 2014), p.161.

[437] Barbara Bracco, *La Patria Ferita* (Milano: Giunti, 2012), p. 45.

human characteristics are ascribed, such as intentionality, feelings and moods. Sites at the front line and in the rear, the so-called theatres of war, are personified, animated, charged with symbolical meaning and extra-emotional connotation in private writings. Another aspect, which is more in line with Ungaretti's poem, is the tendency to not perceive any boundaries, physical or psychological, which should exist between the individuals and their surroundings.

The fusion and identification with landscape, however, is not only experienced by individuals: there are also cases of collective identification and fusion with specific spots. This is the case, for instance, with the beloved hideouts described by Piero Jahier in his *Con me e con gli Alpini/With me and with the Alpini* mentioned in the first chapter. These, in fact, came to symbolize a whole company of Alpini and represent a sort of home and a setting for their interaction with each other and for their conduct in war.[438] If war causes displacement, men still manage to adapt to their new surroundings, but when a specific position has witnessed combat, and has been the location of their war for a longer period, leaving the site might trigger the same emotions felt during their initial separation from their home villages.[439] The separation from home is the most relevant one, but in war, under extreme circumstances, those who manage to find a new comfort zone both in a place and with a group are lucky. These people are often aware of this fortune and of how miserable they would feel if the conditions changed. For example, in the

[438] See Chapter one.

[439] Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 29.

passage by Jahier, hideouts, along with their names as new entries of a shared family lexicon, become part of the soldiers' identity.

An example of the way in which nature and the battleground enter the personal sphere is provided by Filippo Guerrieri's accounts in which the mud of the Carso is described in all its pervasiveness. Nature, in this case, is described as evil, playing a negative, almost sadistic role in witnessing, and mirroring with its red, bloodied mud, the sufferings on the battlefield. The attention to the physical qualities of the ground is due, not only to contingent military necessity but to the attention one generally has when arriving in new places and, even more so, while having to adapt to them in extreme circumstances. It would have been impossible for soldiers and officers not to note the terrain in the Carso, for two reasons. Firstly, under extreme circumstances, the level of vigilance and sensitivity is necessarily higher, and the degree of 'envelopment' studied by Frers and Meier is lower.[440] In war, this is partly due to the necessary military attention to detail and partly to the hyper-vigilance inherent in the state of alert characterizing life at the front.[441] The second reason is a practical one, namely that soldiers not only worked hard to build trenches in the soil, but also lived in those trenches; they lay wounded or died on the battlefield. It is easier to grasp and follow this argument by paying attention to the description which Filippo Guerrieri provides of this terrain. The red mud of Carso is often symbolically compared to blood, and in most cases after battles, blood and mud were actually mixed:

[440] Lars Frers and Lars Maier, Ibid, p.1.

[441] On the initial reluctance of wartime doctors to recognize war neurosis and psychosis defined 'la strana malattia/the strange illness' see Annacarla Valeriano, Ibid., p. 161.

Dolina Bari, 9 maggio1917 Il Carso però non vuol diventare bello per nulla, s'infischia della primavera e del bel tempo, rimane arido, brullo, sassoso, rossiccio, fa venire ancora i brividi anche a noi che lo conosciamo da un pezzo, figuriamoci ai novellini che arrivano mano a mano quassù! Anche noi stiamo pigliando i connotati di questa terra, stiamo diventando ruvidi e rozzi. E a Monti che si fa?[442] A quest'ora i villeggianti verranno a frotte per l'amor di dio non vi rinchiudete in casa, uscite fuori e divertitevi, che non val la pena rinserrarsi in casa solo perchè io sono in guerra.[443]

In this, as in many other descriptions, there is a continuum between the land and the human beings displaced there. The terrain emanates distinct features which are collected and ascribed to the soldiers there, who have become as rough and tough as the Carso soil. Here the fusion is more abstract and emotional; in other passages Guerrieri describes in depth the way in which the mud of Carso becomes one and the same with the soldiers' clothes and bodies, an issue which has been largely dealt with in *La Patria Ferita* by Barbara Bracco.[444] Men in the trenches experience a series of metamorphoses which provides them with physical and, consequently, emotional contact with the space around them, and to a psychological and existential state of fusion with a specific war theatre.

[442] Monti is Guerrieri's home village in the area called Lunigiana (between Liguria and Tuscany) Massa Carrara Province.

[443] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 219.

[444] Bracco, *La patria ferita,* p. 45.

Weather plays a crucial role in determining both ordinary routine and military action and in making the landscape appear different, i.e. more or less friendly and welcoming. There are some places, like the Carso, that are so strongly marked by peculiar physical features and by negative memories and 'aura' that they seem to fend off sunny weather and beautiful seasons and remain frightening. These landscapes are a disquieting contrast to the lovely weather, even when it is warm and bright. Weather often becomes a significant protagonist in these writings and, similar to the landscape, it is attributed responsibilities, merits, and all sorts of human qualities. Fog, for instance, which is typical of the area in which Guerrieri's company was working, is described as benevolent because it hides the soldiers from the enemy.[445] Fog makes it impossible to fight and forces both units to ignore each other and do something else, as if the enemy were not there. The danger lessens, and the soldiers might be able to enjoy an ordinary day, even at the frontline:

Gaiga, 4 Novembre 1916 Una specialità poi di questo fronte sono le nebbie che ci avvolgono quasi di continuo e sono una fortuna, di esse approfittiamo per uscire in pattuglia, per portare il rancio, per fare tutti i movimenti che la vita di trincea richiede, il nemico avvolto anche lui non vede, lascia vivere e vive. [446]

[445] On weather conditions in the Carso see <http://www.meteo.fvg.it/clima/clima_fvg/02_documenti_descrittivi_e_approfondimenti/01_Il_clima_del_Friuli_Venezia_Giulia/clima_fvg-divulgativo.pdf>

[446] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 187.

The mutual influence between men and places is a given in many writings. Specific positions not only, as in the case of Carso, influence moods and perceptions negatively and affect the men's morale. This is the case with the following passage taken by Lieutenant Carlo Emilio Gadda, who, on 31 August 1916 from his position near the Mount Cengio on the Asiago plateau, writes:

Oggi piove schifosamente: un'acqua fottuta, un'umidità boja, una melma del controcazzo.[447]

Then he describes his shelter:

Il mio alloggio poggia per due lati alla roccia muschiosa, da cui colano rigagnoli nella camera, per altri due è fatto di sacchi tesi su bastioni di legno che costituiscono le colonne del tempio. Il tetto, con buchi e sgocciolature è in parte di lamiera, in parte di telo e tenda: il pavimento è solcato da corsi d'acqua che ne fanno uno strato melmoso. Il suo aspetto è dato dalla figura. Esso è situato un po' fuori l'accampamento, tra le scarpe rotte, gli stronzi e i cenci degli ex-accampamenti di fanteria che gremivano queste pendici.[448]

Gadda closes his description by referring to his own sketch of it. His remarks on weather conditions are redolent of the sense of frustration resulting from life in the

[447] Gadda, *Giornale,* p. 169.

[448] Ibid., p. 169.

trenches, a sense of frustration that violently invests the weather and the surrounding space that are described as annoying and unpleasant (to say the least).

However, the opposite can also happen, meaning that the emotional condition of men could be extended in writings to the surrounding landscape which thus is personified and charged with positive emotions. This is the case in the following passage, in which the will to rest, the desire for a peaceful, even boring and ordinary day seems to pass through the trenches which lie lazily hiding in the fog, as described by Guerrieri:

Trincee della zona di quota 309 - 8 aprile 1917 Pioviggina e la linea delle trincee si perde, si nasconde nella nebbia fine, pare che anche esse siano animate oggi da un desiderio di pace, povere trincee che sanno tutta l'iniqua furia delle cannonate e tutte le tempeste. Nei ricoveri non più alti di un metro, non più larghi di due, con un soffitto impastato di avanzi di tavole, di stracci, di fango, i soldati fumano la pipa e scrivono a casa co un'aria primitiva e selvaggia che fa di essi tanti taciturni; hanno il cappotto un po' logoro ed il viso incolto, l'acqua viene giù a gocce e li bagna lentamente sino alle ossa; domani verrà il sole ed allora tutti usciranno da quelle nicchie per asciugarsi e riscaldarsi. Così da due anni la continua eguale vita di guerra![449]

In this case, the emotions and feelings of the soldiers are extended to the trenches. Thus characterized, they seem to ask for peace. The personification can be detected

[449] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 213.

by observing the verbs: the trench line gets lost and ‘hides’ itself in the fog; the trenches are said to be animated by a ‘desire’ for peace, and are described as 'poor trenches'. The trenches' wish for peace is highlighted by the fact that the separation between them becomes blurred, while through the rain and foggy weather, they try to remain concealed. With the focus on this humanized space (charged not only with human feelings but also with human intentions), Guerrieri starts describing the men in the small barracks who are trying to forget the war and the bad weather by smoking and writing. The quality of the places they inhabit have marked them both physically and emotionally, their fusion with the weather and their mood depending upon it, is signalled by the fact that the rain ‘slowly soaks them to the bones.' The syntax chosen by Guerrieri, the *crescendo* and the juxtaposition of images and descriptions seem to suggest that the soldiers' wild and primitive appearance is derived from, and influenced by, the rudimentary context in which they are forced to live and fight.

Even between war and weather there are some similarities: both bring a routine, alternating rain and sun, staying inside and outside, waiting and acting then waiting again.

In the following letter by Guerrieri, nature makes itself present to the soldiers as a constant pestering nuisance through fleas which are attracted to dirt. The passage describes the nomadic life conducted which requires soldiers and officers to focus mainly on dangers and movements from one position to another, and forces them to neglect their hygiene and appearance. But this aesthetic and physical transformation is a prelude and signals the beginning of a fusion with

nature and an increasing wildness. This is seen by the phrases 'and we go with the wind and with the water' which could mean we go in spite of wind and water but the preposition 'con' meaning 'with' signals an interaction, a sort of symbiosis: being at one with the elements. In the second to last sentence, Guerrieri compares men in their uniforms to woodmen who 'no longer know what the touch of a comb is.' The last sentence of the passage suggests, once again, a fusion with water, which covers them all and makes them shiver:

3 Luglio 1916 Mi direte che è una stranezza il trovarsi sporchi su per questi monti, e in mezzo a questo relativo freddo almeno alla notte, ma pure è così e in gran parte dipende dalla vita nomade di noi che continuamente andiamo di roccia in roccia, di picco in picco senza altra preoccupazione di quella del fucile e della baionetta. Siamo ridotti a uomini di bosco, laceri, contusi colla barba lunga di molti giorni e i capelli che non sanno più le carezze e le ricerche del pettine; e andiamo col vento e con l'acqua bagnati da capo a piedi e spesso tremanti per il freddo.[450]

The objects and contexts surrounding them seem to become their sole identity: they become the bayonet; they know only fleas, cold dirt, war, rain and mud. The immanence of the circumstances appears to be stronger than their core identity and is contrasted only by the presence of writing. This is described by Guerrieri as emanating affection, love, hope and all the feelings which families have infused in it. There is a sort of animism which characterizes Guerrieri's experience of war and

[450] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 145.

which describes places, weather and objects as being moved by a certain something.

If in the poem 'I fiumi', mentioned at the beginning of this section, Ungaretti describes the Isonzo as a river in which he, due to the extreme exposure to which war inevitably led, felt himself a ‘fibre of the universe’, in a letter written on 10 November 1917 Guerrieri calls the 'river-fibres of the universe' guilty, for having allowed the enemy passage: 'Ah questi fiumi che ingrossano quando passiamo noi e diventano magri al turno dei tedeschi!/ Ah these rivers which swell when we have to pass and fall when it's the turn of the Germans!' Given its humanized aspect, and its deep involvement and role in war, the landscape is no longer neutral and can thus be defined as an 'internal enemy'.[451] Similar to people, nature could be ambivalent, changing its attitude; one moment providing protection and the next appearing distant and forgetful, if not openly maleficent. In a passage written by Engineer Lieutenant Sebastiano Spina in his notebook entry of October 1917, nature responds to the neglect and abuse on the part of men by negating its fruits and beauty:

È questo il secondo autunno che io trascorro in zona di guerra. La campagna che non ha conosciuto il biondeggiare delle messi, non ci arreca i doni dei grappoli dorati e dagli acini [my guess] zuccherini [replaced with 'saporiti']), la guerra con la sua distruzione, e le sue stragi, ha sconvolto la vigna, sradicato gli alberi che han servito a riscaldarci nel lungo e rigido inverno, resa infeconda la terra che si

[451] See the entry 'nemico alle spalle' by Panzini reported in the appendix.

insterilisce sotto il calpestio dei fanti e dei cavalli e i fuochi degli accampamenti, gli scoppi delle granate. [452]

Further insights on the mutual influence between men and nature in war are provided by the following passage in which Lieutenant Guerrieri describes the extent to which the front impacts the way that men behave and perceive themselves. The Val D'Assa is described in its ambivalence, both as a vantage-point for them but also for the Austro-Hungarian counterparts. All in all, the nature of this front, according to Filippo, transforms the men from soldiers into 'watchdogs':

Trincee da Cima Arde a Capitello del riparo É questo il miglior fronte del Trentino, dove le perdite sono minime e le fatiche sopportabili, dove ogni cosa è almeno tollerabile, dominiamo la Val D'Assa da ottime posizioni sul ciglio della valle che sprofonda giù a picco tutta rocce e precipizi che mettono le vertigini e fanno scorrere un brivido per le ossa, dall'altra parte con una uguale sicurezza dominando altri burroni vegliano gli austriaci, ci guardiamo gli uni cogli altri, ma non possiamo farci nulla di male, la valle orribile ci separa e ci rende e ci trasforma in cani da guardia... [453]

The same hideouts which could be described as safe, and the benevolent rocks dear to the Alpini might be maleficent actors when taken by the enemy, and are

[452] Engineer Lieutenant Sebastiano Spina, manuscript notebook.

[453] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, pp- 168-169.

transformed into agents participating in the enemy attack. If rocks become a strategic tool of mountain combat, and an intrinsic and determining aspect of battle, the fusion with nature is still present, as the common faith to which both trees and men are destined. Rocks falling from high above could sweep them away. War on the mountains represents an encounter between the industrial aspects of war fabricated by men (explosions, artillery, etc.) and natural elements which become militarized (rocks, hideouts which become weapons and trenches, etc.). Guerrieri reflects frequently upon war in the mountains:

In Italy, the conflict on the Austro-Italian front has been often described as the 'white war' (guerra bianca). The colour here immediately evokes the snow in the Alps, where the fighting took place. The uniqueness of this operational environment is also conveyed by referring to its spatial verticality... significantly, the image of the 'white war' is popularly used as a synecdoche for the whole theatre, including the plains and low-lands where snow did not fall, demonstrating the power of landscape to shape popular perceptions of war.[454]

The use of a synecdoche to define a kind of war and a section of the front is of the utmost interest here as it provides further evidence of the strict connection

[454] Selena Daly, Martina Salvante and Wanda Wilcox, 'Landscapes of War: a Fertile Terrain for First World War Scholarship', in Selena Daly, Martina Salvante and Wanda Wilcox, eds., *Landscapes of the First World War*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 1-15, here p. 3.

between language and the war experience, between perception and the representation of war that lies at the core of the present thesis:

Pendici di M. Cimone, 30 giugno 1916 La guerra su questi ermi picchi di monti, fatta ad altezze inverosimili, acquista un carattere tutto suo proprio speciale, una delle caratteristiche principali è lo sforzo fisico che richiede per l'incessante salire su per strade impraticabili dove perfino i muli a metà si fermano e tornano indietro. E quando si arriva in cima sudati, affaticati, con le gambe che non reggono più e gli occhi si chiudono per il sonno troppo dimenticato ecco che comincia la fase terribile del combattimento. In cima si è arrivati, ma vi sono ancora le rocce unite ardite minacciose da espugnare, sono macigni, massi quadrati di dura pietra che il nemico vi lancerà da lassù a forza di leve e di mine che scendono con rumore assordante, trascinando tutto per via uomini ed alberi. É una difesa che costa poco agli austriaci e che reca a noi molto danno e molta rabbia, ai macigni unite la fucileria e l'artiglieria che concentra il fuoco nella gola del monte e voi avrete una pallida idea di ciò che siamo costretti a subire e a superare. [455]

In between: moving to and from the front

This section focuses on war as a journey and on its description in letters as a form of travel writing or travel reportage. The letter that has been selected to introduce this relation with the home-front landscape is one sent in 1916 by Giuseppe Zanivolti. In it he explicitly expresses his will to get to know Italy, a need that arose

[455] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 143.

during the war, not only because war caused his displacement and led him to see new places, but also, and most importantly, because of the sacrifices requested by Italy. After having wondered what Forlì might be like, Zanivolti describes the hills which he sees from the window of the hospital in which he is recovering in quarantine. Having great memories of his journey and the experiences which led him to see other cities (such as Venice) on his way to the front, he tries to make the most of his ill-health:

Forlì 22 settembre 1916 Carissimi, sono arrivato stamane in questa città. Veramente non so se sia bella o brutta. Guardando dalla finestra della mia camera, osservo delle amene collinette, dove un sole ridente scherza sui pampini d'oro. La città non l'ho ancor vista. Per sei giorni son rinchiuso all'ospedale in contumacia, passati i quali potrò uscire. Se m'è concesso cambiar ospedale sceglierò Napoli o Roma: voglio vedere un po' questa benedetta Italia, per cui si fanno i massimi sacrifici.

Since passages never exist in isolation but should always be considered in light of the context of the letter (and of the wider collection), it is worth mentioning here the ironic use of the adjective 'benedetta'/'blessed' attributed to Italy. This becomes clearer while reading the rest of the letter where Zanivolti explains how and why he ended up in hospital after having been wounded in a battle. Reporting the exclamations of other men in his company, among which his captain says, 'Zanivolti my heart breaks! This is not an advance, it is a slaughter', he manages to

describe how absurd the disregard for human lives is in the way in which war is carried out, thus making the phrase 'this blessed Italy' appear even more incompatible with the rest of the account. Of particular interest here is the fact that Italy becomes 'something' one would like to know about because of the effort and sacrifice it requires. Without them, Italy as a notion appears to be too weak to attract attention, thus reinforcing the assumption that, before the war, Italians would feel a sense of belonging to their smaller local dimensions, such as villages of origin, regions and valleys.

In another letter from 1916, Zanivolti openly describes his journey from Novara to Udine, where he was supposed to have gone with his soldiers:

Udine, 18 July 1916 Carissimi, non saprei come descrivervi il mio viaggio. Mi pare di avervi detto che a Novara avevo perduto il treno che portava i miei soldati. Ho preso allora il treno delle 11 che andava a Milano. Ivi mi fermai un'ora: feci colazione e partii alle 13 e 20.[456] Dovevo raggiungere il treno 7647. A Brescia mi si dice che quel treno era ancora a Milano. Proseguo per Verona, dove cerco informazioni, ma non mi sanno dir nulla. Allora decido di recarmi a passar la notte a Venezia e raggiungere Udine con mio comodo verso il mattino. A Peschiera passai presso il lago di Garda. Mi posi al finestrino a contemplare l'azzurro dolce del bel lago veneto, che andava a nascondersi dietro le falde del monte Baldo. Slanciata come una piccola gondola sorrideva al sole la punta di Sirmione, che avevo sognato

[456] From the oral interview conducted with Zanivolti's relatives I learnt that Pepino Zanivolti was known for his love of a late breakfast, a habit inherited and maintained by his daughter Giuliana until she was in good health.

leggendo i versi di Catullo. A Vicenza una salva di batterie antiaeree contro un velivolo austriaco, mi avvertiva che per me cominciava una vita nuova, o meglio la vita di un anno fa. Arrivai a Venezia alle 21. La laguna, lievemente increspata dallo zeffiro vespertino, s'addormentava placida agli ultimi sprazzi di luce del giorno. Venezia mi pareva sorridesse di gioia nel tripudio del popolo affacciato ai balconi, formicolante pei calli, nella brezza fresca che spirava per Canal Grande. Il vaporino scivolava leggero leggero come un sogno. Seduto sulla panchina respiravo a larghi polmoni, sorridente tutta quella festività, tutta la purezza profumata che spirava dai gerani fioriti delle finestre ogivali. E vidi la piazza di San Marco e il Ponte di Rialto. Mi pareva di sognare. Alla 1 lasciai Venezia. Arrivai a Udine stamane alle 6, dove tuttora mi trovo annoiato aspettando quel treno che pare non arrivi più. Mi sento morir dal sonno. Pepino

Having foolishly missed the train, Zanivolti tells his parents how he decides to profit from his solitude to enjoy the journey and contemplate the cities and places the train passes through. In Venice he even has time for a short walk before leaving for Udine. Freedom is the feeling infusing his writing until the re-establishment of military rule, routine and boredom which imprison him when he gets to Udine, and he finds himself awaiting a train which will take him to the front. The landscape here is displayed as if on a screen, and its beauty and peculiar nuances become a means to express a series of emotions in relation to the encounter with them. As is typical of all travel writing, the views and encounters described are never external and objective, but represent rather an occasion to express, between the lines, a

series of personal developments, changes and evolutions which are more likely to come to the surface while travelling. The places encountered underline his sense of freedom, first with their lyricism, as is the case with Peschiera on Lake Garda after sunset, which reminds him of certain verses by Catullus. Then Vicenza, which, with its anti-aircraft batteries, reminds him of the harshness which he will be forced to face in a few hours. Finally Venice, where he decides to spend the night and procrastinate a little before his arrival at the front line. Venice looks sleepy, as he does after a long trip, but it also looks cheerful with everyone out on balconies, as if welcoming him with a smile. This trip to Venice is like a sigh of relief for Zanivolti, who savours the extra time away from the front.

All those places, in fact, are filtered with war in mind. It is exactly because of war that the vision of Venice appears so similar to a daydream and is described as such. The dream of Venice is not only that of beauty and calm, but that of the complete absence of war. This dreamlike atmosphere is signalled in the words and adjectives attributed to the city. Epitomizing this atmosphere is the description of the first sight of the lagoon upon his arrival: 'she was calmly falling asleep in the last rays of the sun.' 'The steamboat' for instance, 'was gliding on water light as a dream', and when he finally catches sight of San Marco from the water he writes 'I felt like I was dreaming.' Being a dream, it had to come to an end and it does in the last lines of the letter. As in a real dream, Pepino has the chance to realize that this is not real, but, like a lazy child enjoying the unreal pleasantness, he would like to turn around and stay under the duvet a little longer. But his train wakes him up and at 1 o'clock his dream ends. The surreal steamboat becomes a military train that

arrives to take him away from his beloved Venice. The beauty gives way to more factual details, and in an abrupt awakening at 6 a.m., Pepino finds himself in Udine waiting for his train, which is too close to the warzone for daydreaming. He is then reintroduced to his life as a soldier, as he was in Vicenza.

The circular structure of his letter is worth highlighting. It starts factually before Zanivolti recounts getting willingly lost in time and space and forgetting all about war. It then closes with a cold, hard return to his actual life during war. In Vicenza he is warned of the new life he was encountering, but then, reflecting a little more, he realizes that this life was not completely new to him: it was something he had experienced a year before. The journey is short but is able to engender a suspension which is intense enough to allow him to forget about war, rules, combat and duties. Significant is the fact that numbers and time resurface in the letter once he leaves Venice and when his daydream of this peaceful lagoon city is over.

The warzone landscape, however, not only appears to be a protagonist of many letters, as even the places encountered while travelling to the front line or during periods of leave are frequently covered in officers' writings. Areas on the home front are observed with different eyes throughout the conflict. They might be unconsciously compared with the places at the front, and, as a result, their calm and beauty might be emphasized either positively, as desirable qualities, or negatively, as a further inacceptable sign of the distance between the home front and the problems of men at war. In some cases, the places described have that lovely taste that only inaccessible things retain. Zanivolti delays his arrival at the

front more than once, as is the case with his letters dated 18 July 1916 and 7 December 1916. Something similar is even to be found in a letter written by Lieutenant Campodonico on 26 August 1915:

Sono sempre in viaggio verso il fronte, perché, come succede in questi tempi, le coincidenze dei treni non sono regolari. Ci siamo fermati mezza giornta a Venezia, - siamo circa in 40 - e abbiamo visitato la città: molto bella. Avrete ricevuto una cartolina colla mia fotografia in piazza S. Marco; abbiamo girato in gondola, la laguna. Siamo andati al Lido.[457]

While describing how, along with forty other men, he visited Venice before reaching the line, Campodonico feels the need to ascribe his delayed arrival at the front to the poor punctuality of the trains and to highlight that he profited from that with other colleagues. These snippets of information are meant to avert any criticism on the part of his family, but also on the part of his own super-ego reminding him of his sense of duty.

Similar to the way in which military positions can be perceived as either maleficent or benevolent spots depending on the progress of war, even landscape on the home front can absorb and reflect a whole set of energies and emotions depending on whether it is encountered in a moment characterized by dark forecasts or optimistic views. As described in a letter written on 7 December 1916, Zanivolti is travelling to the front. This time he is returning there after a long period

[457] Campodonico, *Lauri*, p. 63.

of recovery. He is first treated at the hospital of Forlì for a wound sustained in September on Mount Veliki and then assigned, until he has completely recovered, to the 18th department gunfire in Turin. That the landscape is not a given and does not always underline or communicate the same set of emotions is clear if one compares Zanivolti's description of Vicenza, Sirmione, and Lake Garda in the letter of July 1916, analysed above, with the following dating to December 1916. On his way back to the front after his recovery in Turin, Zanivolti openly mentions the different 'aura' that the landscape has this time. This is partly due to his unwillingness to go back to the front and to the fact that he thought he would be granted a longer convalescence in Turin. Instead, he is required to substitute another officer who did not show up.[458] Worthy of note is not only that the same places are marked by different characteristics, but also that, in spite of the huge number of letters he sent from July to December, Zanivolti is completely aware, and has a clear memory of, what he thought of those places earlier on, and of what he wrote about them in his letter home. This should be interpreted in light of the aforementioned concept of 'envelopment' in the encounter with places, but it also directs further attention to the important bond between experience and its re-elaboration in writing. In the letter written in December, in spite of the 'envelope' constructed through aesthetics, the mountains take on a sinister aspect and breach Zanivolti's 'envelope', reminding him of life at war.[459] The moment of sharing experiences and encounters in letters emerges as a vital moment not only in that it

[458] Zanivolti laments this circumstance in a letter written on 1 December 1916.

[459] Frers, 'Perception', p. 35.

represents a chance to communicate with loved ones, but also, and most importantly, in that it fixes memories in words:

Vicenza, 7. 12. 16 Carissimi, son giunto ora a Vicenza. Piove, c'è un buio pesto. Avrei voluto proseguire per Schio, ma sono stanco e pien di sonno: prenderò il treno alle 8,20 domattina. Il viaggio finora m'è stato più una gita di piacere che una partenza: rividi il lago di Garda con la sua bella punta di Sirmione, ma era fosco con molta nebbia: non aveva il fascino del luglio scorso. In fondo, come un'apparizione si delineavano i monti bianchi del Trentino. Li guardai prima un po' pensieroso, poi sorrisi, come se là qualcuno m'attendesse pe farmi passare un soggiorno incantevole fra la ridda della tormenta e gli antri delle fate. Sento un piacere inesprimibile di passare Natale fra i ghiacciai e le nevi, in alto, in un'aria pura e leggera, col sogno dei ricordi puerili, la visione della leggenda e l'eco delle campane sperduta nella poesia della notte fra le valli bianche…Quando sarò giunto vi scriverò, se il freddo non me lo impedirà. La valigetta l'ho lasciata a casa dello zio Angelo. Mi spiacque di non aver potuto vedere Mario e salutarlo. Sarà per l'anno venturo. Vi saluto e v'abbraccio. Vado a fare una passeggiatina per le vie deserte di Vicenza. Speriamo che stanotte non mi disturbino gli aeroplani. Vi bacio. Pepino

Also of interest is the letter, sent on 8 December 1916 from Valle dei Signori, as Zanivolti states explicitly his will to relax in a quiet area, savouring life before going back to the front at Mount Pasubio:[460]

Avventurarmi in un viaggio pericoloso e pieno di insidie per giungere sul posto a notte inoltrata, non conveniva. Ho pensato allora che un buon lettino in una cameretta ben chiusa non m'vrebbe fatto male e tornai a Valli dei signori. È un bel paesello, quasi pittoresco, molto tranquillo. È abitato e con parecchi alberghi. Il mio si chiama 'Albergo al Sole'.[461]

The impact of war on natural and civilian space

At times, the experience of space and the observation of landscape represent such a vivid experience that they cannot be omitted in private writings. The metamorphosis experienced by nature, and even more by villages, throughout the conflict shows resonances with the metamorphosis experienced by men at war. Therefore, the sight of a ruined village is often described as particularly painful in letters and diaries. Even though an in-depth analysis of this topic lies out of the scope of this chapter, a few works should be mentioned here as they offer fruitful perspectives with which to explore the several passages included here. The contribution by Antonella Tarpino offers a further methodological angle as it

[460] On soldiers' and officers' unwillingness to go back to the front after hospitalization and recovery see Edgar Jones, 'The Psychology of Killing: The Combat Experience of British Soldiers during the First World War', in *Journal of Contemporary History* 2006 No 41(2), pp. 229-246, here p. 235.

[461] See Zanivolti's postcard from Valle dei Signori in the appendix.

explores the almost osmotic connection existing between people and landscapes. Most of the time, the landscape mirrors the transition and change enacted by, or investing, people. It thus becomes a witness of war as, proposed by Emanuelle Danchin.[462] Even though the diachronic dimension is crucial while addressing the theme of ruins, in the present chapter the synchronic interaction with space and landscape prevails. Worth mentioning, as far as ruins are concerned, is the idea that remnants of war signal traumatic transitions as opposed to slow transformation. If Emanuelle Danchin speaks of postcards offering 'views of a topography of ruins' as a ' source of witness' of war destruction, one could argue that the sight of ruins, abandoned houses and villages act, for those encountering them during the conflict, as a synchronic witness able to recount what is unfolding. Ruins carry the weight of what has happened, of what is still going on, and project a far from reassuring view on future outcomes.[463] As such, their sight is, most of the time, unbearable for soldiers and officers who reflect upon them in letters and diaries.

Furthermore, landscape and its representation in writing become a means of explicit evasion from the contingency of military life, as in the following letter in which Zanivolti puts into words the contemplation of the landscape he sees on the Asiago plateau:[464]

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[462] Emanuelle Danchin, *Le temps des ruines (1914-1921)*, (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015), p. 19.

[463] Emanuelle Danchin, 'La carte postale de ruines support mémoriel des destructions de la Grande Guerre' in Nadège Mariotti et Marie-France Paquin, eds., *Les images de la Grande Guerre à l'épreuve du temps*, actes du colloque de Saint-Remy-la-Calonne des 15-16 Mai 2013, (Suresnes: Les éditions du net, 2015), pp. 57-65.

[464] Sent to his parents on 24 June 1917 from Villa del Brun.

Mi si apriva il cuore. Quel sorriso di natura cancellava per il momento in me un mondo di rose crucciose di ricordi pieni di tedio e di stanchezza.

The exchange with the natural theatre that is nature has incredible powers such as that of alleviating the worries related to life at war, which is once again described by adopting a physical metaphor such as a 'world of distressing roses'. As was the case with the letter describing the evasion of his duty through sightseeing in Venice, even here the experience of space and nature is able to remind him of a life other than that of war, and enables him to understand another time, the huge divides that separate life at war and in peacetime:

Pareva di ritornare a un'altra vita. Oh come è diversa la guerra dalla vita comune! Là ci sono semplicemente gli abeti oscuri, qualche fiore disperso e alcuni uccellini che ci dicono che la natura esiste, ma sono diversi anche essi, di una specie direi quasi affatto mutata. Il fringuello canta sempre quella sua frase monotona, a cadenza, come una nenia cantata sulle culle ed ora ripetuta sulle tombe...

These two lifestyles are described as different landscapes: war is a landscape where one would only find a certain kind of tree, namely firs, (it is not accidental that in all seasons they are same dark colour, and that their leaves are sharp), some flowers and a few birds can be found to remind the reader that nature still exists. However, it is different; transformed. The birds sing in a uniform way, always with the same

rhythm, like a monotonous tune repeated over and over from the cradle to the grave. The key of this passage is once again hidden in the phrase 'it seemed.' The protagonist is not in another life, he is not far from war, it is only a moment, an impression, something that will eventually pass. Even if only for a short time, how nice it is, the snapshot and view of the Altipiano. It seems so beautiful that it appears to be void of war:

Ma la vista che si gode dell'Altipiano è più vasta, quasi infinita e sfuma in una nebbia azzurra del mare a sinistra e in una distesa che ha dell'infinito di fronte a destra. Il Tagliamento, il Brenta, l'Astico sepeggiano in strisce bianche tra il verde oscuro delle macchie, il giallognolo dei prati e il biondo delle messi mature.

Even in this letter there is an abrupt change in tone when he begins answering his parents' questions. The image of the graves is followed by ellipses; he goes on to write 'I have presented the request: hopefully it will be accepted'. It is a rather interesting caesura, as it returns from a daydream and immersion in landscape to the more down-to-earth and frustrating aspect of military life, namely the bureaucracy accompanying all recognitions of degrees and career promotions. This, however, seems to be what interests his parents, and as soon as he realizes this, he changes tone and after providing the required answer he abruptly ends the letter.

The pervasiveness and vivaciousness of Zanivolti's descriptions of places is at the centre of another letter sent to Maria (his sister), in which he opposes the pleasant aspects with the immanence of war and its consequences on the places

and people encountered.[465] While describing it he also places himself in the process of moving from one place to another, and, as if recording with a camera, he attempts to describe the details and the angles which he spots along the way in combination with his personal perceptions and particular visions of them. The will to share his experiences of place induces him to include details pertaining to various senses. The scent of local women returning from church and the smell of incense is recorded. In the same letter, he describes a village called Sasso, where he is supposed to stay. What is most striking in his description is the impact of war in the form of the military presence in the village, one which appears half-destroyed, abandoned and neglected. Pepino does not fail to recognize that his own soldiers are responsible for this state of ruin. The tough face of war has affected and contaminated villages which were once home to civilians. His thoughts then go out to those who will one day go back to those houses and find them damaged and violated:

Mi ha fatto male quella vista. Chissà quante famiglie sogneranno la loro casetta abbandonata per forza in momenti tristi, pieni di angoscia. Avevano seppellito un po' di roba, il rame e qualche oggetto caro, non potendo portare tutto con loro: ma anche quelle care memorie, che racchiudevano tanti segreti, che avevano una storia di lunghe tradizioni, di persone succedutesi nell'oscuro con tanti ricordi d'affetto, furono dissepolte, rovinate. 'L'altro giorno' mi diceva un soldato 'ci fu qui il proprietario con due ragazze a visitare quella casa. Hanno pianto.' Anch'io mi

[465] Written from war zone on 26 May 1917.

sentivo il cuore gonfio, per quel dolce senso di affetto, che ci lega a tutto ciò che ci ha visto nascere e crescere, che ci ricorda il mondo bello dei nostri primi anni.

Even here the damage is never purely external, as if touching houses and objects, stealing or damaging them means violating and destroying family history. War impacts on landscape as it impacts on family history, on individual bonds to things and on the memories of happiness or sadness that they used to keep safe.[466] Zanivolti's eye touches upon landscapes, houses, and objects, describing them as emanating emotions, telling stories, and storing memories. This is a common denominator for many descriptions (as is the case with Zanivolti and Guerrieri) and thus needs to be taken into consideration. Apart from a certain sensitivity that could have been a characteristic of these men prior to the war, and which is not deeply connected with WWI, based on a number of sources observed it is possible to argue that it is war that led them to have such an eye for nature. It is war that makes them look at nature so attentively, leading them to such detailed observations. This emerges from a few practices intrinsic to military life: first of all, that detail can be a vital thing to be considered, and, secondly, that hyper-vigilance was a necessary attribute for a good soldier. Moreover, hyper-vigilance could also be seen as a result of the stressful experiences the officers are exposed to. This does not mean that they suffered from anything clinically diagnosed but rather that war and its traumatizing nature made hyper-vigilance a regular condition for those

[466] On bond between places and memories, between physical milieu and diachronically layered identities, see the Antonella Tarpino, *Geografie della Memoria, Case, Rovine, Oggetti quotidiani* (Torino: Einaudi, 2008).

involved, as one can detect by browsing through many war writings. This heightened sensitivity is both detectable in the attention to tiny details and also in the exaggerated empathy with which these writers perceive both human beings and objects.[467]

Some descriptions record the total absence of war from the home front as an annoying and even disturbing element. This is the case with several letters sent by Guerrieri from Salsomaggiore.[468] Even though the descriptions resemble travel writing in some aspects they do not fail to mention the perception of the home front by someone who has experienced war. Salsomaggiore is observed and described by Guerrieri during his time of recovery from injury. The following passage provides an example of how different the description of the urban landscape is, and of the way in which information is given as a response to the curiosity of parents who want to know more about this famous holiday destination. In the first passage, he compares it to the villages of Liguria, saying that it is similar but with no sea or pine trees; meaning similar but less attractive. The richness of the place (especially when perceived by someone who has slept in trenches until recently) appears to be one of the most relevant traits of this place, which is marked by a social life, luxury and entertainment of all kinds:

Salsomaggiore, 11 agosto 1917 Salsomaggiore è bello ma lo credevo di più data tutta la reclame fattagli intorno, ad ogni modo c'è il mezzo di passare il tempo ed

[467] Gibelli, *L'Officina della Guerra*, p. 164.

[468] Salsomaggiore is situated in a thermal area in Emilia Romagna and has always been a famous holiday destination.

anche divertirsi: musica, caffè, passeggio è tutto uno sfarzo ed un lusso incantevole. Poi c'è il teatro ed è sempre, ogni sera, aperto ed affollato, quando si è stanchi si va lì, arriva così l'ora di andare a dormire... Bellezze naturali del luogo nessuna, è un paese come tutti gli altri senonchè le case sono elegantissime, moderne con giardini e fiori, gli alberghi molti e di lusso, fate conto di vedere un paese di riviera ma senza mare, senza pini; a qualcuno può anche non piacere.[469]

The different aspects of this place are noted in this letter; the social aspects are given particular attention as they seem to be the main reason why people go to Salsomaggiore, which does not have any attractive landscapes or natural beauty to offer to its visitors. As mentioned in the passage above, people come from different places and seem to enjoy the diversity offered by the city:

Salsomaggiore, 13 agosto 1917 Salsomaggiore è un paese stranissimo, basta una serata passata al caffè per passarlo tutto quanto in rassegna. Gente d'ogni paese e d'ogni colore venuta da vicino e da lontano, credo assai più per divertirsi che per curarsi; i bagni sono una piccola scusa per tutti questi signori che non sanno come spendere il denaro e come ammazzare il tempo. Al caffè facciamo i grandi anche noi e con una piccola spesa assumiamo arie e pose da miliardari, poi le ferite riportate sono un ottimo passaporto, chi ci guarda con curiosità, il paese è piccolo, chi ci domanda della guerra, tutti desiderano sapere quando finirà.[470]

[469] Guerrieri, *Lettere dalla Trincea* , p. 229.

[470] Ibid. p. 230.

The only concern of the rich tourists visiting Salsomaggiore is to keep amusing themselves and not think of war. Even when they ask about it, it is to know when it will finally come to an end. Guerrieri, along with his mates, tries to enjoy this period removed in time and space in this Salsomaggiore which appears to be suspended and distant from the real.

Sharing landscapes

The previous sections have dealt with the descriptions of landscapes, both in war zones and on the home front, as a means through which to represent war displacement to family audiences. The particular circumstances of war, and the resulting frustration experienced while failing to communicate it to families back home, become clear while simply browsing through the samples of sources considered. This is especially true of epistolary exchanges, where the attempt to overcome the divide, both physically and psychologically, between war and home is clear to see. As explored in the previous section, periods of leave and convalescence, of course, retain a crucial role given that both provide the chance to either go back home or enjoy time in a quiet location, possibly far from the front line. However, if these experiences remove soldiers and officers from their daily routine, given that war has come to be ingrained in their understanding and attitudes, the remoteness of war and the cheerful atmosphere of the home front frequently creates more problems for the members of the military rather than provide them some relief.

In this section, a particular form of description will be addressed, namely the description of a shared war landscape. The circumstance considered here is that in which, for a fortunate set of coincidences, the war landscape could actually be shared, even only for a limited span of time, by officers with one of their loved ones. As the family remains the most important audience for many officers, the experience of sharing with a family member such an unusual landscape of experience, such as that of a war zone, retains a great importance. The occasional visit to the front line of a loved person, be it a father, a brother, a very close relative or friend, is an exceptionally exciting episode, and is thus surrounded by a special 'aura' when recorded by young, junior officers in their writings. What is exceptional about this is that the dichotomy engendered by war is somehow overcome by being visited at the front line. These visits offer officers a chance to interact with someone from their core relational milieu while remaining focused on their military duty. The soldiers thus continue to live in the war zones where they are displaced, and are surrounded by their new military family, but, added to that, they have the chance to host a loved one and show him (generally it is males who visit the front line) some aspects of their military life. An example of this routine-sharing is offered by the letter sent by Filippo Guerrieri to his mother in which he enthusiastically describes his father dining with him and his military fellows at the canteen:[471]

Costa di sotto, 30 luglio 1916 Carissima Mamma, Scrivo anche a te oggi per dirti la gioia di avere riveduto il Babbo, qui, proprio qui, dove tanto ho sofferto e dove

[471] Ibid., pp. 162-164.

ancora scoppiano le granate poco simpatiche degli antipatici austriaci. Credevo che subisse un'impressione più forte, è rimasto tranquillissimo anche quando qualche colpo si è venuto a sfogare vicino ferendo un soldato, peccato che non sia militare anche lui. Gli ho fatto vedere tutto, le posizioni nostre e le nemiche, i monti tanto contesi li ha toccati e calcati, ha visitato e percorso le trincee nostre e quelle austriache, rovine sopra rovine, ma non gli ho scorto negli occhi nessun segno di sgomento, di meraviglia, e come si può non rimanerne meravigliati. Gli sono piaciuti i razzi illuminanti ed è rimasto tutta la notte alla finestra del mio palazzo osservando con occhio indagatore ciò che succedeva, due granate gli sono passate sopra rombando, io dormivo per la stanchezza, ma di tanto in tanto per abitudine ormai presa mi svegliavo ed allora vedevo lui dritto con la testa fuori dalla finestra. La devastazione dei paesi, le case diroccate, ogni cosa bella e brutta ha, direi, goduto. È rimasto con me molto tempo.

The gap existing between the home and war fronts is finally overcome, this time not through the invention of a new hybridized family lexicon, the detailed description of the front line, or through the use of literary echoes of mutual understanding. This time the spatial (but also chronological border) separating war from calm has been breached. This is a memorable experience and, as such, plays a crucial role that Guerrieri celebrates in his letter. The nature of affection shines brightly while represented at the front line: the encounters remain vivid in the memory of those who experience them, encouraging officers to continue accomplishing their duty with more strength, courage and pride because of the visit

they received. On the one hand, receiving a visit from someone they know and being held in high consideration, pushes them to employ all their good qualities to face war and make themselves and their parents proud of their efforts and achievements. For many officers, war is, first of all, a matter of duty and personal (and thus also family) prestige. This is especially so for those officers who joined the war influenced by their family's interventionist attitude. This aspect is quite important both for their morale and for their commitment to war. It is possible to say that some officers (as well as soldiers) went to war not because they were obliged to but also as they wanted to make their parents proud and thus want to reinforce and project an image of success, goodwill, honour and other key qualities, as already investigated in the chapter on family communication. When fathers visit the front line, this suddenly offers their sons a chance to show what they are up to, to display the incredible enterprises and daily difficulties that they face. They show how brave they are, this time not through writing but by presenting themselves in their new military life. Moreover, in the case of Guerrieri, the sacrifices that his father made, the struggles he managed to overcome to join him at the front, are a further matter of pride and respect (recognized also by his military family) and reinforce those values and ideals infused in him by his own family:

Il fatto di avere il Babbo così vicino mi ha talmente impressionato che, direi, vivo ancora adesso quasi come in sogno non credendo a tanto. Non so come abbia potuto far tanto, come sia riuscito a venir qui dove *nessuno* può arrivare, certo deve aver molto faticato e lavorato. Gli ufficiali del battagione lo hanno accolto molto

gentilmente, gli hanno offerto tutto quello che avevano e siccome qui non si è ricchi di notizie, l'hanno coperto di informazioni, anche il Colonnello l'ha ricevuto e questa è una stranezza, perchè il mio *massimo* superiore è solitamente terribile e di malo umore. Vorrei sapere il santo che protegge il Babbo e qual preghiera speciale ha recitato.

Of interest is also the fact that he answers specific questions uttered by his mother, as her inquiry about whether he gave his father some private writings and souvenirs from war that she could keep safe (and of course read) at home:

Non gli ho potuto dare molti ricordi di guerra, ne avevo tanti, ma poi con la stessa facilità con cui li ho raccolti, li ho anche rilasciati per via, io ho sempre odiato i pacchi, specie ora sono un tormento, eppoi chi immaginava che sarebbe potuto venirseli a prendere lui in persona? L'ho accompagnato sino al camion che lo deve condurre a Thiene, anche in questo ha avuto fortuna, se ne farà una bella gita in automobile e passerà anche lui il suo quarto d'ora eroico. Ma non è tutto qui, ne vuoi una di più? Proprio stamattina mentre si parlava con quel rincrescimento della sua partenza è arrivato l'ordine di andare ancora indietro a riposo.

The letter then changes focus and presents a short 'dissertation' on gender in war time which is, in fact, an attempt to explain why it would be impossible for her, as a woman, to visit the front. Filippo reassures the motherly audience that she too, through this writing, can be part of the experience. The detailed description

provided thus becomes an attempt to bring her to the front and show her how brave her son and her husband are, how well they coped together in those difficult circumstances, what huge affection they both have for her, and out of which serious motivations they thought it would have been unthinkable for her to visit the front:

è il colmo Mamma, che le donne non possano venire non è una trovata per farti rimanere a casa, ma è la verità, saresti più volte svenuta e non saresti mai arrivata; qui le gonnelle ci stanno male, non vengono neanche le damine della Croce Rossa, neppure quelle di Ferrara, il pericolo non è per voi. Vedi che in fondo noi uomini in genere vi trattiamo bene, vi portiamo ai bagni, in villeggiatura, a teatro per farvi passare tutte le malinconie che avete sempre per la testa, ma dove vi è da arrischiare la pelle vogliamo essere soli. Guarda come siamo buoni!!!

More than this, Filippo seems to understand that his mother might feel excluded at not having the chance to meet his new military family and so he asks his new friends to write and sign a postcard for her, just as if they had got to know her as they did his father:

Per ricordare anche a te questa felicissima giornata a tavola ti ho scritto una cartolina che tutti gli ufficiali hanno firmata. Guarda noi uomini quanto siamo gentili!!!! Ed ora basta, non so più cosa dirti, vorrei mettere tanti punti esclamativi per riempire la pagina. Ti lascio con un bacio a te e a tutti

Even though an in-depth gender analysis will not be explored in this chapter, Guerrieri's letter provides interesting insights on the evolution of gender and of the roles attached to it throughout the conflict.[472] His mother, for instance, no longer accepts her minor role: the exceptionality of the event and her interventionist feelings make her more willing to fight the exclusion from an area that is normally shared by men. The letter ends with some bits of information but the father figure is mentioned again as a witness who could reassure her that the situation is going well, that morale is high, that the state of health is good:

Questa notte avremo il cambio e andremo in un paese abitato dai profughi tutti si sentono bene, nessuno accusa la febbre o dolori al capo; non si è mai vista tanta salute come oggi, è un vero rifiorire di contentezza e di benessere, anche il babbo l'ha rilevato. Appena giunto alla nuova destinazione scriverò ancora e vi descriverò tutte le bellezze di quel benedetto paese che già noi tutti amiamo per la sola ragione che ci raccoglie per ristorarci e farci rivivere.

Even after the visit, writing does not seem to lose its role during the war and is still used as a means of privileged self-reflection, as a way of recording, celebrating and witnessing, but most importantly as a way of sharing. It is used to pass on the encounters at the front line and to communicate them to mothers and other family

[472] Paola Scandaletti, Giuliana Variola, ed., *Le crocerossine nella grande guerra aristocratiche e borghesi nei diari e negli ospedali militari. Una via all'emancipazione femminile*, (Udine: Gaspari 2008).

members who did not have the chance to experience it. However, these descriptions and accounts have the vital function of extending the visit over time and to represent a monument celebrating it. The will to stretch in time the closeness with the military group and the informal atmosphere engendered by the visit through writing is witnessed by this letter sent by Guerrieri in answer to some regards and thoughts written by his father to him and his mates:

Carissimo babbo, abbiamo ricevuto il tuo smagliante biglietto, la balda gioventù del battaglione ti ringrazia tutta quanta riunita alla mensa. Ora viviamo in un quieto paesello (Zugliano) presso Thiene dove si passa il tempo istruendo i complementi venuti, che lasciano in tutto e per tutto a desiderare. Fino a quando resteremo? Nessuno lo sa, mille congetture si fanno, ma nulla vi è di certo o di probabile. Tutto è campato in aria. Si sta bene qui: non solo dormo in una casa ma usufruisco anche di un comodo letto dove godo dei magnifici sonni. Il lavoro un po' intenso di preparazione di questi nuovi soldati venuti mi impedisce di scrivere a lungo, lo farò domani. (Zugliano 9 August 1916)[473]

The unforgettable experience of having his father close to him at war makes the conflict more understandable for him and easier to describe to his mother:

Trincee Cima Arde- Le fratte 14 agosto 1916... Sono sempre sul fronte del Trentino ma non più dove è venuto il Babbo

[473] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 164-165.

So locations are described as something which Dad has or hasn't seen. The visit has somehow created a year zero out of which war time will be reframed and recalculated.

The case provided by Filippo Guerrieri's collection is relevant as it bears witness to the fact that being able to share the experience of war was a crucial need, to the point that he describes in enthusiastic tones his father's travelling to the front line. Of interest is also the fact that he records his visit in letters to his mother. This enables him to pour out a set of feelings which, in order to respect a father-son male code, he probably would not mention in letters only directed to the father. The nuances of these accounts are various and also involve the attitudes toward a mother figure seen as the custodian of affection, love and worries, but also frequently connected to a motherly inclination to ask for updates, a tendency to worry too much, and, in addition, to distort and misinterpret the information and writing styles of letters. The mother figure is a particular addressee of these missives in that she is accorded an ambivalent role, namely that of someone needing both protection while also imposing it upon her son.

Both aspects of this supposed or real attitude are frequently dealt with explicitly in letters, and constitute a reason of resentfulness and distance. The reasons for this self-distancing from mothers' projections, cares and requests vary and are also worth taking into consideration. The main motivation behind this appears to be a need to be seen as a brave adult and heroic man who knows war and has no fears or doubts. Mothers often voice the emotions one would silence or

censor in order to survive the situations in their letters. We could well say that mothers are the beloved, but nonetheless excluded recipients of certain war writings.

A few traits of these descriptions appear worth analyzing as they help to disclose some further characteristics of the young officers' attitudes towards landscape, and of their need to communicate it to their loved ones. The fact that fathers are able to actually travel to the front line, to experience the landscape (which, as already mentioned is never only a landscape), to take in the view of it, and the uncomfortable aspects pertaining to it, is a further mark that they could understand the officers better than their mothers. In his letters, Filippo openly tells his mother that he cannot really imagine her in those areas. She tends to panic about everything. How would she react to those noises, to the view of the aeroplanes which were scaring her to death even in the comfort of her own home? Instead, fathers appear to be the quintessence of values such as courage and honour. Guerrieri spends a long time describing what he saw, how he felt about it, as if, by having his father at the front line, he was also establishing a new, and more familiar encounter with the war zone. This visit is a legitimation of war, as if his father has come to see the school in which his son was sent to study, or went to watch a match in which Filippo was a regular player. As soon as the supporting father leaves, Guerrieri feels the need to write to his mother, not only to reassure her that everything went well, but also and more importantly, he feels the need to share the exciting experiences through writing. These letters portray the desire to both communicate to his mother how pleasant the visit was but also to create a

fresh and glorious record of it for his father to read upon his arrival back home. The written and oral becomes one and the same here, as the written anticipates what the father will say to the mother. Given the evident connection between father and son, their mutual understanding and emotional convergence, there is no risk of a discrepancy between the two versions as they probably agreed in advance which aspects could be disclosed and which should not be shared with the mother/wife.

The following extracts taken from the letter collection by the upper-class volunteer soldier Enzo Valentini are included here as an example of how a description of the landscape can increase spiritual proximity with loved ones (as is the case with Valentini and his mother) or let differences emerge (this is the hypothesis formulated here with reference to the exchange between Enzo and his father). The following letter (written on 6 October 1915) is of interest first of all in that it is one of the rare letters of his collection directed to his father.[474] Secondly, because he writes it in response to a letter his father sent him, enthusiastically proclaiming that he holds the Allied victories to be a sign of the end of war. Significantly, Enzo answers to his fatherly enthusiasm informing him that a volunteer he used to know has been killed. Probably thinking that he has managed to convey war to his father, Enzo switches to a lighter tone and describes the youthful bravado characterizing his interaction with the newly arrived Capalbi. The passage, however, is only a prelude to the true conclusion of the letter which ends with a topic which is dear to his father, namely hunting. The idea is that of a letter thoroughly designed to answer his father's opinions on war, share some lighter

[474] Valentini, *Lettere*, pp. 130-133.

news and then, most tellingly, turning to hunting as an easier platform of communication:

Ieri ho veduto per la prima volta la pernice alpina; m'è passata a un metro appena sopra il capo valicando la cresta rocciosa con grande strepito di penne; e l'ho veduta bene: è più grande di un piccione di media grossezza, completamente bianca, di un candore abbagliante. Ne ho veduta anche un'altra che non aveva mutato del tutto le penne, e aveva ancora la coda macchiata di grigio... Ho pensato a te che chissà quanto ti divertiresti a cacciarle.[475]

Even this, which appears at first as a common denominator, becomes in fact a matter of division between the two. Enzo is an attentive and passionate observer of nature and he loves describing and cataloguing both vegetables and animals, therefore he would never hunt such a lovely animal. Evidence of this discrepancy between his father's idea of hunting as a manly action and Enzo's attitude towards nature is provided by the letter sent to his mother on 19 August 1915, which is entirely devoted to the idyllic description of birds, such as in the following passage:[476]

Se queste rocce si pavoneggia al sole il Culbianco facendo scintillare a tratti la neve della sua coda, e il codirosso montano volteggia pazzescamente allegro alzando e

[475] Ibid., p. 132.

[476] Ibid., pp. 56-58.

abbassando il suo ventaglio di rubini e gonfiando orgogliosamente la gola nera e lucente come la caglia del carbone. ...Raramente, e timida dell'altezza inusitata, persino la rondine ci porta la grazia famigliare dei suoi voli e dei suoi trilli, poi torna a valle. Il merlo ricorda i lieti vigneti delle colline lontane [477]

Describing something that he is so keen on becomes, in his letter, is an occasion to be intimate and close to his mother, to the point that Enzo describes swallows and blackbirds as heralds of familiar views and memories. However, the opposite happens with his (actual or projected) fatherly audience, one that imposes on him a harsh change of tone that characterizes the end of his letter:

Leggi questi ragguagli a Papà e digli che cacciando il porco austriaco, desidero il cinghiale maremmano (gentil sangue non mente) e mi sento spuntare il bernoccolo del cacciatore [478]

The passage abruptly interrupts the dreamlike atmosphere of sweetness and natural harmony. In its place is a formula of what, according to Enzo, might be the right tone to catch his father's attention (a little bit of war rhetoric and a reference to hunting) thus compensating not only for the lack of letters directed to him, but also, and most importantly, for the previous passage dedicated to the lyric contemplation of nature.

[477] Ibid., p. 57.

[478] Ibid., pp. 57-58.

Sharing home front landscapes with sons

The published collection of letters by the Vivanti family represents a great example with which to discuss the way in which even fathers feel the need to share the changing landscape of their city or home villages with distant sons at war. Cesare Vivanti, for instance, discusses the changing landscape and lifestyle in Pavia, where he works as a city clerk. He mentions the people he meets during the day around the city with precise coordinates and gives an account of his daily routine. On 21 October 1915, at six o'clock the landscape described is the topography of his encounters in Pavia:

Ho visto de Pontis. E iersera, uscendo dall'ufficio, ho veduto anche Leo, che ti ha scritto e ti saluta. Poi, fermatici all'angolo dell'Ostelleria Demetrio, abbiamo vista la signora Gilda che tornava da casa nostra... Mentre discorrevamo tutti e tre insieme è passato e ti saluta Sciascia. [479]

On 8 November 1915, at six pm, he mentions the presence of engineer officers who meet up to eat at the Demetrio:

Qui c'è ancora una quantità di ufficiali del genio, varianti di giorno in giorno che, quando io esco dall'ufficio la sera, riempiono, allegri e contenti, il Demetrio per il

[479] Vivanti, *Scrivimi,* p. 150.

pranzo. Penso a te quando eri nella breve - troppo breve - luna di miele di Padova.[480]

By contrast with the Demetrio, that is crowded with officers and has become a crucial meeting point for interventionists and mobilized élites from Pavia, the university, which used to be the heart of the city, has now turned into a tragically silent place since its mobilized students left for war. Cesare records this in a letter written on 14 November 1915 at 6.15 pm (significantly, Cesare's sense of duty obliges him to write to his son when his working day is over):

L'università è fin'ora silenziosa o quasi e la storica aula VIa tace e tacerà Dio sa fino a quando! [481]

This is an attempt to overcome the divide, to pretend his son is still close to home, if not physically, at least spiritually. This involves different tasks: Cesare feels less lonely when he writes to his son about his daily routine and news (as if discussing them at lunchtime), he also feels reassured at the idea that his son still feels part of a known community with shared values and ideals.

However, Cesare's letters also witness differences in the changing city, with new rules and new laws that emanate throughout the conflict, and that are superimposed on the elements of continuity that define Pavia, such as the floods of

[480] Ibid., p. 165.

[481] Ibid., p. 170.

the River Ticino, the role of the university, the hospital, and the Fraschini Theatre. In a letter of 25 September 1918, he mentions the impact of the Spanish pandemic flu, 'Anche qui sebbene assai leggermente serpeggia l'influenza... la città ora si ripopola'/Even here, if only slightly, the flu is spreading... but now the city [implicitly little by little] is repopulating'.[482] In the part which has been omitted here, Vivanti provides his son with the guidelines suggested by Doctor Preti on how to prevent it. The impact of the flu is also mentioned in the letter sent on 25 October 1918, in which the end of the law forbidding the sale and consumption of freshly baked bread is announced with relief:

Le condizioni sanitarie, con qualche alternativa, accennano a continuare nel miglioramento. La città comincia a rianimarsi... Resta però incerto quando le scuole riapriranno. Da domani - dopo tanti mesi di pane raffermo - cominceremo a riavere il pane fresco. È un buon preludio di ritorno alla vita normale. [483]

Even the flood of the River Ticino, which is certainly an element of continuity, is different in wartime and the town clerk Vivanti, given the number of men away at war, is forced to ask the military engineer corps for help:

21 Maggio 1917 Qui nulla di nuovo. Continua a piovere. Il Ticino, straripando, ha allagato via Milazzo ed i pressi di Porta Nuova. Dalla cortesia del Generale Poggi ho

[482] Ibid., p. 343.

[483] Ibid., p. 346.

ottenuto che il servizio di trasporto sia fatto da barche e da uomini del Genio, senò non si serebbero trovate nè barche, nè barcaioli. Speriamo che anche la piena non venga a turbarci con la conseguenza dei danni ai raccolti, che promettono tanto bene nelle nostre belle campagne davvero ubertose. [484]

The passages presented below are particularly interesting because they provide an insight of the connection of people from Pavia with the moods of the rivers Ticino and Po. Every inhabitant of Pavia, especially those living in the depressed area of Borgo Ticino or in the areas of the city centre near the river, such as 'Porta Nuova', mentioned by Vivanti have developed observation skills and gathered information concerning the causes and signs accompanying the flood and determining the level of risk. It is no accident that Vivanti mentions the wind. If the wind blows from the Po the flood is expected to be much worse as the water doesn't flow properly and the effects are much more devastating. Heavy rains turn each Pavese into an attentive observer walking morning and evening along the river to check the water level and make a hypothesis as to the likelihood of a flood and forecasts on it:[485]

30 Maggio 1917 Qui nulla di nuovo. E non è nuovo il mal tempo che imperversa con pioggia e vento, procurandoci una piena peggiore di quella dei dì passati. Torno ora

[484] Ibid., pp. 271-272.

[485] Detailed information about the effect of the wind on the flow of the River Ticino was collected in person by the author of the present thesis during several floods. The main source for this information was the old Mr Ermanno from via Milazzo in Borgo Ticino who knew everything about the river having lived on its lowest bank for more than ninety years. Mr Ermanno unfortunately passed away a couple of years ago and all the people from Borgo terribly miss his walks by the river with his staff and his hat.

dal Ticino, che è grosso assai, e da una visita agli argini, i quali in alcuni punti presentano seri pericoli, mentre ferve l'opera del Genio Civile per rinforzare con sacchi i punti più minacciati. [486]

The observation made by Cesare during his walk along the river proves to be correct and on 1 June he has to race to the river at night to supervise work to contain the flood. The following passage ends with the positive note that the River Po is now able to absorb more water from the Ticino and that this will possibly make the flood less long-lasting. Furthermore, the weather has significantly improved:

1 June 1917 Iersera alle 11 mentre ero a letto leggendo, sono venuti ad avvisarmi che il Ticino aveva rotto l'argine del Rottino per circa cento metri. Mi sono alzato e sono andato a vedere sul posto dove mi sono fermato fino alle quattro, perchè il lavoro era molto ed urgente. Oggi - per quanto tutto il Borgo sia allagato - le cose pare si mettano meglio, perché il Po accenna a decrescere ed è tornato il bel tempo.[487]

Cesare's announcement of the imminent flood, and the description of his commitment to prevent its effects and damage are of interest here for three reasons. Firstly, they represent his attempt to make his son a part of what is

[486] Vivanti, *Scrivimi*, p. 274.

[487] Ibid., p. 275. A picture and newspaper article dedicated to the Flood are provided in the appendix.

happening back home. The constant description of the river level mimics Cesare's attempt to virtually bring Augusto on the ritual flood-river walk. Secondly, it gives him the opportunity to bridge the divide between the home and the war front, by stating the exceptional nature of a flood happening when the city is suffering a huge shortage of men, thus forcing him to an exceptional effort that implies taking special measures to contain it. Thirdly, and most importantly, the flood gives Cesare the occasion to feel as if he is also committed in a war against the enemy water, facing an exceptional emergency and writing from his own city front, while he is saving Pavia from the flood. Following this set of observations, it is possible to argue that, in the Vivanti collection, landscape represents a further occasion of intimacy and encounter in the space of a letter.

Transcending trench landscapes

Di queste case/ non è rimasto/che qualche/ brandello di muro/Di tanti/ che mi corrispondevano/ non è rimasto/ neppure tanto/ Ma nel mio cuore/ nesuna croce manca/ è il mio cuore/ il paese più straziato.[488]

Ungaretti is a constant point of reference while trying to make sense of the experience of war, of its connection with language and with writing. More relevant for this chapter, he is also useful in looking at the way in which landscape is

[488] Translation by Jim Friel 2003 av. at <http://www.beilharz.com/poetas/ungaretti/>. Last two verses: my translation.

internalized. In this sense, the poem *San Martino del Carso* appears of particular interest, especially its last two verses 'è il mio cuore /il paese più straziato'/'my heart is/the most ravaged village'. These lines reveal that Ungaretti's gaze, first directed at the ruins, the parts that are missing, the bonds that are lacking and the lives that have been lost is then directed towards his own experience of this absence. The poem also reveals a paradox of war, that is to say, its ability to bring to the extremes both presence and absence. Under 'presence' we find the redundancy of materials, the strong physical impact of the battleground, death, noise, light, darkness, and smells. 'Absence', however, can be seen as the lack of all those things that once were, such as quaint villages, ordinary daily life in a civilian space, cultivated lands in the countryside, communication with loved ones, and cheerfulness, to name but a few. There are few points in common between Ungaretti and Campodonico's ways of experiencing and transposing war; the former so delicate and eloquently reticent and the latter so redundant and rhetorical. However, the self-reflective ending of *San Martino del Carso* can be applied as a further tool to understand Campodonico's experience of war and also his election of himself as the most interesting landscape to be portrayed and described. If, for Ungaretti, the death and absence of peace is internalized, and his heart comes to resemble a village torn apart, Campodonico's obsession with staging, projecting and embodying a winning and assertive character at war appears tainted by fear and other upsetting feelings. The necessity for Campodonico to dominate the landscape of war, both at the front and in the rear, both during battle and during rest, betrays an anxiety that has been examined in

this section. His pictures and letters have been analyzed in the light of a feeling of uncertainty which, due to the different time and intention, was neglected by other investigations such as that by Omodeo.[489] Presence and absence play a vital role in Campodonico's epistolary collection in which he tries to affirm his own personality, which always shows narcissistic traits. Interestingly, he appears both as the author and as part of the audience of his writings and pictures, which could suggest that he put them together more for himself than for others. This self-inclusion in the audience is present, with different features, in another interesting source, that is the collection of letters by the volunteer soldier Enzo Valentini who numbers them, enriches them with drawings, souvenirs and flowers, and hopes to browse through them with his mother one day when war is over and when he returns home. For Valentini, this 'diary in letters' is mostly a delicate romantic way to feel closer to his mother and to project himself back home. Campodonico's pompous letters and self-celebrating pictures represent a vital elevating tool that allow him to transcend war. His urge to sublimate both war and his participation in it through an aesthetic narcissistic attitude can be seen as an attempt to resist, through redundancy and rhetoric, what is perceived as having been undermined by war, that is to say the sense of identity. A few examples taken from his collection of letters might help to explain this further. In a letter home sent on 18 February 1916, Campodonico writes:

[489] Adolfo Omodeo, *Momenti di Guerra, Dai Diari e Dalle Lettere dei Caduti 1915-1918* (Torino: Einaudi, 1968), pp. 47-53.

Cari gentiori e parenti, Vi mando una fotografia interessante in cui si vede un generale che visita la prima linea a pochi metri dagli austriaci e il sottoscritto che dà ampie spiegazioni tattiche. È una fotografia presami all'improvviso senza che io lo sapessi, ma è veramente bella ed interessante.[490]

What is of interest is the fact that Second Lieutenant Campodonico writes on the picture in order to state the identity of the two figures, that is to say he referred to himself as 'il sottoscritto'/ 'the undersigned' and the general. This picture reinforces the idea of Campodonico's collection of pictures as a sort of photographic diary not really of war, but rather of himself at war. It resembles a self-celebrating reportage similar to those that are obsessively conducted nowadays on social networks, in which the true object of any picture is the ego of the person posting it.[491] Continuing this train of thought, even Campodonico's handwriting on the picture can be interpreted as a tag *avant la lèttre*, witnessing that he was there with a general. Moreover, the fact that he is writing to his 'parents and relatives' reveals that he is possibly addressing a broader audience, thus signalling his desire that the picture be shown even to people outside the strict family circle. The photograph is quite interesting because it represents Campodonico as a 'war Cicero' who is so experienced that he can provide explanations to a general. Campodonico's claim

[490] Campodonico, *Lauri*,. pp. 89-90. Picture in the appendix.

[491] For further insights on this see Ferraris, Maurizio, *Anima e iPad* (Parma: Ugo Guanda Editore, 2011) Codeluppi, Vanni, *Tutti Divi* (Bari: Laterza, 2009) and Aboujaude Elias, *Virtually You: The dangerous Powers of the E-Personality*, (W. W. Norton: New York, London, 2011).

that he is giving detailed tactical explanations should necessarily be downplayed through contextualisation. Given that the general had probably only just arrived, or was visiting to get an idea of that section of the front, Campodonico is illustrating to him the battleground. He owes his knowledge on the physical aspects of the battleground to his activity as informant and scout. In his letter of 5 November 1916, he informs his parents 'I share with you the news that I have been promoted adjutant major in the second battalion, I have spurs and a horse.'[492] He will even receive a commendation on 12 May 1916. The attitude he has in the picture reveals his self-confidence while talking in public, one that derives from his activity in the war courts and in discussing matters connected with battlegrounds and tactics that he draws from the tasks of scouting and informing. In this picture, Campodonico is staged as the main character; the general is hidden behind another man. These two elements make Campodonico's claim that he didn't know someone was taking this picture quite improbable. From the analysis of his letter collection, a different hypothesis has emerged: he probably asked a fellow officer or a soldier to take a picture of him while he was talking to the general. This would explain why, at a time when photography was expensive, the photographer would have focused on a second lieutenant rather than on the general, who is almost invisible. On 12 May 1916, when he sends home a picture taken during a boat trip on the Adriatic, he also feels the need to tell his parents who he is 'I am the one ....'. It is clear that he has a different not solely familiar and not solely synchronic audience in mind, otherwise there would be no need to provide this redundant information. This

[492] Campodonico, *Lauri*, p. 76.

redundancy and this self-reflectiveness, though, tell us something important about Campodonico's war, that is to say his desperate need to filter it through his own narrative, be it written or articulated through images. Moreover, it reveals Campodonico's need to place himself precisely in that war, finding a place, understanding the role undertaken (actual or presumed), observing his change. His pictures are also redolent of the fascination for photography as a new powerful medium, a fascination that he shares with many other officers in WWI.[493] Photography is considered here as a further tool to complete the projection narratives and subjectivities put forward through writing. As observed by Fieschi, Joschke and Petiteau:

La photographie est d'ailleurs rarement en fin en soi. C'est un médium qui vient compléter d'autres pratiques du témoignage individuel, journeaux, correspondances, dessins et gravures.[494]

Campodonico also dedicates a few lines to discuss the role of photography in a letter sent on 1 March 1916:

Cari genitori, Inviovi una bella fotografia; già ve ne mandai fin dai primi giorni di guerra e da allora in poi ne dovete avere molte, che possono formare una

[493] See Zanivolti's picture printed on a postcard in the appendix.

[494] Caroline Fieschi, Christian Joschke, Anthony Petiteau 'Photographier la Guerre en Amateur' in Sylvie Le Ray-Burini, Caroline Fieschi, Aldo Battaglia, Benjamin Gilles and Anthony Petiteau, eds. *Vu du Front Representer la Grande Guerre*, (Paris: Samogy Edition de l'Art, 2014), pp. 80-88.

collezione discreta. Altre ne ho e altre ne farò per continuare a mandarvene. La fotografia fissa la figura di chi passa davanti al mistico foro racchiudente l'obiettivo e nell'istante in cui il nero profondo dell'interno della scatola s'apre alla luce, questa ne inonda all'improvviso l'intera cavità, la sostanza luminosa ed eterea penetra ad ondate ben più rapide di quelle marine portate dal vento e di quelle umane portate dall'incrollabile fede di vincere e morire. [495]

Apart from the technical aspects disclosed to his parents, who probably know them already, what is of interest here is the mystical place ascribed to technology. The positive celebration of technology in the form of photography is relevant in a war in which technology means mass killing. The camera can seize the moment, thus rendering it eternal with a picture, and is the positive counterpart when compared with a machine gun that can end a life in an instant. Campodonico does not make this parallel, which appears to underlie his attitude. He reflects on the nature of new weapons in many letters and this passage, which is devoted to a camera, appears as a positive counterpart of technology at war. An example of how Campodonico refers to the new weapons and on their effects on men is seen in a letter written right before the one on photography on 24 February 1916:

E ho trattato ogni sorta di armi, dalla primitiva pietra con cui Davide uccise il gigante Golia, come ci racconta la tradizione biblica, fino ai moderni Mauser ed alle

[495] Campodonico, *Lauri*, p.91

brillanti rivoltelle saettanti fiamme e schioccanti dardi di morte, ai potenti e tremendi giganti distruttori della turba che s'agita.[496]

Campodonico's fascination with the new possibility offered by new media goes beyond the obsession for photography, as witnessed by letters sent home on 20 and 23 March 1917, in which he informs his parents that he has been filmed for a documentary released by the review *Novelle* and he urges them to watch it as soon as possible. On 20 March he writes: 'Vi si vede benissimo la mia bella figura'/ one can see clearly my handsome figure' and on the 23rd, reminding them to go to watch the film he states: 'vi si ammira la mia bella persona'/one can admire my pleasant form'.[497] He mentions this film to his parents and they incessantly request news about the war zone, one which, Campodonico argues, is represented by the film and has the added attraction of his own appearance. Once again, his own figure is substituted for the landscape, in the attempt to stand apart from it, to transcend war.

Campodonico, who receives the news of his awaited promotion to lieutenant at the beginning of April, on 24 April 1917 sends a picture taken in the courtyard of his command. The site is undoubtedly close to the Carso where he was killed in combat a few hours later. This picture is different from the ones sent before as it is less rhetorical and less pompous; the same could be said for the tone of the letter which finally leaves space to a more spontaneous youthful tone. The

[496] Ibid., p.90.

[497] Ibid., p.134.

spirit is that found in certain letters by Cambini, Tocci and Zanivolti, describing how the sense of anxiety was contrasted through jokes and games played while in the rear areas or at the command, especially during the final moments before going back to the line:

Cari genitori, V'invio 5 belle fotografie, fatte nella sede del mio comando, che come potete vedere è una bella palazzina con giardino e vasca nella quale, come rileverete in tre fotografie, io ed un maggiore del mio reggimento stiamo per precipitare il cappellano. Ho segnato con una crocetta nera il mio ritratto, perchè in qualche fotografia è un po' confuso.[498]

The picture shows three men accomplishing this act of bravado, and another one watching and smiling from the steps in front of the entrance to the command.[499] While observing it one has the impression that euphoria is the main protagonist of those moments of rest at the command headquarters. The picture is taken in front of the main door to the command and shows Campodonico throwing the military chaplain into the pool. Campodonico is probably still experiencing the cheerfulness of his own promotion to lieutenant (even though he downplays this when he announces it in his letter of 3 April 1917).[500] The portraits mentioned by Campodonico in this letter are not included in the published collection but it is interesting that he marks the 'unwanted' portrait with a black cross in order to

[498] Ibid., pp. 137-138.

[499] Ibid., situated between p. 28 and p. 29.

[500] Ibid., pp. 134-135.

signal which one was, in his opinion, unsuitable. This betrays not only the aforementioned obsession with self-representation, but also the worry behind it: the idea that he will not be there to decide which is the picture that best represents him. In wartime, and especially for those at the front, this was an ordinary worry. However, it is striking when considered by an external reader who has never experienced life during wartime that Campodonico wrote this a few hours before his death.

The argument proposed in this section is that the landscape considered by Campodonico is his own physical, spiritual and military evolution throughout the conflict, one that he desperately tries to document in pictures. Landscape does not exist without him. He is both the main character in the pictures and the vigilant eye staging them (or both, as is the case with the image with the general). The following passage on war photography is of use to frame Campodonico in the light of a practice which was common in war:

Il ne s'agit en aucun cas de couvrir la guerre d'une façon exhaustive, puisque le point de vue est lié à l'itinéraire du combattant. [501]

However, in the case of Campodonico, it is possible to detect a claim of exhaustiveness not in the overall representation of war, but rather in the representation of his own war enterprise.

[501] Caroline Fieschi, Christian Joschke, Anthony Petiteau, 'Photographier la Guerre en Amateur', p. 84.

Conclusion

What emerges from the analysis undertaken in the description of landscape in war writings is not only that space plays a crucial role in the experience of war and its written records, but also that the way in which it is addressed depends upon a number of factors. As the section 'sharing landscape' has shown, there are different ways to convey the experience of landscape to men and women, and even more so, to fathers and mothers. Another relevant observation would concern younger sisters who received yet another kind of treatment, but that lies outside of the scope of this chapter, the main goal of which is an exploration of strategies for sharing landscapes in letters during the time of war. As was the case in previous chapters, here the observation of a specific trait has led to broader and somehow more peculiar insights into the issue of intimate communications during wartime, and more specifically on writing as a means through which to maintain bonds and represent identities in extreme circumstances. It is no accident that private records (i.e. diaries) retain a minor role in this chapter, as it has aimed to shed light upon the need to communicate spatial details and physical settings as a reassuring way to feel closer to loved ones, to preserve previously created bonds, and thus continue with former relational identities. Landscape can become a means through which to express feelings one would otherwise censor or to share future forecasts which would otherwise fail to find their way into letters.

The ways in which landscape enters letters might reveal further aspects concerning the writing attitude and projection of the self through writing which are redolent of the different circumstances and moments in which these texts saw the

light. However it can also be the result of ambitions and expectations that, as is the case with Campodonico, predate the experience of war. Even in the case of Campodonico, however, war impacts further on them, infusing writing with hidden anxiety and fear that, totally erased from the surface of the text, appear deeply ingrained in it, influencing the obsessive self-representation and necessity to appear assertive, successful and immortal in letters and pictures. Campodonico's attempts to transcend war and wartime are so extreme that they even transcend the boundaries and grounds of effective communication, thus revealing a self-referential nature which is the opposite of what has been observed in almost all other sources. Applying the notion formulated by Frers and Meier, one might see Campodonico as being dominated by an extreme form of self-envelopment separating him from the actual nature of war, but also from the intimate epistolary encounter with loved ones.

Chapter 6

Combat

Introduction

This chapter investigates the ways in which combat enters officers' experiences and writing. The hypothesis is that combat becomes a pervasive presence which invades individuals' time and space - intended here as both objective entities and as subjective comfort zones.[502] Combat, in the form of the re-evocation of trauma, enters even the writings accomplished at the home front, or in the rear, thus also haunting life far from the frontline. Writing is also examined here as a way to contrast combat's colonization of time and space. In order to structure this argument, De Certeau's trajectories and pathways - previously discussed in the chapter on landscapes as ways to re-appropriate space - are applied to further understand the ambivalent attitude towards combat.[503] As far as trench warfare is concerned, the theory could provide interesting insights. Similar to the renegotiation of urban space, in fact, which results from the interaction between the super-imposed topographic representations and the practice of the city, namely the opposition between discourse and counter-discourse, writing could be seen as a form of re-appropriation of a metaphorical space (and time); a space

[503] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: UCal Press 1984), p. 95.

of subjectivity.[504] If the paradoxical nature of the urban space consists mainly in the mutual influence that these two aspects exercise on each other, the paradoxical nature of the war experience emerges as the result between imposition (of space, time, narratives, perspectives, conduct, emotions) and the reaction that emerges in response to such imposition (higher sensitivity, subjective re-elaboration of the combat experience and self-projections in writings).

In his brilliant book *The Embattled Self*, Leonard V. Smith investigates and presents different kinds of writing approaches to and within the war. 'Experience "as it happens", in the sense of a succession of nows is intrinsically incompatible with narrative. The initiation to combat would seem to prove this incompatibility obvious. Yet because experience abhors a vacuum, the succession of nows requires the imposition of some sort of linear, narrative order.'[505]

Smith explores the dichotomy between the 'empirical' and the 'moral' component of writing, that is: he considers the witnessing intent behind writing about the war as a lived experience, and the relevant question of how to consider and deal with these writings, regardless of whether they are diaries, letters or novels. Drawing upon a wide range of theory from Foucault to Heidegger, the main point Smith makes is that while the subject constructs the narrative of his war experience, he is also constructing a narrator. This is relevant here because, in introducing the categories of narrator and narratives, more generally used for fiction and literature, he is, in a way, dismissing what might be termed an overly-

[504] Andrew Webber, *Berlin in the Twentieth Century: A Cultural Topography*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[505] Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 20.

scientific approach to sources. He instead suggests considering the complexity of the circumstances in which those texts first saw the light, along with the audiences for which they were first conceived, and the goals behind them. Even though this might appear straightforward, it is rather innovative to think of primary sources in this light, as it pushes us to consider more attentively the subjectivity creating them and, at one and the same time, created through them. The difficulty of conveying the experience of combat leads officers who write to adopt different strategies: they experiment with various ways of expressing the emotions resulting from combat and look for a space and role in the chaos of battlefields in which to place their subjectivity. Writing also represents, as argued, among others, by Antonio Gibelli, a re-appropriation of subjectivity and a weapon to fight the identity challenge inherent in war life.[506]

Relying upon and going beyond the observations proposed by these and by other key studies on war writings, on the relation between the experience of war and writing, this chapter provides an overview of a few stylistic strategies which accompany not only the actual description of combat, but also the psychological recollection of fighting as showcased in junior combat officers' letters and diaries. This chapter thus limits the scope of its analysis to a selection of sources that have been chosen as they showcase specific writing attitudes and circumstances and, in the light of the investigation conducted on the broader sample examined in this thesis, have appeared particularly insightful for the discussion on writing combat. The idea to limit the in-depth analysis to three sources (two letter collections -

[506] Antonio Gibelli, *La Grande Guerra degli Italiani, 1915-1918*, (Milano: BUR, 2007-2009), p. 139.

Zanivolti, Guerrieri - and one private record - Vitelli's notebook) results from the need, perceived here as prevailing, to observe the evolution of writing attitudes on combat throughout war, depending on the different contexts of fighting and of writing.

The chance to observe this evolution is offered, for instance, by the letters of Giuseppe Zanivolti who describes his participation in two battles, one year apart. The first letter, written on 5 October 1915 and the second on 22 September 1916, discuss, respectively, combat that took place on the night of 28-29 September 1915 on Mount Vodil and on 17 September 1916 on Mount Veliki Carso.[507] From September 25 1915, Zanivolti was assigned as a candidate reserve officer to the 90th Infantry of the Salerno Brigade, undertaking demonstrative actions in the area of Mount Vodil. This was requested to support a manoeuvre planned for the 24th and delayed due to the weather conditions. It was eventually undertaken on 28 September by the Alpini groups active in the area.[508] When he was wounded on 17 September 1916 on Mount Veliki, Lieutenant Zanivolti was with the 18th group St Etienne Rifles.[509] The letter written retrospectively by Guerrieri on 19 July 1916 from Costa di Sotto near Mount Cimone has also been considered because it provides a self-reflective attitude, thus offering further insights on the style, tenses and syntax adopted when recalling combat. In this case, Guerrieri was with the 11th

[507] Lieutenant Giuseppe Zanivolti's private unpublished letter collection.

[508] The weather conditions at the end of September mentioned in Cadorna's bulletin of 1 October 1915 that also mentions the infantry action, but only very vaguely, on the area of Vodil av. at <https://alpinigenovaquarto.wordpress.com/2015/10/01/bollettino-di-guerra-del-1-ottobre-1915/>

[509] Information derived from Zanivolti's 'stato di servizio' included in Zanivolti's private collection.

company, third battalion 210th Regiment in the Bisagno Brigade and was fighting to regain Mount Cimone between 26 and 30 June.[510]

Another insightful piece of writing is offered by Lieutenant Vitelli who writes in his private notebook, *Doss Remit*, two subsequent passages to record the accidental and tragic death of one of his men. He first writes in a spontaneous and personal way and then adopts the structure, wording, and style common to military records.[511] Of interest in *Doss Remit* is the fact that this accidental death is described using strategies normally adopted to describe combat, that is to say the narrative pertaining to traumatic time. Finally, sources by Colonel Gagliani and Lieutenant Campodonico have been considered as further contextual elements for their insightful contribution to the overall discussion of combat and writing.

Between traditional imagery and actual warfare

Both Gagliani and Campodonico provide an overview of the battlefields. In Gagliani's case, the overarching view is strictly related to the fact that he commands an artillery regiment:

L'artillerie, moyen principal d'attaque comme de défence, éxige elle un autre angle de vue. Elle domandes une vision surplombant le front, d'où la recherche des

[510] Guerrieri got a silver medal for the courage demonstrated in the action conducted under fire on the 27 June 1916.

[511] Antonio Vitelli, *Doss Remit* . The account starts when Vitelli has to leave the quieter area of Doss Casina and leave his safer task, i.e. observing and recording the level efficiency of artillery action, to substitute a lieutenant taking the lead of the 907th battalion of the 17th Mountain Regiment on the line in Doss Remit.

postes d'observation (colline, arbres, tour d'églises). De ce fait, elle confère un sentiment du control aux artilleurs, que les fantassins leur jalousent, d'ailleurs.[512]

Contrary to Gagliani, Campodonico simulates this angle of observation to elevate himself from a warfare that he perceives as being a long way from his heroic pre-war vision:

La guerre de movement dans des telles conditions devient vite impossible. Se terrer s'impose. L'horizontale remplace la verticale.[513]

This truth about trench warfare in WWI is acknowledged clearly by Colonel Gagliani in a passage written on 22 February 1916 which provides an example of his attempt to make sense of the present war in the light of his military knowledge of past wars:

In questi 9 mesi la guerra nostra, come quella che si svolge in quasi tutti i teatri europei, ha assunto le caratteristiche della guerra d'assedio: solo che un tempo si assediavano le città, ora si assediano le nazioni! Molti assedi sono finiti in seguito ad un attacco di viva forza, il colpo si dava sul nemico estenuato, altri hanno avuto il loro necessario epilogo quando il nemico ha dovuto darsi vinto per fame o per difetto di munizioni. Quale di queste due forme assumerà la fine di questo assedio colossale?[514]

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[512] John Horne, 'Le Front' in *Vu du Front Representer la Grande Guerre*, (Paris: Samogy Edition de l'Art, 2014), pp. 18-28, here p. 22.

[513] Ibid., p. 18.

[514] Colonel Pasquale Gagliani, *Anno 1915- 1916-1917 Campagna austro-italiana Impressioni e Ricordi*, manuscript consulted at Archivio Diaristico Nazionale Pieve Santo Stefano. Parts of the diary have been digitized and are available at <http://espresso.repubblica.it/grandeguerra/index.php?page=autore&id=118>.

Referring to De Certeau's categories, one could argue that the 'Icarian' view of Campodonico is constructed through an aestheticizing attitude that aims to sublimate war and, along with it, his own role within it. The idea proposed here is that through his sublimation of combat, Campodonico tries to 'invent the front' in a way that enables him to elevate himself from a war experience that is oppressive and banal compared to his expectations and ambitions.[515] His writings could thus be interpreted as an act of resistance to the static nature of trench warfare. The following passage, taken from a letter sent by Lieutenant Campodonico on 25 September 1916, provides an example of his need to sublimate war:

Cari genitori, Mi fu chiesta da mia madre la descrizione di una battaglia, ma descrivere un così complesso evento è troppo difficile, per cui mi limiterò a comunicarvi un insieme di impressioni da me avute e considerazioni varie sull'evoluzione bellica.[516]

Rather than describing a battle, as requested by his mother, Campodonico states the difficulty of such a description and writes a sociological-historical essay instead:

Ai tempi eroici l'impeto delle schiere era impeto umano rinforzato dal ferro variamente foggiato a difesa ed offesa; ma più che nel ferro la forza risiedeva nel corpo del guerriero, nella potente armonia delle membra, da cui scaturiva l'arte in

[515] Phrase and idea borrowed from John Horne, Ibid., p. 18.

[516] Campodonico *Lauri,* p. 111.

unione con la forza: l'arte sublime dell'estetica, fondamento del bello, a cui s'ispirarono gli artisti dell'Ellade.

After discussing war in what he defines 'the heroic times' he reflects upon what war has become in the present:

L'epoca nostra volle abbattere questa forza, volle che la guerra fosse guerra di scienza, che i conduttori fossero dei dotti e non dei guerrieri, che i mezzi per vincere fossero quelli che la scienza ci ha dato e non quelli che dall'umana forza ci vengono; ma questo volere ha incontrato la barriera delle sublimi virtù militari, che esaltano il valore e la forza, il sacrificio e la privazione…[517]

Campodonico, from his standpoint, and through his pictures, tries to re-establish a negated verticality.[518] He wants to stand out both physically and metaphorically from the trenches, from the landscape and from the undefined military crowd. He attempts to re-establish a vertical dimension in what has been defined as the horizontal nature pertaining to WWI.[519] Interestingly, he also manages to overcome, through his activity as an explorer, even the boredom and helplessness generally deriving from stasis in the trenches. One might venture that, feeling haunted by a disappointing war, he tries to dominate it with the portrayal of his image and with his omniscient narrative voice. The case of Campodonico, however,

[517] Ibid. p. 112.

[518] Campodonico's pictures are provided in the appendix.

[519] Horne, 'Le Front', in *Vu du Front*, p. 18.

is isolated within the sources considered. Nonetheless, it helps shed further light on other officers' responses.

Combat writing and subjectivity

Gibelli underlines the violence of artillery bombardment that 'sottoponeva gli uomini a un'esperienza sonora di intensità incomparabile'/ 'exposed men to an auditory experience of unparalleled intensity'.[520] This observation could be applied to all other senses that were constantly exposed to terribly intense stimuli, not only in combat but during day-to-day life in the trenches. The excessive sensorial stress engendered by war made combatants more receptive even when they were far from the front line. The multi-sensorial nature of war is perceived and fixed in writing through synaesthesia, meaning the cognitive and sensorial ability to experience something with different senses. Synaesthesia is considered here neither as a pathology nor as an alteration of ordinary mental activity but rather as the outcome of the repeated exposure to exceptional stimuli. It represents a further tool with which to examine descriptions of combat, battles or incidents within the military unit, often experienced and described in a multi-sensorial way. The coexistence of different senses is connected with the traumatic experience of the event.[521] The presence of synaesthesia in writing can be both explicit and implicit: explicit if the different senses are defined clearly; implicit if the

[520] Gibelli, *La Grande Guerra degli Italiani 1915-1918*, p. 106.

[521] On post-traumatic synaesthesia see Jane Silent, 'Beautiful Fragments of a Traumatic Memory: Synaesthesia, Sesame Street, and Hearing the Colors of an Abusive Past' in *Revista Transcultural de Música Transcultural Music Review* No. 10 (2006).

involvement of another sense is simply signalled by the use of an adjective pertaining to that sensorial area.

There is a peculiar connection between the chaos engendered by battle and the desperate need to find effective narrative strategies to render it while also maintaining a balance between a mock objectivity and the inevitable subjectivity of all personal memories and accounts. This chapter aims to showcase the key role of this new sensorial experience for a further understanding of writing in and from war. The challenging experience of combat is not solely represented by the words, details, adjectives and verbs provided by officers in their writing but is additionally signalled by a specific way of writing, by a peculiar form of syntax, a paratactic movement in the construction of accounts which mimics the multifaceted aspects of war and tries to represent its many simultaneous aspects. Writing becomes a coping strategy to re-elaborate the experience of combat. Constructing a narrative and a narrator, projecting a specific identity through writing virtually elevates combat officers from their actual condition, virtually liberates them from their sense of helplessness, fear and uncertainty while they face what is an overwhelming, unexpected, destructive and extremely frustrating warfare. Given the subjective nature of time, traumatic time is re-enacted through retrospective writing that transports officers back to the moments of the events described. The retrospective immersion in past experience is signalled by the mix of tenses characterizing their accounts. This is exemplified by the letter sent by Corporal

Domenico Castelli to Campodonico's sister on 3 June 1917 to provide an account of her brother's heroic death on 24 April 1917:[522]

Fu la notte del 24 aprile la sfortuna di molti soldati del mio reggimento perchè seppe con valore prendergli al nemico un posto avanzato...., tutto si credeva finito, ma verso le dieci della sera incominciava l'artiglieria a concerntrarsi sul nuovo posto e a tutta la zona dietro di esso essere colpita da continui tiri... Verso le 24 e 30 le comunicazioni telefoniche incominciarono a mancare, allora il signor colonnello abbandona il telefono perchè non può comunicare più coi battaglioni, non può star fermo senza notizie; il signor capitano Balestrieri è in alto alla dolina a osservare i segnali coi razzi, guardando ove aumentava la fucileria, e dove batteva l'artiglieria nemica la quale non si sapeva ancora il punto che bersagliava'[523]

The passage by Castelli is not referred to in this chapter in order to add something to the image of Campodonico, but rather because it is an example of the way in which experience is transposed and retrospectively recalled and, at the same time, re-experienced through writing.[524] If one were interested in the projection of military and masculine values, however, the letter would be of great interest, as, even if it is meant to recount a tragic event - that is the death of the addressee's

[522] Domenico Castelli writes retrospectively from Sarzana on 3 June 1917.

[523] Campodonico, *Lauri*, p. 23.

[524] Unlike the intention of this section, Omodeo inserts Castelli's letter in order to reinforce his thesis that 'Altro soldato di razza era indubbiamente Angelo Campodonico'/'Another purebred soldier was undoubtedly Angelo Campodonico'. In Adolfo Omodeo, *Momenti*, p. 47.

brother - Castelli appears to be committed to infusing the letter with a mythological self-aggrandizing tone. The description of the battle starts with the following passage, which prepares the ground for what is told afterwards. The first verbal tense is a simple past which, however, is soon replaced by what in Italian is defined as ‘imperfetto’ (unfortunately translated with the simple past in English). This is a verbal tense used for an action that takes place in the past, but emphasizes the phases of it, the process: 'si credeva', 'incominciava'. Then the ‘passato remoto’ is restored 'incominciarono' when the punctual and objective recollection of events is provided: 'Around 12.30 am the telephone communications began to fail'. The surprise is that this is followed by a simple present. This tense enters the account because Castelli is, all of a sudden, reliving those moments and describing what he sees in real time. ‘Then the captain leaves the telephone as he can no longer communicate with the battalions, he cannot stay there, motionless, with no news. Captain Balestrieri is up high on the sinkhole to watch the flare signals, observing where the rifle shots increased and where the enemy artillery was aiming’. The 'imperfetto' again enters the description when Castelli reflects upon the explanations of the events and zooms out of the scene into which, for a while, his memory has projected him. His writing actualizes the past experience for himself and for his audience.

A relevant example of a written recollection of combat is offered by the following passage taken from Zanivolti's epistolary exchange.[525] In this letter,

[525] Zanivolti with the 10th company, 90th Infantry Regiment of the Salerno Brigade is in the area of Sleme Mrzli. Given that they were supporting other groups in a minor action that did not lead to

written on 5 October 1915 from Arrigo hospital in Alessandria where he is recovering from an injury, Zanivolti provides an account of the event that took place on the night between 28-29 September.[526] This action, and the wound resulting from it, are transposed and communicated to the family only once the danger is over.[527] In describing the battle, Zanivolti could have opted for a reassuring and minimizing attitude. Instead of doing so, he chooses to magnify and underline the dangers of the experience in order to provide an account characterized by highly heroic tones:

I nostri cannoni ci laceravano le orecchie. A mezzanotte ricevo l'ordine di andare a rinforzare la sinistra degli Alpini presso alla casetta diroccata alle falde del Vodil. La notte continuava buia, quasi volesse nascondere tanto sangue. Con una fatica enorme, strisciando nel fango fra i reticolati spezzati, arrivai sul posto. Non siamo ancor ben distesi che il mio comandante la compagnia cade ferito. Prende il comando l'altro sottotenente (della Territoriale, di fresco venuto alla compagnia). Anche il capitano degli Alpini cade ferito gravemente e poco dopo spira.[528]

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satisfying results there is no specific record of this action in the military records of the Salerno Brigade, nor in those of the Liguria Brigade with which some companies of the 90th infantry were cooperating.

[526] The actions carried out at the end of September are mentioned in Cadorna's bulletin of 1 October 1915 that also mentions the infantry action, but only very vaguely, on the area of Vodil. av at <https://alpinigenovaquarto.wordpress.com/2015/10/01/bollettino-di-guerra-del-1-ottobre-1915/>

[527] This is due to the fact that he needs not only to recover but also to organize his thoughts about his combat experience.

[528] Interestingly in his service record states a different date for the battle, that is to say 30 September 1915, this means that he either mixed up the dates when he was hospitalized or that it was recorded in the wrong way at a subsequent stage.

In describing combat, Zanivolti oscillates between the objective account of a military action and his extremely personal experience of it. Signs of the former, namely the precision commonly found in military records, are the details pertaining to the time and place of the events, such as 'At midnight', and 'at the foothill of Vodil', but also those concerning the motivations behind the order 'to go and support the Alpini'. After providing the indications of the time and place of the action, the surrounding landscape, and the action itself, are given a more personal connotation through which they take on a symbolic and mysterious role: ‘The night went by in darkness, as if it wanted to hide so much blood.' The re-elaboration on the condition in which the action was started is the prelude to what comes after, namely the personal account of the battle:

L’azione però pareva continuasse, bene e regolare. Il cielo cominciava a rasserenarsi. Verso oriente un fascio di luce scialba mi permetteva di distinguere il viso pallido de’ miei soldati. Tutto a un tratto sento un gran vociare dalla mia destra, dove la trincea faceva un gradino discendente. 'Urrà! Urrà!…'Mi volto quasi meravigliato e vedo una lunga riga di cappottoni che venivano di corsa verso di noi con baionetta inastata. Quelli che gli erano di fronte si diedero a fuggire.

The battle is described using a series of literary strategies meant to create suspense in the reader and allow him to imagine how immense and dangerous it was. An example is provided by the sentence: 'What happened afterwards I will never be

able to tell'. On the one hand, this sentence reveals the exclusivity of the experience and prevents the reader from thinking that they can have any proper access to it, but, on the other, it paradoxically represents an attempt by Zanivolti to initiate his family audience into military life and the dangers and confusion of battle. Worth noting about this sentence is something which surfaced in the translating process, namely that the order of the sentence consciously places the emphasis on the events by using 'what happened afterwards' and then minimizes the possibility for Zanivolti to ‘recount’ it. This passage can be considered as crucial, especially when compared with the beginning of the letter in which Zanivolti states that he perfectly remembers all the moments preceding the battle and then he states that he is reluctant or unable to recount his experience. The negation of the possibility to describe could be thus intended as solely psychological. This pessimistic view on sharing is followed, and contradicted, by a detailed description of events, and by a vivid representation of the confusion inherent to fighting represented as a synaesthetic, multi-sensorial moment. Placing the reader at the centre of the action, Zanivolti recalls both the acoustic and the visual elements surfacing in his memory along with the spatial indication. This evokes a physical, tactile sensation 'where the trench took a step down’. Even the metonymy ('line of big coats') adopted to describe the enemy's approach is worth mentioning as a further aspect of immediacy pertaining to Zanivolti's recollection.[529] Responding to the principle to choose an 'immediate over non-immediate' image, he mentions

[529] Günter Radden and Zoltán Kövécses 'Towards a Theory of Metonymy', in Klaus Uwe-Panther and Günter Radden, eds., *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co. 1999), pp. 17-60.

exactly what he first sees, i.e. a part characterizing the figure of the enemy, before providing the final information that those 'big coats' were Austrians soldiers.[530]

In order to evaluate the role of subjectivity and agency in this letter, it appears worthwhile to consider the way in which personal pronouns are used in that they signal the personal filter. The frequency of the personal pronoun 'I', which is used nineteen times, is worth signalling in that it enables Zanivolti to represent himself as if he were always there, present and ready to react. More than this, even when he is not an active participant or witness of the event, the 'I' introduces his personal point of view. Moreover, through the use of the pronoun 'I', Zanivolti portrays himself as a possibly crucial agent in the action and as someone responsible for the success of a difficult and risky enterprise. Secondly, his important role and his keenly felt sense of belonging to the military unit, and to the mission he is requested to undertake, is marked by the possessive adjective 'my', as in the phrase 'my soldiers'. Even the shock provoked in him as he notes that the recently arrived and less-skilled second lieutenant is no longer there represents, in the letter, a sort of initiatory moment that forces Zanivolti to take the lead and become the only protagonist of this combat narrative.[531] The initiation is signalled by a question which reflects Zanivolti's thoughts:

Anche quei pochi alpini e i miei soldati cominciarono a correre chi qua, chi là generando una confusione incredibile... Sentii allora come un brivido per tutto me

[530] Ibid., p. 47.

[531] This is connected with the prejudice against members from the *territoriale/*reserve units that in 1915 were still displaced far from combat, therefore new to it.

stesso. Io tremavo, tremavo dalla rabbia, dall'indignazione. 'Ma quel comandante la compagnia dov'è?…' mi domandavo…

The answer to this question, however, had been anticipated and suggested in the letter: it is in a previous passage which specifies that this second lieutenant (who had recently joined the company and belonged to the reserve unit) took the lead after his commander had been wounded.

If the 'I' refers, as already suggested, to Zanivolti's active role and engagement in the action, 'me' and 'my' are also relevant for the interpretation of the text in that they are used to convey either his sense of belonging to the group or the way in which members of the group relate to him and regard him during and after the action. Providing a visual representation of how soldiers were relating to him spatially, the following passage suggests the central role he was attributed by the troops. Movement is also used here to contrast his soldiers' confusion and disorientation with his own resoluteness and courage. Through this sentence, Zanivolti infuses his letter with the suggestion of his central position and of his crucial role in the encounter. It is no accident that the only time the personal pronoun 'me' is used as a direct object rather than as a subject it is adopted to signal his central position:

Non esitai tanto. Mi piantai là fermo verso quelli che s'avanzavano sempre più baldanzosi, e con una forza di volontà non mai avuta, con una risolutezza, che io non m'ero mai immaginato, chiamai la mia compagnia e gli Alpini. Quei poverini che non sapevano dove rifugiarsi, alla voce di un loro comandante, mi furono subito

attorno, sbigottiti, pallidi. In un baleno li feci stendere e feci aprire un fuoco d'inferno. A quella raffica risoluta, i nemici sparirono. Chi cadde, chi si nascose. Non li vidi più. Allora sentii la voce fievole del mio comandante, che chiamava la compagnia…

Contradiction can be seen as the defining attitude towards sharing combat; a complex form of ambivalence which accompanies the trauma and chaos of the fighting experience, on the one hand, and of the recollection of it, on the other: Non voglio proseguire; il ricordo di quel momento m'avvilisce… Forse proseguirò il racconto quando verrò a casa in licenza. Chi mi vide quando sono arrivato, ha dovuto proprio fare una risata sonora. Ero infangato sino alle orecchie, stracciato, scalcinato, le avevo tutte con me.
Significantly, this letter has a reassuring, circular structure. It begins and ends with Arrigo Hospital as the point in space and time from which the battle is re-evoked, thus embedding the tragic and risky military adventure in a more familiar and comforting place: the home front, not far from Pavia.

A similar strategy of framing a landscape of terror with one of pleasure and calm is adopted in another letter, written by Zanivolti on 22 September 1916 from a hospital in Forlì. Some sections of this letter have already been explored in the chapter on landscapes: the first paragraph is, in fact, entirely devoted to the description of the pleasant view from the window and of the condition in which he finds himself. The second paragraph introduces the re-evocation of the battle. Even

here, Zanivolti opens with a sentence which underlines how heroic his participation was and how lucky he was at having suffered only a minor injury:

Era un fuoco d'inferno quel giorno. Quattro volte si tentò di assaltare le posizioni nemiche e quattro volte bisognò retrocedere. Alla fine il colonnello stesso balzò dalla trincea, gridando: "Così si va avanti" e aperse le braccia come dovesse abbracciare qualche cosa di grande, bramata.. Fece due passi e cadde colpito al petto. La morte desiderata, quella morte d'eroe ch'era forse stata l'ideale della sua vita di soldato, l'avea baciato sul cuore…Ormai più nessuno potea sull'animo dei soldati, che vedevano contro quei reticolati intatti una morte certa, senza effetti. 'Ci ammazzano … Avanti… Avanti … Si muore …'Mi fermai davanti al mio Capitano. Era pallido, gli occhi sbarrati, le labbra tremanti. 'Zanivolti, mi si spezza il cuore… Questa non è un'avanzata, è un macello': Io stringevo forte il moschetto e guardavo. Numerose mitragliatrici avevano aperto il fuoco con pallottole esplodenti; tutto era un rumore, un bestemmiare, un pianger sommesso, un fumo nero, acre, amaro.

Significantly, the following passage tackles the discrepancy between the sacrifice of men and the small achievements that result from it, summarized by the word 'purposeless'. Combat merges as a synaesthetic experience where the 'noise' of explosions and swearing comes together with smoke that has a bitter taste; a pungent smell. Moreover, reported speech enters the account as both a further acoustic component and another witnessing tool:

'Madonna mia, sono ferito…' Il Capitano diede un sussulto: 'Ma non è nulla - ripigliai subito - È un forellino al braccio'. Corsi dietro un riparo a fasciarmi. Non volevo far sapere nulla a' miei soldati, ma fu impossibile. Quando partii il Capitano mi baciò piangendo; il Sergente non seppe dirmi nulla, avea gli occhi gonfi. Mi ricordo d'avermi asciugato due lagrimucce… Il vostro Pepino

Contrary to the previous letter, the end of this account is not marked by a reassuring return to the safe home-front environment of the hospital, instead the letter ends in the middle of things, almost on the battlefield. When Zanivolti leaves the battle, he also leaves the letter, without even adding his typical regards but simply closing with 'yours Peppino'. The end of his letter thus mimics the silence which characterizes his departure from his military companions and from the battlefield, as if re-evoking those moments and describing the emotions accompanying them had left him, once again, deeply moved and speechless. This feeling he wants to share with, and even instil in, his family. In line with the theory that 'humanity has only a certain limit of endurance', it is possible to argue that the fact that Zanivolti has been at war for longer, compared to when he wrote the previous letter, and that he has already been wounded twice, makes it more

difficult for him to recover from the trauma of combat (and from the death of his captain).[532]

Delayed accounts: hyperbole and combat

The following passage, taken from Guerrieri's epistolary collection, is of interest for its self-reflective nature. In the extract reported below, closing a letter written on 19 July 1916, Guerrieri tries to describe the nature of his desire and his need to portray a battle.[533] It is worth noting that this description is only provided to the family more than twenty days after the battle took place.[534] This detail will become particularly interesting as we further investigate other writings and battle reports later in this chapter. While the account and sharing of these moments is sometimes delayed due to the practical impossibility to write, frequently it is due to the complex reprocessing of memory and of the ways in which experience is accepted and re-elaborated, and only to a stage common to those who write:

Come e perché vi parlo stasera di questo fatto che non ricordo mai, perché mi produce ancora una forte eccitazione, ed una specie di smarrimento? Non lo so, forse perchè sento tuonare così bene i nostri cannoni su quel punto proprio dove tanto quel giorno ho penato. Il racconto è spezzettato, ridotto; è narrato così come

[532] Edgar Jones, 'The Psychology of Killing: The Combat Experience of British Soldiers during the First World War' in *Journal of Contemporary History* 2006 SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi Vol. 4(2), pp. 229-246, here p. 235.

[533] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, pp. 153-158.

[534] The battle to regain Mount Cimone took place between 26 and 30 June. The action conducted by Guerrieri was rewarded with a silver medal.

lo consente la mente che si riaccende ancora di quelle vampate e di quella disperazione. Mi ci voleva il riposo! [535]

Also of interest is the frequency with which these officers self-reflect on paper about their reluctance to share and their difficulty in describing battles in a proper, concise or exact way (a trait that is also underlined in the letters by Zanivolti and in Campodonico's previously investigated refusal to describe actual combat). The difficulty felt in both thinking about those moments and then in putting the emotions and memories pertaining to those experiences into written words, is signalled by a series of aspects such as lexical choice, syntactical construct, and the tone and rhythm given to these recollections. This letter, for instance, begins in *medias res*, as if Guerrieri is describing a battle taking place while he is writing. The immediacy of the account is such that we must imagine him borrowing from a notebook in which such a precise report of place, events and personal perception is stored:

Carissimi, Di fuori un bombardamento terribile, il terreno intorno è seminato di batterie che sparano colpi sopra sul Monte Cimone.

From this opening, characterized by the use of present simple, the reader imagines that what is described is taking place at the time of writing. Only later in the letter does Guerrieri use the verb in the *passato remoto* to signal that his account refers

[535] Guerrieri, *Lettere*, p. 158.

to the past, even though he can still clearly recall those moments. It is the traumatic past which, rationally, one knows is gone, but, emotionally speaking, one can still feel around and inside oneself. A haunting presence which is not solely visual but involves all the senses and is rendered through synaesthesia. The following passage provides a further example of the inconsistency of the proper time of traumatic experience, marked by the overlapping of different moments on the page:

Quando il battaglione lo attaccò al comando del Capitano Veggian che Angiolino conobbe, non eravamo ancora alle sue falde che cominciò una pioggia furibonda di granate, non si poteva proseguire, il sacrifico sarebbe stato enorme ed inutile, pure qualcuno doveva andare innanzi e cercare nonostante il fuoco la strada.

The circumstance described in the first section of the letter belongs to another time, one that is past. However, there is still a vivid and close participation through writing. This becomes clear when the direct speech is reported indirectly 'non si poteva proseguire'/'we couldn't go any further'. Here, even if Guerrieri uses the *imperfetto* (simple past), Italian readers perceive it as a present tense, as they imagine the conclusions that are reached by the troops: 'it is impossible to go further; the sacrifice will be enormous and useless'. And someone answers something along the lines of: 'True, but someone still has to find the way through'. Of course there is no evidence that such a verbal exchange took place but, in Guerrieri's mind, similar contrasting thoughts seem to have been formulated and solved with the final resolution to go and take the risk.

This passage ends in uncertainty as we still don't know which brave men will dare risk their lives for the sake of the manoeuvre. Using an additional paragraph to

create more suspense, Guerrieri begins his account. He then discloses the way in which he was involved as a main protagonist in this operation. He does not hesitate to admit that he was ordered to do so, even though he chooses the words 'called' and 'chosen, selected' which have more positive implications and suggests that this decision was taken out of an affirmative evaluation of his skills and courage. There is no reluctance to disclose that he did not volunteer for the assault as it is made immediately clear that it would be almost impossible to carry out the action and come back alive:

Non vidi mai una precisione di tiro come quella volta. Io me ne stavo coi miei uomini a ridosso di un poggio e fui chiamato (scelto) a cercare la strada. Il compito era terribile ogni metro quadrato della strada a brevi intrevalli di tempo era battuto, con una violenza inaudita, sul volto dei miei superiori e dei miei compagni vidi un pallore di morte e con occhi stupiti guardavano me che vi andavo incontro. Scene orribili, caddi più volte e mi rialzai, d'un tratto mi trvai la strada spezzata da una mina come proseguire? Mi gettai nel buco profondo sperando di poterlo girare e salire dall'altra parte, ma anche lì un'altra mina era scoppiata ed un altro buco apriva la sua bocca grande ed infame ed il terreno sotto i piedi cedeva e mi trascinava giù nel fiume, di sopra il fuoco continuo incessante (da far) impazzire. Come risalii e ritrovai la strada? Non ricordo bene, so che un sasso fermo mi trattenne, vi aggrappai le mani e su continuai la mia missione, su fino a sera, a cercare la strada per il mio battaglione.

The 'total' nature of danger and the imminence of death are portrayed by means of hyperbole and by the tendency to include everything in this complete and catastrophic picture. In this way, 'every single' metre of the road is under fire; there 'never' was such precision of fire as there was then; the violence was 'unimaginable' and the paleness on his mates' face is a paleness 'of death'. In the face of such impossible and overwhelming circumstances, direct speech enters the page unannounced to record what Guerrieri thought at the time: 'How to go further?' This is the first of several questions to which his account gives detailed answers. However, the following questions (implicit or explicit in the text) are imagined as being uttered by his intended audience rather than him. This rhetorical device helps him to maintain the vividness of his direct description while also enabling him to return to the present dimension in which his writing is produced. There is an implicit 'you wonder' preceding, or following, the question 'how did I get back and find the way through?' that is imagined as spoken by anyone reading this account. This imagined reader 'actualized' on the page has a crucial role in that it is a concrete embodiment of the attempt by Guerrieri to not only overcome his struggle to remember and put into words his experience, but also to explicitly reformulate his words to make them accessible and understandable for his family audience.

Worth noting is the role that Guerrieri assigns to himself by using the verb 'ero' (I was) in the first person singular and also to include his mate, Gigi. Here it is translated with 'it was myself and Gigi', but it would be more appropriate to translate it in another, less conventional, way in English such as 'I was there, and

Gigi'. Only from the second sentence onwards are the verbs used in the first person plural, thus including the companions in the action as co-protagonists with him in his account. That first verb 'ero', however, signals that Guerrieri puts himself in the foreground both because of a need to retrospectively celebrate his courage and in response to his parents' imagined desire to receive positive updates about their son:

Ero io e Gigi soli, soli, il Capitano Veggian ed il secondo soldato che mi ero chiamato era stato ferito da un altor colpo. Inseguiti da quel fuoco d'inferno sostammo in una grotta, ma di sopra gli austriaci ci avevano scorti, gridavano e sparavano, bisognò ancora scappare e il dovere voleva che si andasse innanzi: giornata terribile, ma la missione fu compiuta fino all'ultimo, e il Colonnello ha proposto per una ricompensa tutti noi della piccola pattuglia. La ricompensa non verrà di certo, seguirà la storia di quella di Monfalcone, ma ad ogni modo sono venuto a conoscenza della motivazione e quella mi basta, a suo tempo ve la comunicherò.[536]

It is worth observing the vagueness with which Guerrieri refers to war in the moments immediately following the action described. In the letter written on 30 June 1916, in fact, he expresses his feelings about the horrors of war, about the dangers he and the other men are exposed to, and he makes general observations about their condition. He limits himself to the following statement:

[536] Ibid., p. 157.

Quando ripenso ai pericoli corsi e così felicemente superati non so capacitarmi del perchè sia così vivo, sano e a direi anche contento, perchè in fondo non sono proprio triste, qualche volta rido, persino sgangheratamente e sempre mangio con avidità quel po' di roba che di tanto in tanto mi arriva...

In the letter written on 30 June, he expresses many emotions and considerations about war, both in relation to the type of war conducted on mountain peaks and in relation to the struggles and suffering of battles in general.[537] The following passage begins with an explicit reference to mountain warfare:

La guerra su questi ermi picchi di monti, fatta ad altezze inverosimili, acquista un carattere particolare tutto suo proprio speciale, una delle caratteristiche principali è lo sfrozo fisico che richiede per l'incessante salire su per strade impraticabili dove perfino i muli a metà si fermano e tornano indietro.[538]

The following passage deals with the human condition and his personal view on and of the conflict in its bloody battles. It also bears witness to the pervasiveness of combat, as a traumatic experience that persists over time:

Troppo dolorose le scene che si svolgono di gente ferita che non può essere soccorsa, di soldati che si raccolgono dentro una grotta col loro braccio

[537] ibid., pp. 142-144.

[538] Ibid., p.143.

sanguinante, col viso deformato in attesa di una mano fraterna che li aiuti, mano amica del compagno che giungerà si ma tardi, nel fare della sera quando nessuno più vede e l'ira austriaca darà un primo segno di stanchezza. ..Scene di pietà e di orrrore che rimangono qui nel cuore nella mente, che si vedono sempre, che conitnueremo a vedere per tuttta a vita. In mezzo a tanta rovina, sia pur vittoriosa, la fortuna continua a proteggermi, a seguirmi come una buona amica: è certo la protezione alta di Dio che non vuole ancora la mia fine.[539]

It is peculiar to start a sentence with 'troppo' without then coming to any conclusion: 'too hurtful the scenes of wounded people'. One is tempted to utter the question: 'too hurtful for what'? To be described? To be recalled? Imagined? Endured? Sustained? Faced? Overcome? To these imagined questions it would be possible to answer: 'probably all of the above'. But given the topic of the chapter, and given Guerrieri's choice to generalize and only recount his actions about a month later, it might also be interpreted here as 'too hurtful to be told'.

The practice of everyday war in Vitelli's notebook [540]

The accounts of war presented in letters and diaries and written from the trenches can be seen as attempts to overcome the difficulty of living in such conditions, as ways to re-imagine the space, and as momentary escapes from them. War space (meant here both as emotional and actual) is renegotiated through these daily

[539] Ibid., p. 143.

[540] Phrase derived from Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, **(**Berkeley: UCalPress 1984).

writings. In *The practice of everyday life*, De Certeau describes the dichotomy between the voyeuristic attitude of the Icarian eye, observing the city from the roof of a skyscraper, and the direct Daedalusian experience of the urban labyrinth proper - of what he defines 'the practitioners of the city' - namely the people living and walking on the streets.[541] Personal accounts of battle can be imagined as something similar to what De Certeau defines as creative walking paths actualized by each practitioner of the city, who re-appropriates the urban landscape and re-imagines its space through his/her paths through it.[542] Applying De Certeau's idea on the re-negotiation of space to our field of investigation, and imagining military members as 'practitioners of war' rather than as 'practitioners of the city', we might begin to view private war texts as written (rather than walked) paths to re-appropriate and renegotiate war space and war time. These ‘writing paths’ create many wars within the war, many battles within the battle, and many 'practiced' perspectives. These are driven from experience to contrast the Icarian voyeuristic views and assumptions of those who view battles from above (generals) or who only imagine them from afar (those on the home front who base their assumptions on articles in the press and official communications).

The idea of writing as the natural driver of human beings to creatively re-define space (both physical and emotional) and as a means to re-insert the self into the world and into history, could further explain the frequency of writing activity and its pervasiveness throughout the conflict. This could also further explain the

[541] Ibid., p. 93.

[542] Ibid., p. 95.

military hierarchies' attempts to constrict and control writing activity in different ways: through censorship, which was setting limits to the free expression and subjective interpretation and representation of war, and, more subtly, but nonetheless efficiently, through the constant request for military reports. These forced officers and soldiers to modify not only the message conveyed but also its intrinsic structure. It is not infrequent that official writing styles influence and contaminate private writings. Returning to De Certeau's theory, it is possible to consider the production of official reports, as responses to requests from the military system, as the following of pre-existing imposed paths (meaning paths of communication in war rather than urban spaces to be walked). Daily military reports form a structure, and a mental and linguistic barbed-wire fence able to influence, and at times trap, even the more personal views and accounts of war. Being a constant element of officers' bureaucratic life (often lamented as a further burden by Vitelli), official records exercise an influence on both the perception and written recollection of events as they are required to be detached, objective, detailed and impersonal. An exceptional example to explain this parallel narrative existence is offered by the journal kept by Antonio Vitelli, providing an account of an accident involving one of his soldiers. He begins subjectively and then, interestingly, decides to reproduce the formal military account he was required to write on it. What is significant is the fact that the formal account is also entered into his own notebook, as if responding to a personal need to re-frame the event in more rational and detached terms. Experience is very different in these two written accounts and, even if Vitelli is writing about an accident rather than about a combat

scene, his description provides a thought-provoking angle from which to take our first step into the tricky and nuanced subject of the personal accounts of trauma. Both passages considered in this section provide an account of the accidental death caused by a grenade explosion at the military camp, one which leads to the death of one of Vitelli's men.

In the introduction to the article 'the Everyday as involved in war', Tammy M. Proctor investigates the hybrid terrain of the encounter between war and everyday life which appears of interest here.

Part of the disconcerting reality of war is this juxtaposition: danger and fear in the midst of the ordinary. War in its ugliness defies imagination, but it also produces a state of uncertainty that cannot be maintained through every moment of every day. Humans cling to their routines and create new everyday 'normal' activities in the midst of war.[543]

The trauma in Vitelli's account is not solely that of losing one of his men, of seeing a man turned into a human torch, but also that of having to acknowledge the constant risk of violent death imposed by war technologies, even outside combat. Here, the shock results from the fact that, unlike death on the battlefield, this loss comes unexpectedly. War has invaded the space and the time in the trenches and cave hideouts which, despite their proximity to the battlefields, have been built and conceived (and are therefore envisaged) as relatively safe areas

[543] Tammy M. Proctor, 'The everyday as involved in war ', in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI**: 10.15463/ie1418.10453.

when fighting abates. This accident is thus shocking for Vitelli and for the rest of his unit:

Oggi verso le due del pomeriggio mentre ero nella mia tana a riordinare le carte di batteria, ho sentito nel camminamento coperto un accorrere di soldati e alcune urla strazianti di dolore. Balzato fuori d'un salto mi sono messo a correre verso la caverna di accesso alla batteria ma giunto in prossimità dello scavo in roccia pel grandioso ricovero della truppa, un terribile spettacolo mi ha bruscamente arrestato. In mezzo a tre o quattro compagni anch'essi bruciacchiati e anneriti ho visto ardere un uomo fra uno stridore e un odore insopprimibile di carne cotta, in una caliginosa fumata che strozzava il respiro. Nella maschera nera e convulsa che mi compariva davanti ho ravvisato tuttavia i tratti di un minatore, il soldato Serragli uno dei più belli e bravi giovanotti della batteria. Ma che terribile trasformazione...[544]

Worth noting is that Vitelli tells this account in the first person, stating what he was doing when he came to learn about the accident and how he came to realise that something was wrong. The account reproduces, step-by-step, the details that led him to the tragic discovery. It is thus rich in subjective perceptions and in acoustic, visual and olfactory elements that always filter through Vitelli's narration. The emotions experienced by Vitelli are explicitly reproduced on the page of his journal through a series of adjectives such as 'strazianti'. While the use of 'straziate' used to

[544] Vitelli, *Doss Remit*.

define the voices of other soldiers would have meant ‘desperate’, Vitelli chooses 'strazianti' instead: a verb that defines the effect that these voices have on him when he hears them. Even the description of his own reaction to the first sign of danger is charged with emotions. There is no need in Italian to write ‘Balzato fuori d'un salto ’ (Bounced out with a jump) as the verb 'balzare'/'bounce' already suggests both the idea of rapidity provided by words like 'immediately' and that of surprise conveyed by phrases like 'all of a sudden', thus delegitimizing the use of the additional phrase 'd'un salto'. The choice of such repetition probably lies in the need to describe the emotions experienced and the set of fears and hopes which that quick jump out of his barracks came to symbolize. However, the repetition could also hyper-compensate the fear of not having been quick enough. Even though he probably couldn’t have prevented this accident from happening, Vitelli, as all survivors tend to do (and in this case also as the lieutenant responsible for the troop), implicitly infuses his writing with a sense of guilt for a life stupidly lost while under his command.

The already-mentioned idea of speed is reinforced by the verb 'correre' (to run) to describe the way in which Vitelli proceeds towards the cave. This space is portrayed by a series of adjectives suggesting drama and tragedy. The first adjective is, in fact, 'terrible' used as a pre-modifier of 'scene'. The rapid movement is 'abruptly' arrested. The smell of burning meat is defined as 'insopprimibile' (irrepressible); it persists even once Vitelli is back in his barracks. This reinforces the idea of war’s process of colonization of subjective time. The adjective suggests that he would like to suppress it but he cannot; he would like to have some way not to

perceive it but he doesn’t. The unbearable nature of the smell is reinforced by the use of 'strozzare' (to choke) as a verb to describe the extent to which it made it impossible for Vitelli, and probably also for his men, to breath. The shocking metamorphosis engendered by the fire is particularly painful for Vitelli who, at first, cannot even recognize Serragli, who is now reduced to a black husk of burnt meat. This transformation is particularly shocking as it could also be interpreted as the metamorphosis of a war able to reduce men to undistinguishable agglomerates. Synaesthesia pervades this account where all senses are present: the acoustic (the shouting voices of his soldiers) the visual (the terrible scene of his Serragli reduced to a black mask) and the sense of smell (the pervasive and persistent acrid smell of burnt meat). The tactile is also evoked with the mention of the thick smoke.

The border between this more personal section of the account and the more detailed and objective report provided to the military system is signalled by Vitelli who writes: 'Ed io me ne sono andato in fureria a redigere il mio burocratico rapporto all'autorità gerarchica immediatamente superiore' / 'And I went to the command room to prepare my bureaucratic report for the hierarchical authorities directly above me.’ From here on, citation marks signal the beginning of some parts taken from this more bureaucratic version of the events, provided below:

La disgrazia è stata causata da una disattenzione: il povero Serragli nell'uscir di corsa dalla caverna dopo aver dato fuoco a una mina ha gettato inavvertitamente la miccia ancora accesa in un barattolo di latta contenente circa un mezzo Kg di polvere da mina (che serviva per confezionare le cariche) che egli aveva lasciato lì proprio nel camminamento. La vampata lo ha avvolto e conciato in quel modo, gli

altri tre a quadro distanti qualche passo se la sono cavata con qualche bruciacchiatura da nulla.

Worth noting is the fact that this passage, probably borrowed from the military report he had already written or that he was about to write, is included in his private notebook, thus becoming part of his own recollection. This, on the one hand, contrasts from a formal and stylistic point of view with his personal recollection of the event but, on the other, turns out to be somehow complementary to it. A comparison between the two passages reveals that the subjective perspective, so crucial in the personal account, is almost erased from the military report. Moreover, the factual report takes the form of a document comprised from the reports received from the group of soldiers and miners who witness the accident. The intervention of Vitelli's voice is only detectable in the use of 'povero' (poor) to define Serragli, and 'inavvertitamente' (inadvertently) as an adverb used to absolve him and allow the accidental nature of this incident clearly emerge. These two adjectives, however, could also belong, as already suggested, to the accounts provided by Serragli's mates and accepted by Vitelli in his account. Another interesting aspect is that this more objective tone, borrowed from the bureaucratic version of the account offered to the military system, is abandoned in the notebook once the dynamic of the accident has been described. The subjective perspective of Vitelli thus resurfaces and takes hold of the remainder of the narration:

Mentre scrivo, la terribile maschera nera del disgraziato minatore mi è sempre innanzi agli occhi, e nelle narici ho qull'odore tremendo, lugubre di carne umana abbruciata...

The question remains as to the reasons that led Vitelli to describe this event, even in the form of a proper military record. The hypothesis that has been formulated here is that this more factual version of events allows Vitelli to detach himself from the tragedy while also helping him to alleviate his sense of guilt (no matter whether it is well-grounded or not) for failing to prevent the accident. One could argue also that, through the official record, Vitelli is trying to regain the Icarian view tragically lost when he was requested to leave his post at Doss Casina and at the observatory to go down to the 'ground-level' of war, where he inevitably has only a partial view.[545] Significantly, he is now in a lower position compared to that of the soldiers who witness the event, as indicated by his remark 'while I was in my hiding place... I heard in the covered walkway soldiers running here and there'. To understand what has happened he has to jump out and rise from his dugout.[546]

If letters are viewed, as they have in numerous studies, as 'bridges' between the frontline and the home-front, it would be possible to go further and propose the idea of written words in war notebooks and diaries as bricks to constantly build

[545] More information and spatial insights on these areas are available at <http://www.guerrabianca.it/it-it/escursioni/556ec0c2d19970ac130048ee/doss-casina-e-luoghi-della-guerra-dei-futuristi>.

[546] On the nature of trenches in mountainous sectors see Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, 'Combat' in John Horne, ed., *A Companion to World War One* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), pp. 173-187, here p. 178.

connections between imposed war identities and pre-existing representations of the self.

Conclusion

Combat, meant here as the quintessence of confusion and disorder, is omnipresent in the sources selected in this chapter. However, the forms in which it is evoked differ significantly: for instance, it might be desperately hidden or 'silenced' in writing (as is the case with Campodonico). In these cases, ordered and logical structures and sequences of events are super-imposed on experience as a form of hyper-compensation. The drive, which can be detected in these kinds of account, is a need to contrast, and possibly erase through writing, or sublimate through extreme exaltation, the accidental nature of experience imposed by war upon the subject. Also present is the disquieting impossibility to gain a well-defined - and therefore reassuring - place on the battlefield. Behind these writing attitudes is the conscious, or unconscious, need to survive the destructive impact which these mass-combat and death experiences could exercise upon the subject. Such hyper-compensation might take different forms: the subject, for instance, confronted with the annihilation of subjectivity and the dehumanization of combat might exploit writing as an activity to regain a place in the world, to regain a hold of his own integrity and identity. In some cases, writing represents a chance to re-interpret or even (consciously or semi-consciously) mystify the course of events in an attempt to put forward an ideal, imagined heroic role, able to elevate the self from the anonymity of battle, and provide him with a special place in war, and in the

world.[547] The written word thus assumes many different functions, acting as a tool to retrospectively interact with past experiences, to constantly renegotiate the present, and also to imagine, project, filter, or face future events. The function of the written word goes well beyond the message conveyed and the motivations behind it. Writing pertains to many functions: first and foremost it could be seen as a way to say 'I' even in (and from) the trenches, and, in so doing, to 'endure' war.[548] Advancing the argument on writing as a form of most-of-the-time unconscious resistance to the rigid cognitive paths imposed by combat, one could argue that even synaesthesia (both in the realm of experience and in that of written re-elaboration) can be seen not solely as an act of endurance, of reaffirmation of the human component against the annihilating military framework, but also as an act of resistance against imposed ways of feeling, thinking, acting and living at war.[549] The subjectivity constructed by these writings, the use of hyperbole, metonymy and synaesthesia, the frequent inconsistency in the use of verbal tenses along with the change of register adopted in Vitelli's notebook, have emerged as necessary tools to represent unimaginably traumatic experiences.[550] The analysis conducted on the selected sources has revealed a strict, complex and ambivalent connection between experience and writing, which influence each other at both a synchronic and diachronic level.

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[547] Gibelli, *La Grande Guerra degli Italiani, 1915-1918*, p. 139.

[548] Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War, Combat, Morale and Collapse in The German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[549] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 95 and Andrew Webber, *Berlin in the Twentieth Century: A Cultural Topography*, p. 23.

[550] Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self*, p. 20.

Chapter 7

Breakdown: the trauma of Caporetto

Introduction

Caporetto represented a terrible military collapse which changed the Italian war, transforming it into a war of defence. The Austro-Hungarian and German troops broke through, invaded 20,000 km of Italian territory and pushed the defensive line back to the Piave river. The toll was 11,000 fallen, 29,000 wounded and 300,000 Italian prisoners taken.[551] The heavy bombardment that started at 2am on 24 October 1917 was followed by German troops' military breakthrough in the Plezzo and Tolmino valley (on the northern sector of the Isonzo front) where the Second Army was positioned.[552] The Rout was charged with a high symbolical meaning and came to represent all the contradictions of war, the treatment of combatants, their morale and the very nature of war itself.[553]

On a military level, the Rout was the result of a mix of synchronic and diachronic factors. At a synchronic level it was provoked by an effective joint and unexpected assault of Austro-German forces conducted through an innovative surprise infiltration tactic previously adopted by German troops in Riga.[554] The unprecedented military collapse is also deeply rooted in the broader military

[551] Nicola Labanca, *Caporetto Storia di una disfatta* (Firenze: Giunti, 1997), p. 9.

[552] Wilcox, 'Morale and battlefield performance at Caporetto, 1917', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2014, vol. 37, Nos. 6-7, pp. 829-854, here pp. 830-831.

[553] Melograni, *Storia Politica della Grande Guerra* (Bari: Laterza, 1972), p. 210.

[554] Wilcox, Ibid., pp. 830-831.

circumstance of 1917, with the Russians abandoning the war as a consequence of the Bolshevik revolution and the resulting availability of further forces previously fighting on the eastern front.[555] After the defeat in August 1917 that had cost the Austro-Hungarian forces Monte San Gabriele and Monte Hermada, the Austro-Hungarian high commands decided to change its military strategy on the Isonzo front. Thanks to the help of German troops, they planned a quick breakthrough that did not depend on a large number of men but was rather based on German assault troops dressed in Austro-Hungarian uniforms so as not to alert the Italian army.[556]

Several diachronic factors should be considered while discussing the terrible consequences of the Austro-German assault. Its outcomes were, in fact, worsened by a few aspects pertaining to the organization of the Italian army with its highly hierarchical structure where orders were imparted from afar. This resulted in a more rigidity and in a difficulty to respond quickly to unexpected circumstances.[557] These factors certainly impacted not only on the military developments of the Rout, they also worsened the consequences of the breakthrough. These, along with other factors such as the strategic habit of moving heavy artillery pieces to very advanced positions, are devoted specific attention in the section of this chapter entitled 'elements of continuity'.

Some aspects pertaining to the public discourse appear worth considering as they prepared the ground for the ways in which Caporetto was framed,

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[555] Labanca, *Caporetto*, p. 20.

[556] Labanca, *Caporetto*, p. 34.

[557] Giorgio Rochat, *L'Italia nella prima guerra mondiale* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1976) and Piero Melograni, *Storia Politica della Grande Guerra* (Bari: Laterza, 1972).

experienced, recounted and recorded in officers' letters and diaries. In response to the sense of fatigue and will for peace accompanying food restrictions and other exceptional war-time measures in home front societies, some interventionist newspapers renewed their mobilizing efforts. Throughout 1917, for instance, the local newspaper *La Provincia Pavese* , responded quite polemically to the pacifism of the Catholic local weekly *Il Ticino* and, driven by the need to remobilize the population of Pavia, it published pieces from Arnold J. Toynbee's *The German Terror in Belgium*[558] along with a series of articles stating openly that the goal was that of remobilizing readers against what was considered to be a barbarian enemy.[559] Of further interest is the publication in the supplement of *La Provincia Pavese* of a poem by Bertoldo. This recalls many images derived from the narrative on German atrocities in Belgium and combines them with the use of gas at war. It then denounces pacifism and asks those who have suffered the violence of the enemy to come back to explain to the Vatican that no peace can be made with such infamous enemies.[560] In the heat of the remobilization of the local population, in 1917 a monograph dedicated to the atrocities committed by Austrians in 1848, during the 5 Giornate di Milano, was published. The publication was promoted by Unione Generale degli insegnanti per la guerra nazionale della sezione di Pavia/ the teachers' interventionist Pavese league for the national war, the existence of which

[558] Arnold J. Toynbee, *The German Terror in Belgium an Historical Record*, (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1917).

[559] Excerpts of *The German Terror* are published on the first page of La Provincia Pavese of 5 and 12 August 1917, Microfilm version consulted at Biblioteca Teresiana in Pavia.

[560] Bertoldo, 'Udite e rispondete...!? in *La Provincia Pavese* Supplement number 111 of 22 September 1917.

testifies to the high level of mobilization of the city's cultural elites. What is of interest is what Nino Bazzetta wrote in 1916, probably as a consequence of the traumatic legacies of the Strafexpedition and of the effect that the use of gas had on Italians.[561] Colonel Gagliani records it in his diary on 29 June 1916 and comments the use of these weapons:

Che metodi barbari! Sono strazianti i particolari che descrivono la morte di quelli colpiti da asfissia per i gas di quegli infami![562]

The threatening character ascribed to Germans and Austrians was then extended to the internal enemy. Among the factors influencing the perspective on the 12th Isonzo battle, worth mentioning is also the *Nota di Pace* by Pope Benedict XV. It appeared on 1 August 1917, a time when the sense of fatigue at the long-lasting war efforts and sacrifice was extensively felt. The call for peace was severely condemned in the writings of nationalists Tocci and Gagliani but welcomed with relief by the catholic Guerrieri. The public interventionist discourse often equated pacifism with defeatism and considered it a dangerous internal threat to the fatherland. On 5 September 1917, *La Provincia Pavese* published an article entitled 'Austriaci d'Italia/Austrians of Italy' that equally condemned catholics and socialists for their pacifism, treating them as the enemy. The article argued that peace would

[561] Nino Bazzetta da Vemenia, *Atrocità degli austriaci nel 1848 a Milano e dintorni*, (Pavia: Tipografia popolare, 1917).

[562] The published edition of Gagliani's manuscript does not record the exact date.

be impossible in the present circumstances and urged readers to stay close to combatants.

One might see these narratives as a sign of the widespread tensions and fears pervading Italian home front societies in 1917. The argument formulated here is that these narratives and images represented a further cause of the panic that spread among officers when coherent news and orders failed to arrive, and when they heard about the sudden German advance.[563] The feeling of being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea which accompanied combat officers throughout the conflict comes to its apex on occasion of the Rout. In its aftermath, the feeling of being abandoned by higher commands and exposed to danger was worsened by the fear of not being able to guide frightened soldiers under extreme circumstances. Rather than impacting significantly on the morale of the soldiers, which, from several investigations, appeared no worse than at other stages of war, these narratives emerged from individual and collective fears, and were further nurtured especially within elite circles, thus setting officers in an highly emotional state.[564] Commanders and officers were worried that the Russian example might lead soldiers to mutiny and frighten them with talk of the enemy's exceptional weaponry and level of violence and brutality. These silent fears, connected to both long-term legacies and new elements of anxiety, surfaced together as soon as news of the breakthrough circulated. It led many commanders and officers to panic. The fear of enemy's weaponry was made worse by the fact that Italian munitions were

[563] On officers' rapid demoralization, see Wilcox, Ibid., p. 848.

[564] On the morale of troops before the Rout, see Wilcox, Ibid., pp. 846-847.

stored at a distance and that supplies were more difficult, thus having a negative effect on the troops' morale.[565] The skepticism towards the new '99 recruits might also have played a role in the troops' disorder, not just because of their level of preparation but, again, due to the narratives about their inexperience, which, along with munitions shortages, increased their feeling of vulnerability.[566]

Cadorna's bulletin, published on 28 October 1917, should be considered here both in connection with pre-existing narratives, debates and fears and for its negative and traumatic impact on combatants and on home front societies at a crucial stage of the war and Italian history, when the military emergency had not yet been overcome.[567] The bulletin held the armies that suffered the German infiltration responsible for the collapse, thus amplifying the traumatic impact of the Rout. For the complete lack of empathy, the form and content of the accusations it can be defined as the opposite of a healing narrative.[568] The bulletin fixed in words the phase of trauma, that is to say, it made it harder to overcome the breakthrough both psychologically and culturally.[569]

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[565] Ibid., p. 849.

[566] This could be grasped further by reading the letters by Tocci describing his infantry troop as undesirable. One hypothesis is that they neither respect him nor recognize him as a leader due to his age. See the song included in the appendix dedicated to '99 recruits circulating among troops.

[567] Christina Schäffner, *Editorial: Political Speeches and Discourse Analysis* pp.1-4, in Christina Schäffner *Analysing Political Speeches*, Multilingual Matters, Ltd, 1997, p.2.

[568] G. Bert, 'Narrative medicine: pragmatic aspects and points of view' in Medicina Narrativa N. 1 2011, pp. 27-36.

[569] Official bulletin, in *Relazione della Commissione d'Inchiesta, R. Decreto 12 gennaio 1918. 'Dall'Isonzo al Piave 24 ottobre-9novembre 1917'*, 3 vols (Rome: Stabilimento Poligrafico per l'Amministrazione della Guerra 1919).

The division of the Rout into different phases proposed by Bencivenga and reported by Wilcox in her study, is adopted in this chapter in order to further explore the ways in which writing relates to military events. The Rout has different speeds, different effects and refractions depending on its stage. The first phase (24 October-3 November) marked the initial breakthrough. This was characterized by disorderly mass flight, desertion, the enemy's capture of Italian prisoners and with the Second Army falling back to the Tagliamento river and the Third and Fourth Armies retreating to the Piave river. In the second phase (3-12 November) Italian troops were still retreating but began to reorganize, resist and fight back. The final phase of the battle (12–18 November) saw a renewed Austro-Hungarian attack.[570] The identification of different stages of the Rout, each presenting specific traits, proved particularly useful while observing the sample of sources considered.

This chapter focuses mainly on the notebooks written by the Engineer Lieutenant Sebastiano Spina, Colonel Pasquale Gagliani and by Lieutenant Monelli as well as the notebook and memoir by Lieutenant Carlo Emilio Gadda.[571] Gadda's work has been considered here for its extra diachronic dimension. In fact, Gadda writes some quick notes, accompanied by drawings during the Rout, to retain events and details in his memory, and he writes a memoir on the Rout from the prison camp.[572] The chapter also directs attention to epistolary exchange through the analysis of Zanivolti's and Vivanti's letters and to a selection of letters by Franco

[570] Wilcox, Ibid., p. 834.

[571] Monelli, *Le Scarpe al Sole*.

[572] Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Giornale di Guerra e di Prigionia, con il 'diario di Caporetto* (Milano: Garzanti, 1999; 2002).

Michelini Tocci. The diary written by simple soldier Manetti has proved of great interest and has been used as a further contextual source able to shed light on the theme of writing at Caporetto.

Preconceptions and Expectations

The Rout had a disruptive effect on private writings. This can be detected in both their content and style that are significantly different at the time of the Rout and in its immediate aftermath when compared to previous writing. As far as content is concerned, it is in the private writings from Caporetto that the tensions, fears and doubts, along with the feelings of disillusionment, emerge even in those records that normally silence them (this is the case, for instance, with the notebook by Colonel Gagliani).

In terms of style, given the exceptional circumstances engendered by the Rout, private records show a tendency to welcome more perspectives and voices, even before these have been verified. This makes them quite informative not especially on events, as they might report groundless rumours, but rather on the climax of anxiety accompanying the Rout. Similar to a movie by Hitchcock, designed to render the spectator hyper-vigilant, the unknown, unfamiliar, and unexpected nature of the Rout forced all viewers to pay particular attention to details and to look out for any further information to have a clear understanding of what had happened.[573] The exceptional emotional state engendered by the exceptional

[573] On details and their impact on senses, see Roland Barthes, 'Le troisième sens', in *Cahiers du Cinéma* No. 222, 1970.

circumstances, however, lowered officers' critical grasp of the situation, making them less selective in welcoming fragments of discourse which they had heard; improbable hypotheses and specific nuances on the events. This openness betrayed their desperate need to understand, their attempt to form their own idea on the causes and consequences of the military collapse. This proves to be inevitably 'polluted' by other people's perceptions of the Rout, that little by little are fixed in collective memory and reflected in the private records. Due to the key role that these narratives assume in officers' (contemporary and retrospective) experience of Caporetto, their details, half truths, lies and rumours are fixed even in private writings. Bakhtin's theory of conscience as the sum of several voices (which he calls 'polyphony') has been adopted as a further tool to observe this mix of views and grasps on the Rout.[574] In this respect the contribution of cultural history in putting Marc Bloch's work in a broader perspective is of the utmost interest for the analysis presented in this chapter.[575] Bloch warns against the impact and possibly distorting effect of collective emotional states on the observation, experience and transposition of the event and on the reliability of any act of witness.[576] This has proved useful in order to disentangle aspects of exaggeration signalled in texts by the repeated use of hyperbole, along with contradictions (emerging even within a single source). The presence of these aspects reveals the distance of some

[574] G. Bert, Ibid., p. 27 p.31.

[575] John Horne, 'Les milieux des sciences humaine et sociales face aux atrocités pendant et après la guerre- Henri Pirenne, Fernand van Langenhove, Marc Bloch' in Jean Jaques Becker, ed., *Histoire Cultrelle de la Grande Guerre*, (Paris: Armand Colin, 2005), pp. 11-19.

[576]March Bloch 'Réflexions d'un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre', in *Revue de synthèse historiques*, 1921, pp. 17-39, here p. 21.

observations from the actual state of real events. The growing anxiety born by the lack of news and nurtured by the change in the situation is then exacerbated by the mix of news and by the fragments of narration that, like shell shrapnel, imposes itself whilst at the same time spreads panic. Depending on the style and attitude of the officer who is recording the events, different emotions such as panic, anxiety, frustration and shame enter writings in different ways and influence their style. The category of synaesthesia has proved particularly useful here to investigate the close connection, and in some cases even confusion, of different senses in the perception of events, in the dissemination of rumours and in their written accounts.[577]

The narratives and the rumours concerning Caporetto show a certain degree of continuity with the rest of the conflict. An example of this is provided by Ceschin's interesting explanation of the behaviours and emotions concerning refugees in the immediate aftermath of the Rout as a direct consequence of the fears provoked by the memory of narratives on German atrocities. This memory is refreshed and awakened by the state of emergency and by the lack of official news and reliable guidance on the part of government and military commands.[578] Moreover, they highlight another aspect of interest, that is to say the 'encounter' of observers belonging to different groups. This encounter and this multiplicity of perspectives increases the sense of uncertainty attached to the confusion of roles and identities ascribable to the Rout.

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[577] N. Rothen, B. Meier, and J. Ward, 'Enhanced memory ability: Insights from synaesthesia', *Neurosci Biobehav Rev*, 2012. 36(8), pp. 1952-1963.

[578] Alan Kramer, 'Recent Historiography on the First World War (part 1) in *Journal of Modern European History* vol. 12/ 2014, ' pp. 5-27, here p. 24.

In his description of some soldiers' behaviour (such as the irreverence towards officers, drinking or plundering) Gibelli compares Caporetto to carnival, which is meant here as the time that subverts all previously set rules and undermines hierarchies and the social assumptions and roles attributed to them.[579] Despite the certain subverting force exercised by the Rout on long-lasting assumptions, values and military identities, the parallel with carnival is not sustained in this thesis. Carnival, as it was intended in the Middle Ages, was characterized by two aspects that are completely lacking at Caporetto: the first is the reassuring certainty that everything will soon be restored to normality; the second, which is strictly connected with the first, is the experience of carnival as a mindless collective evasion into freedom, pervaded by irony, sarcasm and laughter.[580] Caporetto has thus little in common with carnival, at least from the perspective of the officers (Gibelli's observations might retain their value as far as his target is concerned, even though farmer soldier Manetti's diary seems to suggest the opposite).[581] The heavy presence of bad omens, mystic references to the apocalypse and distorted and frightful images of nature (to be found for instance in Spina's record), along with the sense of complete disorientation, makes Caporetto more similar to the ancestor of carnival, that is to say a macabre parade. Unsurprisingly, the Rout is recalled with this term by several sources. This is also to be found in the following passage written by Spina on 24 October 1917:

[579] Antonio Gibelli, *La Grande Guerra degli Italiani, 1915-1918*, (Milano: Bur, 2007), p. 273.

[580] Mikhail Bakhtin, *L'opera di Rabelais e la cultura popolare Riso carnevale e festa nella tradizione medievale e rinascimentale* (Torino, Einaudi, 1979).

[581] Giuseppe Manetti, *Maledetta guerra*, prefazione di Antonio Gibelli, (Firenze, Pagnini Editore, 2008).

Poche truppe ormai transitano sulla nostra via. Alcuni soldati che si attardano negli accampamenti deserti, (cancellato: forse con l'intento di passare al nemico) con la consegna di appiccare il fuoco alle baracche ci lanciano... derisioni dicendo che non saremo più in tempo a sfuggire all'incredibile accerchiamento. Un sergente d'art addetto al Comando del 9º Raggruppamento d'assedio ci raggiunge a passo affrettato e mi comunica che ha avuto ordine di distruggere materiale d'artiglieria sul M. Santo, che è di ritorno dalla sua missione e che ha visto il nemico salire dalle sponde dell'Isonzo in numerosi plotoni serrati.

Elements of continuity

This section investigates those writings written before Caporetto that express criticism of poorly organized military strategy and the treatment of the combatants. It also explores the growing divide between the war and the home front, as it is recorded in the selected sample of sources before and after the Rout in order to convey a broader (yet inevitably partial) picture.

As far as military tactics is concerned, Lieutenant Sebastiano Spina, at the beginning of his second notebook in an entry written in Gorizia in August 1917, laments the discrepancy between theory and practice and between expectations and outcomes. In the following passage Spina talks about the military strategy proposed and sustained by Cadorna:

Dev'esserci, ma io non l'ho visto, un aureo libretto del Gen. C. Cadorna intitolato L'attacco frontale nel quale si sostiene con copia di validi argomenti tratti dall'esperienza e dalla storia, che nell'offensiva è necessario sferrare una serie serrata di attacchi frontali, come tanti colpi d'ariete sulle linee nemiche, con lo scopo di infrangerne le difese, penetrare incuneandosi, nelle linee di rincalzo e tentar di aggirarle portando in esse il panico e lo scompiglio e determinandone la disfatta.

Spina, a lieutenant in an engineering unit, claims to have little knowledge of military theory. Nonetheless, his worries about what he sees in the attacks near Gorizia are based on his observation of the nature of the terrain and the enemy's defensive capacities:

Non ho la competenza necessaria per giudicare di tale teoria, nè gli elementi per stabilire se essa sia opportunamente messa in pratica negli assalti che laternativamente si sferrano dalle trincee di Gorizia contro le formidabili difese del M. S. Gabriele e del M. S. Marco. Solo posso dire che per oltre una settimana, reggimenti dopo reggimenti e brigate dopo brigate sono lanciati all'assalto, o contro l'una or contro l'altra, delle imprendibili linee nemiche e inesorabilmente falciati dallo sventagliamento delle mitragliatrici piazzate in caverne scavate nella roccia viva o soffocati dal tiro ininterrotto delle granate o maciullati dai mostruosi proiettili che vomitano i cannoni di tutti i calibri annidati sulle circostanti alture.

The passages by Spina underline the predominance of theory over practice, and the unwillingness on the part of higher commands to vary their strategies, expectations or plans depending on the given circumstances.

A crucial point is that Italian tactics were organized for the offensive, requiring a lot of men, services and materials to supply and support the first lines. It also meant that little attention was paid to making plans for retreat should the enemy unexpectedly advance. This was made more difficult by the large amount of material and forces deployed which slowed down any retreat and made it challenging for men who had to carry heavy artillery pieces and the rest of their supplies.[582] These aspects are to be found in almost all the selected sources at different stages of the conflict. The problem of having to move heavy artillery pieces to advanced positions is frequently noted in the diary by Pasquale Gagliani and is also recorded in the following passage written on 21 October 1917:

Si va delineando una grande offensiva austriaca che pare dovrà comprendere tutto il fronte delle 2 e 3 armata, da Tolmino al mare. è da diversi giorni che si notava una crescente attività dell'artiglieria avversaria, che seguiva aggiustamenti su incroci di strade, capisaldi, batterie ecc. In questi ultimi giorni con colpi di grosso calibro ha battuto molto nelle retrovie specie i paesi pedecarsici e i ponti dell'Isonzo. Tutto fa credere che se offensiva vi sarà questa si svilupperà specialmente contro la 2 armata per riconquistare l'altipiano della Bainsizza e levare la minaccia sul S. Gabriele... Un disertore ha fatto conoscere che l'attacco si dovrà

[582] Melograni, *Storia Politica della Grande Guerra*.

sviluppare il 23. Oggi, la notte scorsa specialmente, il bombardamento sulle retrovie è stato più intenso ...

Moreover, Gagliani's words suggest that the element of unexpectedness of the Rout can be questioned, as what was unexpected was the strategic choices made by the enemy, not its resolution to attack. The attentive and experienced eye of Colonel Gagliani does not fail to grasp even on 21 October that the attack would probably be directed at the 2nd army in order to regain the Plateau.

Another problem that epitomizes both the Italian army's tactical short-sightedness and the unfair treatment of combatants throughout the conflict was the lack of a proper system of leave for men at the frontline. This resulted in physical and psychological exhaustion, which many men recorded.[583]

It is necessary here to imagine how disappointing missed leave must have been for combatants in 1917 when exhaustion was made worse by the awareness that, up to that stage, war meant great sacrifices for men with few military achievements. The need to overcome the 'either/or' dichotomy between tactical failure and poor morale has been underlined by an analysis of the sources.[584] Disappointment and anxiety are expressed by Spina who was supposed to go home, to a reassuring place, and now feels somehow condemned to the opposite. His account written on 24 October 1917 exemplifies the way in which the imminent general tragedy is deeply intertwined with that of the subject:

[583] Denied shifts are lamented from the first year of war. See Gagliani's entry of 2 September 1915.

[584] Wilcox, Ibid., pp. 829-854, here p. 837.

Il cannoneggiamento si estende su tutta la fronte e al coro infernale partecipano le batterie nemiche di tutti i calibri. Oggi sarei dovuto andare in licenda oggi ma è venuto un ordine che sospende ogni invio di truppe in Italia, e invece di andare a casa devo partire per guidare il distaccamento che si trova su Sabotino. Nella notte è venuto un fonogramma del com. della 9ª compagnia richiedente un ufficiale in Val Peumica

The objective details signalling the catastrophe of Caporetto are mixed with more obscure and certainly less concrete signals which are taken as premonitory omens by Spina in many passages of his notebook. The military way of noting down facts with numbers and details is still present in Spina's writing as an attempt to control the uncontrollable. The intersection between the wider event and personal perception and experience of it could be detected when an adjective pertaining to a mystic sphere is used to define a concrete scene or event, as is the case with the metaphor which describes the noise of machine gunfire, bombardments and shootings as an 'infernal chorus' in which the singers are 'all artillery calibres'.

Officers' anxiety was increased by the individual and collective contrasting emotions and projections that preceded Caporetto, as revealed by the public debate and exemplified through the previous discussion in *La Provincia Pavese*. The need to remain close to combatants, suggested by interventionist narratives, is a response to the lack of empathy that combatants complained about. This emotional

distance is lamented by Spina who ascribes it to his loved ones. In the following passage taken, from the monthly entry of August 1917, he writes:

Talvolta mi sfogo a scriver lettere ai miei amici e [erased] alla mia nuova amica di Venezia; e me li figuro lontani, indifferenti, occupati [my guess] dei loro interessi, perseguenti le loro dimore, assorti nei loro sogni, dimentichi di noi, della guerra, forse ignari della battaglia che divampa con inaudito furore e forse intenti alla ricerca della gioia e del piacere.

The unexpected nature ascribed to the Rout should be considered in the light of an important element of continuity, that is to say the schizophrenic nature of the Italian military system. This is characterized by aspects of great efficiency accompanied by aspects of bad organization, and instances of clever strategy accompanied by naïveté. With regard to Caporetto, the high command received precise news from two enemy deserters, and it was able to intercept Austro-Hungarian communications thus gaining exact information about the time of their attacks. Nonetheless it underestimated (and partly questioned as false and misleading news) all the available data, downplaying the risks, and discounted intelligence that the Germans might be supporting the Austro-Hungarians' action. This explains the shock, to be found in many sources, accompanying the encounter with troops assumed to be Austrian who were, in fact, German. (This shock is noted by Gadda and Manetti, among others).

Moreover, the Italian commanders, due to their lack of dynamism, did not pay any attention to the new strategy of infiltration adopted by the Germans in Riga against the Russian army. Here, German artillery used a system of preliminary calculations based on carefully analysed data that obviated the need for lengthy range-finding that would have alerted the enemy to their imminent attack and actual target.[585] On the other hand, Italian commanders were informed about the forthcoming use of gas, but wrongly assumed they were well-equipped to face it. The quick and lethal effects of gas grenades fired in the valley of Tolmino and Plezzo had terrible consequences both in human and in military terms.[586] This tactic allowed the German assault troops to get through the first and second line. The second lines of the Italians came in support of the first lines without realising that they too would be killed by the gas. In many sources, this rapid breakthrough was thought to be impossible and, for many of our witnesses, it was hard to acknowledge.

The differences between the Italian and German troops have to be considered, namely the training in autonomy and resilience of German assault units, designed to take quick strategic decisions. This organization contrasted greatly with the rigid hierarchical system of the Italian army, which allowed its units little autonomy and made the decision-making process lengthy and often

[585] Melograni, Ibid., p. 405.

[586] Ibid., p. 406.

unsuitable for specific battlegrounds (as noted by Spina and almost all the sources in the sample).[587]

To this one should add the physical distance from senior officers imparting the orders and defining the strategies from the battlefields. On 25 June 1917, Monelli was ordered, with his Tirano Battalion of the 5th Alpins, to hill 2003 to support the unit 297 of the Cuneo battalion. On 30 June, the last day of the third phase of the tragic Ortigara battles, he describes the order to retreat from Ortigara thus:[588]

Ma i generali che hanno sbagliato i piani, ma i supremi reggitori che non seppero tenere le nostre conquiste, e diedero ordini incoerenti o nefasti, blaterano ora, rivedono le bucce ai morti ed agli scomparsi, e macchiano di burocratica i sani e i begli eroismi[589]

The physical and emotional distance of higher-ranked officers is also exposed by Lieutenant Sebastiano Spina. At the end of his monthly entry, dedicated to August 1917, he describes a meeting with his captain who is waiting for him at the command in complete safety and dealing with boredom by playing a solitaire. The attention paid by his captain to his solitaire is described as follows:

[587] Ibid., p. 408.

[588] Monelli, *Le Scarpe al Sole*, p.130.

[589] Ibid., p. 140.

con la stessa serietà lo stesso interesse [erased: che un altro potrebbe dedicare] che avrebbe potuto dedicare a risolvere un problema di strategia connesso con la battaglia che divampa a Gorizia[590]

The irony demonstrated in this passage, namely the reference to the captain's physical and emotional distance from the battles — including the consequences and sacrifices involved — is worthy of attention. Focus should be paid to this as Spina's irony evolves into sarcasm in the passage written after the Rout, when he encounters the captain in Udine after he has abandoned the troops without even issuing the required orders.

Rumours and Chaos

Though there are aspects of continuity, as considered above, Caporetto also saw certain unexpected developments unfold. One example is how the enemy modified its military strategy: rather than facing a long line in the traditional way, the Germans decided to use the element of surprise. At times employing poison gas, the enemy carried out rapid attacks aimed at small sections of the frontline. Moreover, the German troops identified two poorly defended targets, ones that were considered by the Italian high command as being of scarce military importance, namely segments of the frontline in the valleys of Plezzo and

[590] Spina, original manuscript notebook. The published edition does not record any correction or deletion of the original quoted here. For a comparison, see Spina, *Un soldato siciliano alla guerra*, p. 52.

Tolmino.[591] German commands' idea to shift the rules and strategy of warfare found the Italian army totally unprepared. It frightened the Italian soldiers and their commanders who, failing to understand that the German troops had broken only small sections of the frontline, came to think that the first lines had been defeated completely. Furthermore, seeing the enemy arriving from an unexpected direction was alarming and this also posed a series of problems as it compromised their attempts to make an orderly retreat, one that was made worse by the damage to the lines inflicted by the assault troops.

Melograni provides an in-depth analysis of why the retreat turned into a rout. He also sheds light on Italian commands' lack of control of its troops, which was partly due to the bombing of communication lines. This disorder is mentioned in Lieutenant Spina's diary, which will be considered later in the chapter. The absence of control was also due to the panic that spread among commanders and this could be seen as the main cause of the subsequent chaos. Panic, in particular, has to be considered as it permeates almost all the writings of those who witnessed the event. According to Melograni, the general panic was due to the fact that the rapid breakthrough not only disorganized the troops: it made the enemies appear better than they really were.[592]

Manetti, a simple infantry soldier, struggles to believe that the Germans had breached the lines in such a short time:

[591] Melograni, Ibid., p. 406.

[592] Ibid., p. 418.

27 ottobre Circa alle ore 7 si difonde la vocie che li austriaci anno sfondato la linia dalla parte del Monte Nero ma io per il primo non ci credo per la prima dissi con i miei compagni può essere ma la seconda o la terza come sarebbe questo è impossibile! specie in così poco tempo. più tardi le voci diventano più diffuse al fine del giorno realtà perchè anche a noi viene l'ordine di ripiegare e abbandonare la linea.[593]

There is a clear difference between what Caporetto was in strict military terms and what it came to represent on a broader social and psychological level. There is a further distinction between the level and nuances of understanding that naturally spread among those who had witnessed the Rout, or were involved in its immediate aftermath, and the official narratives provided by high command (see Cadorna's bulletin). As stated in the opening of this chapter, the Rout can be considered a multi-layered narrative tainted by synchronic and diachronic echoes. Witnesses' experiences in the aftermath of the Rout appear still to be influenced by the emotional effect it has generated. Even the fact of assuming other people's perspectives on, and emotional reactions to, events is only in part normal. In most cases, this attitude transcends the boundaries of the ordinary and comes to resemble the depersonalization that often emerges in individuals who are involved in a traumatic incident.[594] The witnesses of Caporetto become somehow psychotic, they have episodes of delirium which lead them to confuse different people's

[593] Manetti, *Maledetta Guerra*, p. 58. (the grammars mistakes of the original have been maintained).

[594] Mirella Montemurro, *La Rievocazioned del Ricordo nella Testimonianza. Rassegna di Studi*, av at <www.psicologiagiuridica.com>, p.4.

perspectives with their own experience of trauma.[595] Time becomes less clear and, at subsequent stages, their memory returns to those fateful days.[596] Evidence of these processes of stylistic depersonalization is the written accounts that have been left. Ascribable to normality is the explicit use of reported speech in which the distinction between the main narrative voice and other narrators' contributions is respected. This can indicate an attempt to provide an account of events without being held responsible for what is being told. Sometimes, however, there is, on the part of officers, an unconscious adoption of other people's perspectives and voices that become part of officers' own stream of consciousness. This 'blending' normally takes place during, or after, traumatic situations. Interestingly, the selected sources show the unconscious, accidental, sometimes inevitable use of a narrative strategy typically seen in ancient dramas and which is defined in literary studies as 'teichoscopy'.[597] This term indicates a stylistic choice that goes back to the ancient epics, one used by Homer in *The Iliad* when Helen describes what she sees outside the walls to an audience who cannot have the same view. Teichoscopy is the narrative technique used to suggestively describe and recount something happening off-stage. This partly connected with the nature of the Rout, which engenders a paradoxical circumstance in which everyone can witness the tragic

[595] On the collective psychosis in exceptional circumstances of war see Marc Bloch 'Réflexions d'un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre' in *Revue de synthèse historiques*, 1921, pp. 17-39.

[596] Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1985).

[597] Eugenio Spedicato, *Il Male Passionale, La Pentesilea di Kleist*, (Pisa: ETS, 2002).

effects caused by 'something' that only few witnessed in person.[598] This narrative technique, used to recount something that is concealed from the scene, forces the 'narratee' to witness something through his own imagination and form a 'mental topography' of the events.[599] The technique can be very suggestive for an audience: in the case of Caporetto, there is an unconscious use of teichoscopy by all soldiers, officers, and civilians, who while coping with the trauma, seek more information and provide their own account of what they have seen, experienced or heard. On a cognitive level, this can be read in the light of Bakhtin's ideas on conscience as being the sum of many voices. In the case of Caporetto, the individual's perception of events is inevitably mixed with that of others.

On 23 October 1917 Lieutenant Spina's is positioned in Val Peumica, close to a house called 'La casa del buco/the Hole House'. The property earned this nickname after a huge hole was blown in it by a grenade. Taking in the huge craters, caused by cannon fire that pockmarked what was a vitally important road to Gorizia, Spina's comments are significant. They can be framed through Bloch's observation regarding the act of witnessing and the way in which events are perceived and filtered in unexpected circumstances or when news fails to arrive. However, there is also a strong connection with the memories of previous narratives concerning atrocities or the enemy's use of lethal weapons.[600] These

[598] Anna Lamari, *Narrative, Intertext and Space in Euripides' "Phoenissae"* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter 2010), p. 36.

[599] Ibid., p. 34.

[600] Alan Kramer, 'Recent Historiography on the First World War (part 1)' pp. 5-27 in *JMEH* vol 12/ 2014, here p. 24.

multi-layered memories have to be considered while analyzing passages such as the following, written by Spina on 23 October, in order to describe the effect on him of the craters on that road to Gorizia:

Questo fatto suscita un'infinità di commenti fra noi e il vicino comando d'artiglieria. Che gli austriaci abbiano messo in linea un cannonissimo come quello che bombardava Parigi?

The night of 23 October is described as being haunted by regular shooting, followed by huge columns of smoke. This not only prepared the ground for the enemy's breakthrough but also conjures up an atmosphere of acute anxiety. The shots, according to Spina 'fanno crescere nel nostro animo un triste e indefinito presagio/engender in our heart a sad and indefinite omen'.

Unlike previous monthly entries, Spina's October entry does not erase those passages that interpret war in the light of mystic images or even, from time to time, superstitious beliefs. Those passages which, at other stages of his writings, were erased as a result of a revision, are maintained in the writings on Caporetto. One reason for this might be that these aspects have characterized the collective experience of the Rout to the point that Spina does not consider them out of place or too personal to be included.

The theme of hypotheses and myths that grows from the need to know, to interpret events and the potential outcomes of the Rout, recurs frequently in

Spina's diary. Further evidence of this is even found in his pages on Venice. The fear of invasion and total defeat makes people obsessed (to remain close to Spina's words) with gathering information:

Sotto le procuratie vecchie una folla ansiosa e accorata si aggira in cerca di notizie sull'avanzata nemica e legge avidamente i bolletini di guerra affisse sulle [unreadable] per tranquillizare i cittadini. Gli animi sono così eccitati che nessuno più crede alle notizie ottimistiche che vengono dal fronte.

The previous passage (probably written - though this is not quite clear - on 10 November) describes the collective understanding and experience of the Rout for the Venetian people. Interestingly, Spina shifts the focus to his own emotional state and describes his intimate hope to see his family and friends. When he arrives in Venice, worried about the tragic circumstances and impressed by the alleys that are conspicuously deserted, he dedicates a lengthy passage to a description of his own attachment to a Venetian lady. This affection is mentioned in the previous monthly entries of his diary, that he regularly crossed out. Similar to Monelli,[601] in fact, Spina deletes, in subsequent revisions, the more intimate events from his war account, as is the case with this passage:

[601] Paolo Monelli, 'Prefazione dell'autore all'Edizione del 1928' in Paolo Monelli, *Le Scarpe al Sole*, pp. 217-224, here p. 119.

Con l'animo pieno di una dolce speranza, mi avvio per il labirinto delle calli che si snodano intorno all'abitazione della mia amica

As far as the style and content are concerned, the deleted passages from Spina's notebook are of interest in that the corrections demonstrate his attempt to erase from his wartime experience the more personal aspects of his life before and after the Rout. Spina does not want to cancel this memory as he leaves it accessible for himself; that is to say, that while erasing part of the text, he safeguards its readability. The erasing of these lines is probably a sign of what he decides not to include in a revised version of his texts. Unfortunately, dating his subsequent corrections is no easy task, but some hypotheses on their role can be formulated. Reconsidering his lines at a later stage, Spina might have considered them inappropriate and decided to exclude them from a subsequent version of his diary, thinking that it might be read by an audience in the future. The reference to the woman might have appeared to Spina unsuitable both for a restricted family audience and for the general public. Another hypothesis might be that he was so disappointed with the woman he met that he no longer wanted to dedicate lines of his eternal war experience to her memory. The parts of the diary entry that are erased say something about the successive interest and target of this source, even though we do not know what use Spina assigned to it. Along with the passages concerning his impossible Venetian love, Spina erases those passages that are tainted by historical considerations or are too excessive in bloody details. However,

while the first passages are erased due to their content, the others appear to have been deleted for reasons of style.

Gagliani's writing attitude is influenced by the loss of hope, the confusion and the desperate search for scapegoats that characterizes the first phase of the Rout. The emotional state, the sense of anxiety, urgency and bewilderment experienced are transcribed in his writing style; similar to Spina's account, a growing role is assigned to external perspectives. In his entries from 24 October to 30 October, Gagliani increasingly uses phrases to introduce rumours or fragments of discourse. The first is the still reassuring official military communication received on 24 October in the final moments before disaster:

Alle ore 10 giunge notizia che il nemico è stato respinto e subentra una calma relativa

On 25 October, unsettling and random snippets of information begin to filter through. They are reported to Gagliani by an official herald, namely Brigadier Nobili:

Il Col. Brigadiere Nobili Comandante d'artiglieria del Corpo di Armata ci annunzia che, per notizie poco rassicuranti venute dalla 2 armata, è necessario di tenerci pronti a ripiegare a ovest del Vallone.

On 26 October, the situation is out of control and this is signalled by the unrestrained and random spreading of rumours that replaces official news, or compensates for its absence. These voices are recorded by Gagliani as follows:

Circolano voci assai impressionanti di disfatta subita dalla 2 armata: sembra che un intero corpo d'armata sia stato sfondato e volto in fuga

On 27 October, Gagliani takes part in a military meeting held with other commanders and is informed of the accuracy of the rumours concerning the Rout. The way in which the news is recorded probably mirrors the quick, simple and sparse style of the military communication received:

... Le notizie di disastri subiti dalla 2 armata sono purtroppo vere: il nemico è a Caporetto e punta su Udine! La 3 armata deve ripiegare sul tagliamento!

The very existence of a dominant narrative perceived as being more reliable than others is challenged first by the chaotic nature of events and, secondly, by the combination of omissions and contradictions characterising orders and official news of the Rout. Spontaneous narratives become confused with official communications which these might contradict or confirm; in both cases, exaggerations are common. These accounts might be welcomed by officers in their writings. When they are consciously included in their notebooks, other people's narratives are generally signalled by the punctuation conventionally introducing reported speech or

reported points of view. However, these narratives can even enter officers' writings accidentally, in which case they are not signalled; the author might not be completely conscious of having welcomed someone else's perspective into his own account. In the following passage, Spina, writing on 24 October, allow his thoughts to drift onto the page and, in doing so, infuses his writing with a spontaneous, immediate edge. Worth noting is that, similar to Gagliani, the first time Spina's thoughts enter his writing is when he realises how serious the defeat is:

Col cuore in tumulto scendiamo nella pianura del Cerovo. Il vasto parco del genio è sgombro di materiale e di truppe, e dappertutto si notano i segni di una precipitosa ritirata. [..] Per via vedo con doloroso stupore che alcuni centurioni rittano le trincee di cemento che stanno a difesa di Cormons. É posibile che le nostre truppe debbano arretrare così lontano dalle prime linee! Allora siamo al disastro?

Writing Retreat

In the following passage, written on 22 February 1916, Gagliani reflects upon the connection between the experience of war, the activity of writing, and the impact of his experiences on the quantity and quality of his writing:

Questi appunti, iniziati sotto forma di diario, hanno assunto poco alla volta, per la forza stessa delle cose, quella saltuarietà dipendente dagli avvenimenti.

These lines are an interesting self-reflective passage about the hybrid nature of sources. They explain the ways in which the aforementioned writings, which were initially intended as a proper diary, could also take the form of a random notebook. Here we see an example of how events impact the activity of writing. A similar pattern emerges from Sebastiano Spina's notebook: his diary entries were not daily but rather monthly entries, with the exception of the section dedicated to the Rout. This, tellingly, takes the form of a day-by-day account. Spina's and Gagliani's writings are significant as both their writings are affected by the Rout. In Spina's case, the influence of the Rout can be gauged through the increased number of entries and detailed descriptions he uses in the section on Caporetto. Moreover, his writing style becomes more dependent on external narrators and less centred on what was, up until the crucial event, a strong, central narrator.

In the first phase of the Rout, the narrator's subjectivity is challenged by the confusion caused by the military collapse. This could be framed in light of Ricoeur's contentions on the objective and subjective perceptions of time and events, and their influence on self-projection and narratives. In juxtaposition to Spina's voice, Gagliani's appears to be reinforced in the immediate aftermath of the Rout. Gagliani is disappointed, angry and shocked to the point that the usual diplomacy that leads him to downplay things, or express his opinions vaguely, is completely overwhelmed. This is abandoned in favour of a more explicit analysis of events that includes open critique and accusation. His military expertise and direct knowledge of battlefields reinforce his criticisms.

Before investigating this shift further, it is worth making a few observations on Gagliani's writing throughout the conflict, which derives from his role within the army, his attitude towards intervention, war and his sense of duty. These combine to form a coherent panorama of feelings. Hierarchies are never questioned and this is not to be understood only as the consequence of his higher rank but rather as a result of him feeling part of the Italian army and of his close identification with it. Gagliani's critiques are what might be defined as 'critiques from within', that is to say, coming from someone who really feels a sense of belonging to a recognised institution. As examined in previous chapters, Gagliani's writing habits - such as using ellipsis and an exclamation mark whenever he suppresses his anger towards and dissent with the military world - is worth recalling here.

There is a tension between Gagliani's need to pour out his feelings (and, in so doing, eventually exorcise them) and his unwillingness to express them openly and fix them in his writing. This can be observed in his diary at various stages of the conflict when he feels particularly frustrated or worried, or when he witnesses particularly tragic events. However, before the Rout, Gagliani never addresses his anger at anyone in particular: his disappointment remains generic rather than directed at explicit targets.

On 29 October Gagliani stresses the strategic mistakes made by *Comando Supremo* and notes:

Ricevo ordine di tornare sulla sinistra del Tagliamento per rintracciare due reggimenti d'artiglieria da campagna e vedere quante batterie di medio calibro del

Corpo d'Armata stanno ripiegando... Assisto allo spettacolo miserando di una fuga disordinata di un esercito in rotta! Una cosa che strazia l'animo! Quasi tutte le batterie di grosso calibro -lente, lente!- si son dovute far saltare sul posto perchè intrasportabli: uguale sorte hanno avuto molte batterie di medio calibro. Le strade sono impraticabili per tutti i carri di vario genere che cercano di raggiungere il ponte. E quale imgombro dicono vi sia verso il ponte di Codroipo, quello di Medrisio, costruito dal genio, è impraticabile perchè la piena del Tagliamento lo sovrasta!...

In his 'lente, lente'/ ‘really slowly’ we can detect the opinion, also expressed elsewhere in his diary, that it was imprudent to place so many heavy artillery pieces in advanced positions. It is worth noting that this tendency to avoid explicit criticism declined slightly in the immediate aftermath of the Rout.

Gagliani's diary entry on 30 October 1917 appears to be still redolent of the official verdict of Cadorna's bulletin, but his entries are also infused with the pessimistic view that everything is lost forever and that the army will never be the same again. Gagliani’s writing, therefore, displays violent and explicit accusations towards defeatist narratives and their fatal impact on soldiers' morale and the troops' performance. The passage below shows a negative distortion that is caused by the confusion and disorganization of the first phase of the Rout. Gagliani is inclined to interpret the Rout as a direct consequence of low morale and of soldiers' unwillingness to fight. Of further interest, however, is that, contrary to Cadorna's bulletin, Gagliani's attacks are directed to defeatist narratives rather than towards

soldiers' presumed cowardice. This could be explained with reference to many aspects of Gagliani's perspective: firstly, his direct experience of war; secondly, his proximity to the lines; and, thirdly, his awareness of the inadequate treatment of combatants, something that he laments repeatedly in his notes. These aspects made Gagliani more cautious and more reluctant to criticize the soldiers:

Qui affluiscono sbandati di tutte le armi e di tutti i corpi, specialmente della seconda armata: tutti stanchi, affamati e senza fucili! è stata la prima cosa che hanno gettato via! Hanno seguito il consiglio, il suggerimento ricevuto in patria, durante le licenze, dai nemici interni: gettate le armi e si farà la pace! Hanno loro detto: le armi son state gettate, ma invece della pace piomba sulla nostra povera Italia il maggior disastro militare della storia! Bisognerà dirlo ad alta voce: a noi non ci ha vinto il nemico esterno, che eravamo riusciti a battere e a respingere per ben due anni e mezzo: ci ha vinto la propaganda pacifista fatta in Italia dai socialisti, dai giolittiani e anche dalle funeste iniziative papali! Hanno in pochi giorni distrutto il lavoro di 3 anni: il nostro esercito era diventato un organismo perfetto e dotato di tutti gli elementi che potevano assicurarci la vittoria: è mancato l'animo che vince ogni battaglia: e questo animo è stato guastato dai nemici interni. Che ne sarà di noi? Che notizie vi sono del Paese: resisterà il popolo a questa scossa? Povere nostre famiglie!...

In this passage, Gagliani also expresses his esteem for what the Italian army was and his sorrow at finding it transformed into a weak group of aimless individuals.

Even when he describes directionless soldiers, he does not use a bitter tone; empathy seems to prevail. He states that they are 'tired, hungry and without rifles' but, at the same time, he absolves them of the responsibility for their conduct by arguing that it is the direct result of the long-lasting divide between the home and the war front and, more specifically, the defeatist narratives soldiers were exposed to during their leave. In doing this, Gagliani identifies another internal enemy that does not coincide with Cadorna's cowardly combatants but rather with those 'false' arguments that were able to corrupt them. He unleashes his resentfulness towards defeatist narratives from the home front that are, in his opinion, far from the truth and also fatal in their outcomes. In some passages from his diary, Gagliani reflects upon the sense of weakness he experiences when he returns from leave, and he ascribes his low morale to the neglect and lack of empathy and respect combatants encountered on the home front. This is a common denominator for almost all of the sources considered and is recalled in similarly bitter tones by Monelli. Moreover, there are several passages in Gagliani's diary that reflect upon the discrepancy between the heroic and the futile efforts and sacrifice requested of soldiers and the way they are equipped and treated (one example being delayed or denied leave or rest).

Relevant, in this respect, is the need felt by certain officers (as is the case with Michelini Tocci) to revise ideas expressed in their first accounts on the Rout. The following passage is of interest as Tocci grasps the power of Caporetto in redefining the temporalities, even retrospectively. Caporetto is here defined as something that should not have happened but that could have been avoided if the

government and the military system had adopted a different attitude towards combatants. Tocci's first perspective, when he entered the war during the Rout, was the fresh motivation instilled by the military academy. It is very different later. On 20 January 1918, he writes:

La disistima è sorta da Caporetto; questo è il fatto che non doveva avvenire e non poteva accadere se più si fosse fatto per la guerra, se qualche cosa si fosse fatto per i combattenti; se v'erano e vi sono molti per i quali è bastevole premio il spersi benemeriti per la Patria, vi sono anche molti, purtroppo, per i quali Patria è parola vana. Occorreva invece, magari rinnovando i diritti della proprietà, che ognuno avesse sentito e sentisse nel combattere il nemico, di difendere anche qualche cosa di suo. S'è fatta la guerra considerandola una cosa d passaggio e non si è pensato che questa cosa con il suo passare poteva portar via Patria e libertà. [602]

As is the case with the retrospective thoughts of both Gadda and Michelini Tocci, Gagliani looks back at the conduct of the previous years of war as a sign of the value of men. He then looks for further aspects of Caporetto that might reveal alternative reasons for the military collapse other than soldiers' inadequate conduct. The search for scapegoats outside the circle of combatants is of great interest in that it signals Gagliani's unwillingness to use forceful language when discussing combatants. This restraint testifies to his coherent and responsible understanding of his own role as a military leader. Even though his attitude is

[602] Franco Michelini Tocci, Ibid., pp. 130-131.

somewhat patronising, he does not blame the soldiers (even those do not belong to his own unit, like the Second Army). Rather, he attempts to explain their failure. These accounts are sometimes far from groundless and appear redolent of the observation skills that Gagliani develops throughout the conflict and applies to the writing of official military records. In the light of the part-patronising, part-protective attitude towards men, the following passage, written on 28 October, deserves attention because it presents the inadequate military action of his own unit as being the result of impossible weather conditions:

Tutti questi giorni sono trascorsi in mezzo alla febbrile agitazione e un lavoro interno per trasportare le artiglierie di medio e grosso calibro più avanti e riprendere l'azione nella linea su cui si erano ritirati gli Austriaci. Ci siamo ben preparati a dar loro un altro bel colpo ma il tempo ci ostacola: non è possibile eseguire il tiro di precisione necessario... se non ci si vede bene. Ma sarà la stagione poco propizia, sarà Iddio che parteggia per loro, è creto che l'inizio dell'azione viene rimandata di giorno in giorno.

At any rate, on 9 November, ten days after the passage above written on 30 October, the tone of his critiques changes profoundly. Writing towards the closing stages of what historiography has defined as the end of the second phase of the Rout, that is to say the stage in which troops were still retreating but began 'to reorganize, resist, and fight back',[603] Gagliani settles into his more balanced tones.

[603] Wilcox, 'Morale', p. 834.

He makes technical observations on artillery displacements but then adds the following bitter remark:

responsabili? Nessuno pagherà o se paga qualcuno non sarà il vero o i veri colpevoli! E oggi abbiamo il dolore di assistere a questo deprimente spettacolo di vedere raccolti in un campo di riordinamento una massa di oltre 100000 artiglieri senza cannoni!...

The open critique of defeatist narratives and internal enemies characterizing the 30 October entry have given way to bitter criticism of a vaguer target. Reading between the lines of his accounts, however, it is possible to detect a further understanding of the responsibility behind the disaster. Even though Gagliani never expresses it openly, the renewed use of exclamation marks and ellipses suggests that he holds the upper hierarchy of the military system and, possibly the government, partly accountable for the disaster. Given the target of his accusations, he cannot express them explicitly and relies on the tension that seems to be a constant feature of his previous writing.

Caporetto is the major Italian setback of the war, thus it is indicative of the difference between official and private accounts, and of the mutual influence of the collective and individual experience. In the case of Lieutenant Spina's notebook, one can detect a co-presence of more personal elements and general details. It also provides an example of the discrepancy between institutional narratives and actual

events. Spina's third notebook presents an account of the retreat of Caporetto. It focuses on the chaos and lack of communication which accompanied this tragic episode of the war. It begins with the sense of disorientation he felt once he realised that he had been left behind without the necessary instructions on how to handle the situation.

His paragraphs frequently start with details pertaining to military writing, such as the exact time or the number of a company to which a specific officer, encountered on the way, belongs. Apart from the impact of him practising official military writing, these detailed accounts should not be interpreted simply as an attempt to witness events, to have a record for himself and, eventually, for future audiences (either military or civilian). Instead, it resembles primarily a private act of coping and surviving. It is as if noting down passages will help him make sense of it all, and slow the rapid sequence of unexpected events. However, if at the beginning his account is detailed and objective, it then takes a markedly less objective, less rational tone. This is showcased in the following passage (written on 24 October) and signals the impossibility of making sense and staying calm and rational in view of the catastrophic and ineluctable series of events. The context of these events appears to Spina within a suddenly unpromising and maleficent frame, where lightning is sparked by artilleries rather than nature:

Il cielo è cupo e corso dal lampeggiare sinistro delle artiglierie: dal Nord si sente il rombo di un cannoneggiamento infernale. Sento nell'animo il vago presagio di prossima sciagura [604]

The investigation proposed in both the chapter on war landscapes and in that on writing about battles thus appears to be of particular use in order to frame and understand further the writing attitudes accompanying the descriptions of the Rout. The hyperbolic tones of battle-writing pervade Spina's account to the point that the catastrophe is extended to nature in its entirety. Moreover, as was observed and explained extensively in the chapter on war landscapes, these are infused with personal feelings and perceptions. Spina's passage appears representative in this respect in that there is no distinction between the actual landscape and the personal meaning it assumes or between the landscape of war and that of nature, which are seen as intrinsically linked. This symbolic nature, which is torn apart, resembles that described by Pascoli, and certainly well-known to Spina,[605] in his poem 'Il Lampo':

E cielo e terra si mostrò qual era: /la terra ansante, livida, in sussulto; /il cielo ingombro, tragico, disfatto: /bianca bianca nel tacito tumulto/una casa apparì sparì

[604] The entry is dated 25 then corrected with 24 (this might suggest a retrospective writing).

[605] It is possible to affirm with certainty that Spina was familiar with such a famous poem as he loved literature.

d'un tratto; /come un occhio, che, largo, esterrefatto, /s'aprì si chiuse, nella notte nera.[606]

A parallel of the eye appearing and disappearing during the lightning storm in the final image of Pascoli's poem, is Spina's eye as he observes and reveals to us the tragic confusion and catastrophic speed and rhythm of the Rout. Spina's personal fears and subjective interpretation of signs is signalled by the presence of three elements explicitly suggesting bad luck and sinister premonitions, namely 'menacing', 'premonition' and 'misfortune'. The damage to the earth produced by the infernal artillery has conquered the sky and this, according to Spina, can only be a bad omen. The inclination to note the details returns as a form of self-reassurance, and an attempt to record for himself, and potentially for future audiences, the progression of events that he witnessed and took part in. In spite of the objectivity characterizing the following passage, the use of a paratactic sequence of swift sentences renders the anxiety that accompanied the Rout:

Verso le ore 9 un capitano del genio alle dipendenze del 6corpo di armata mi ordina di sospendere i lavori della telerica e di ritirare la truppa nei baraccamenti. Eseguito l'ordine telefono al comando della mia compagnia per avere istruzioni. Mi risponde il vecchio telefonista Bortoluzzi con la sua voce da balbuziente resa ancora più incerta dallo spavento a cui doveva essere in preda e mi avverte che in campagna

[606] Translation taken from <literaryjoint.blogspot.com/2016/10/the-lightning-il-lampo-by-giovanni.html>.

non c'è più quasi nessuno e che il Capitano sin dal mattino è partito per Udine su un'automobile del Comando d'Artiglieria. [erased: Immagino che sia andato a fare le solite spese ma poi apprendo la sera stessa] che è vigliaccamente fuggito senza neanche curarsi di darmi istruzioni per la ritirata della truppa. Telefono allora al Comando d'artiglieria e dopo molti sfozi mi riesce di avere la comunicazione con l'ufficiale di servizio te. Mayer il quale con voce concitatata mi dice di prendere il comando dei due distaccamenti e condurli a Novoli presso il Comando della 90 compagnia per attendervi ordini.

Individual choices are somehow forced by the enemy's rapid advance and the increasing violence of the attacks. In the next passage, Spina describes how, after a grenade falls right besides the barracks, he starts the retreat immediately:

Appena rimesso a posto il ricevitore una grossa granata si abbatte a pochi metri dalla baracca sollevando un cono di scheggioni che piovono fragorosamente sul letto. É come un avviso: il nemico ha notato l'agglomerato delle truppe nella valle e ricomincia il tiro. Dò l'ordine di consumare il rancio e di affardellare lo zaino cercando di dominare l'emozione che mi pervade. Ma i soldati hanno tutto inteso e dop aver rapidamente mangiato fanno un fagotto della loro roba e si mettono in marcia.

Even here space is left to an emotional re-elaboration of events, which is related to the evolution of the military situation:

Lo sgomento e l'irrequietezza sono dipinti sul volto di tutti. Ghedini e io che siamo già a menso non abiamo mangiato quasi nulla e non vogliamo credere alle notizie che abbiamo udito a mensa. Gli ufficiali della batteria, avviliti e disfatti ci hanno raccontato che la loro nuova posizione sull'Isonzo è sottoposta a un violentissimo tiro e che su tutti i ponti congestionatidi truppe in ritirata i proiettili nemici fanno strage. Nessuno però si cura di raccogliere i feriti e la disorganizzazione nei servizi già comincia a delinearsi. Numerosi tiri arrivano sulla strada che dobbiamo pecorrere dove molte batterie sono in vano dirette verso le retrovie.

This is particularly painful for both military members and civilians. The shock of this is reflected in Spina's account, one which provides a detailed description of movements and directions. The march, however, is haunted by bad omens:

Alle 12 circa partimmo ordinati per due. Ghedini è alla testa e io chiudo la marcia. [deleted: Sul ponte della Peumica un tacco delle mie scarpe si stacca netto metto subito l'unico paio di scarpe che ho con me e benchè affatto pregiudizioso, considero l'incidente come un cattivo presagio.] Sulla strada da S. Moriano a ... alto facciamo una sosta per riposarci. Il nemico tira... e pare abbia di mira il magazzino dei viveri: un immeso Gotha, torvo e sinistro con la sua croce nera, vola a bassissima quota dirigendo i tiri e spiando le nostre mosse. Nella pianura friulana caligine indistinta si leva nella direzione di Cividale, un'immensa colonna di fumo che sembra prodotta dall'incendio di una città. É una visione grandiosa e

apocalittica, alla vista della quale rimaniamo perplessi e comiciamo a intire la grandezza della sciagura che si sta per abbattere sulla patria, e l'imminenza del pericolo che ci sovrasta.

In the above passage, the objective description of the company's movement is interrupted by the breaking of Spina's heel, which he interprets as another bad omen. It is worth noting that he feels the need to specify, in a sentence later erased, that he is not superstitious. This point contrasts sharply with certain passages from his notebook, which are pervaded with 'premonitions' and 'omens'.[607] He describes the plain as being dominated by an enemy aeroplane (Gotha model) perceived as a further threat. A climax can be detected in the frequency and order of adjectives, from the initial bad omen of the shoes to the 'apocalyptic vision' symbolizing the 'misfortune which is about to hit the fatherland'. The climax also concerns the perspective which from the personal becomes general: the first 'sign' concerns Spina's shoes but the misfortune is then quickly shared by the whole plain, by the city which looks like it is ablaze, and by the misfortune that is going to crash over the fatherland in the imminent attack. The considered passage provides a good example of the way in which the attitude pertaining to the descriptions of battle reaches its peak when the Rout is portrayed.

[607] The sentence erased concerns his own experience, that is to say his heel breaking off, and is therefore cancelled.

Explaining retreat to home

Caporetto is more than a battle, it is a defeat, and, as such, it is described by Spina as premonitory of total defeat. While, in order to describe it, private writings, both letters and diaries, adopt certain strategies and attitudes which are used to describe other battles from the war, these writings go further. They are able to bear witness through their new approach to the novelty and the shocking surprise that characterizes the Rout.

When it comes to letters, it is interesting to consider both attitudes: those of sons at war (whether they find themselves close to Caporetto or in remote areas of war, like Zanivolti and Guerrieri) and those of their parents. The collection by Augusto Vivanti provides us, in the occasion of the Rout, with both perspectives and is thus worthy of scholarly attention. Of particular interest is the ways in which Vivanti's father, Cesare, tries to align his writing to the needs and expectations expressed by his son in one of his letters. Augusto ends his short message sent on 10 November with the following wish:

Carò Papà continuo a mandare regolarmente mie notizie con la speranza che ogni giorno vi giungano. Nel momento attuale è inutile entrare in particolari ed in dettagli. Sappiate solo che io sto benissimo per tutto che la parola d'ordine oggi è 'sperare'. Bisogna che non manchi la fede specialmente nel Paese e che tutti contribuiscano con le loro forze.[608]

[608] Vivanti, Ibid. p. 300.

His father, who before receiving his son's letter, repeatedly pours out his anguish and despair.[609] In his subsequent letter of 14 November he immediately complies to his son's request in order not to let him down and to provide him support:

Qui nulla di nuovo. Il morale e la fiducia nella nostra popolazione sono altissimi e veramente encomiabili, un sincero spirito di patriotismo vivifica ogni classe di cittadini. Anche questo è un elemento importante che fa sperare in giorni vittoriosi. Dio lo voglia! [610]

Augusto, for his part, knows that his father expects something more from his account, something that he cannot currently provide. Therefore, in his letter of 7 November, he promises a longer and more detailed letter to be sent from outside the war zone:

Non ho molto tempo disponibile bisogna rimandi a domani la lunga lettera che da qualche giorno vorrei scrivere. Per oggi vi basti sapermi in ottima salute ed all'ufficio che sapete. ... Auguriamoci le prossime giornate segnino la ripresa vittoriosa della nostra guerra finora vittoriosa e che vittoriosa deve finire.[611]

The same attempt to fulfil fatherly expectations, even on the occasion of the Rout, is ascribable to Michelini Tocci. In Tocci's letters, it is possible to detect his father's

[609] See the letters written by Cesare on the 28 and on the 5 November (p. 299).

[610] Vivanti, Ibid., p. 301.

[611] Vivanti, Ibid., p. 300.

requests (both actual and projected by Tocci himself). These emerge as an attempt to respond appropriately to the messages received by his father. Tocci's case is so meaningful that it will be devoted a detailed analysis later in this chapter.

In a different manner, Cambini writes to his wife from S. Michele, on the Tagliamento river on 2 November 1917. Cambini separates his family milieu from his war context and, in the letter to his wife, he only discloses the sense of disorientation provoked by the events. He states that he feels as if he is waking from a state of shock caused by the overwhelming circumstances. He also mentions the disruption of the military balance and the questioning of all previous strategic assumptions. He appears puzzled in that he and his men, who occupied the first line, as decided by the military plan, were in fact the last company who retreated to S. Michele:

alla moglie S. Michele Tagliamento 2 novembre 1917
Come ti scrivevo oggi, in una cartolina, mi comincio a svegliare, e a guardarmi attorno: nei giorni scorsi , dal 27 sera, ero in uno stato di stupefazione: era una mazzata troppo grossa! Noi che eravam in prima linea siamo stati l'ultimo reggimento a scendere il Carso: abbiamo ripiegato in buon ordine, e in buon ordine e piena efficienza, siamo giunti fin qua. I soldati sono in buone condizioni di spirito: se dovremo lavorare, lavoreremo di impegno. Ma ... saremo chiamati a lavorare? O dovremo adattarci supinamente agli eventi? [612]

[612] Cambini, Ibid. p. 191.

Cambini states that the morale was good and that his mates were ready to work, but were not ready to passively put up with events. This passage is particularly worthy of attention in that many sources bear witness to the fact that men, even soldiers, were mostly ready to undertake further actions and obey any orders once the military system was able to impart them in a feasible way and to restructure the cohorts. On the contrary, they felt lost if they were left alone, with no guidance, at the mercy of events and of the enemy. In response to his wife's requests for precise information, he explains that he cannot send any further details as it is forbidden to do so. He also laments the lack of information that he himself has access to, caused by the lack of newspapers or any news at all:

Notizie nostre -cioè di noi soldati- non te ne mando perché non si possono mandare: notizie dall'Italia, notizie dal resto dell'esercito non ne abbiamo (l'ultimo giornale da me letto risale al 24!): e le notizie spicciole di noi persone sono troppa poca cosa, ora. Non sarei capace, ora, di spender parole per dirti come mangio, dove e come dormo: ti basti sapere che sto benissimo, che non mi manca nulla, che non risento nulla dei due giorni di marcia sotto l'acqua: altro che dolori artritici, Truci mia! E te ne dirò un'altra: a parecchi venne - più di un mese fa- la malaria e a me, che l'avevo nel passato, non è tornata più. [613]

Interestingly he says 'di noi soldati'/ 'of we soldiers' even though he was promoted to lieutenant on 14 August 1917. This deserves scrutiny because it reveals his sense

[613] Cambini, Ibid., p. 192.

of proximity, togetherness and comradeship which, in his case, has to be understood as compensation for the loss of his beloved younger brother, Raffaello.[614] For Cambini, already traumatized by the loss of his brother, and embracing war as both a personal path to cope with his mourning, and as a way to avenge Renato's death by fighting for the national cause, having to abandon the fields of Pieris and his brother's grave, in the hands of the enemy, is a trauma he barely manages to put into words.[615]

Silence and distance

What makes Caporetto an individual and collective catastrophe is also the sense of abandonment engendered and/or exacerbated by both the lack of news and the spread of fragmented, alarming and sometimes misleading accounts.[616] This silence had been experienced before and during the Rout, when orders failed to arrive, and, if any news did arrive, it was contradictory. Some units were forgotten, left to the mercy of the enemy. The silence, both conscious and accidental, continues afterwards as there seemed to be no connections between the war zones and the home front. By conscious silence we mean the choice made by the high command not to provide detailed information on the event. The effect of this silence was traumatic for both fronts: the men at war and their families back home.

[614] See chapter one, section on family of arms and mourning.

[615] Vittorio Cian and Plinio Carli, 'Introduction', in Cambini, *Epistolario*, pp. v-xiii, here p. xii

[616] Bongini, Ibid.

If we consider the case of the Vivanti family, for instance, we can both imagine and detect in the sources the sense of anguish felt by Cesare (and his wife) who, used to receiving constant and detailed updates from their son, are left without any for a long period. What is worse, is that, instead of the balanced, 'dear' and mostly reassuring 'written voice' of their son, they are exposed to the metallic defaming and depersonalizing report represented by the Cadorna bulletin. This was hurtful for its content, for its form and for the perspective that it put forward, but also for the distance and lack of empathy that it promoted. This left men alone at their war, silenced by a lack of post, isolated from their loved ones, and dismissed with a summarized and misleading sentence. After having been described by interventionist narratives as the heroes of the fatherland, the sons of the ambitious upper-middle classes are reduced suddenly to useless depersonalized units by the system they are fighting for.

The collection by Zanivolti provides us with an example of the traumatic silence suffered by Zanivolti himself due to the lack of letters from his family before, during and after the Rout, and before being caught prisoner on 10 November on the Mount Feragh.[617] During the Rout, Zanivolti was momentarily away from the action but was ordered to leave for an unknown destination that he presumed could be the frontline. This feeling of being remote from the catastrophe but presumably about to witness it in person leads him to respond by writing quickly and often, anxiously awaiting answers and feedback from his parents. In his case, the traumatic silence is the silence of his family who do not write. This at first

[617] He was serving as a lieutenant in the 18th company gunners.

annoys him, especially on his birthday. Gradually, this also scares him and brings him to interpret silence as a sign of contempt towards him. The case of Zanivolti's growing anxiety bears, once again, witness to the vital role played by epistolary exchanges in war. Letters become even more prominent in catastrophic moments in which the compass goes awry and the core identity and role assigned to men in uniform is shaken to its foundations. Letters, both written or sent, read or received, come to represent a source of continuity and an identity-compass and identity-anchor for the soldiers.

What is striking about Zanivolti is his ability to say 'I' in almost any circumstance of war, as he shows by writing a postcard to his parents on 23 October 1917 in order to remind them of his forthcoming birthday on the fateful 25 October. Zanivolti's attitude to take everything personally acts against him when the circumstances take a turn for the worse:

Cartolina postale italiana in franchigia. Corripondenza del R. esercito.
Indirizzata ad Antonio Zanivolti 23-10-17 Aspetto con rassegnazione che mi suonino sul groppone finalmente quei tanto aborriti ventidue anni. I tedeschi rispetteranno certamente il grande avvenimento con una calma perfetta. Mille baci. Beppino

Peppino[618] ironically imagines and wishes that the Germans respect his birthday by delaying their assault. Worth noting here is the reference to Germans rather than

[618] Depending on the circumstances, Zanivolti refers to himself as Pepino, Beppino or Peppino. Beppino is the typical nickname for Giuseppe in Lombardy.

to Austro-Hungarians, as if he is aware that German troops might support the Austro-Hungarians, or even lead the charge. In Zanivolti's writing, history is bent to his own needs and interpretation of facts. This is also clear in the letter written on 25 October:

Zona di guerra 25-10-17 Carissimi, aspettavo vostre notizie, ma non mi sono giunte. Aspettate forse l'occasione del mio compleanno? Bisogna che pazienti ancora un poco allora... Credevo di passare l'inverno quassù, invece chissà dove andrò a cacciarmi. Domani scenderemo a Vallonara e quindi si partirà per ignota destinazione. Vi terrò giornalmente informati di ogni nostro movimento. Mentre vi scrivo, nevica lentamente. Ci sono già venti centimetri di neve per terra. Sarà un po' penoso il trasloco questa notte con tale candore gelato. Comincia la via crucis ma pazienza. Io sono allegro ugualmente e scaccio col mio mandolino la malinconia a' miei colleghi. Si dice che si va sul Carso, in Macedonia, in Palestina. Chissà invece che non si venga a casa. Tutto è possibile in questi tempi, anche una morte improvvisa. Ma io scherzo. Penso piuttosto che se vado in Macedonia, addio licenza liceale. Avrei fatto bene tentarli tutti gli esami nell'ultima sezione. Ma chi sa i casi che possono accadere. Bisogna sempre sorridere anche quando si vede il proprio castello, costruito con tanta pazienza e sacrificio, andare in frantumi. Sempre ridere anche della morte e si vivrà felici. Stassera suoneremo, canteremo e che crepi la guerra. Vi bacio. Beppino

The letter ends with the resolution to celebrate his birthday, and, along with that, life in general, in spite of the events 'Stasera suoneremo, canteremo e che crepi la guerra./ Tonight we are playing, singing and to hell with the war'. Reading between the lines however, this apparent youthful bravado conceals a fear of an uncertain future. This hypothesis is supported by the first part of the letter that informs us that he has been let down and subverted both in military and in affective terms, reinforced by the image of the castle breaking into pieces. Even if not directly involving the sector where he is, the Germans had started a terrible attack and, to make this worse, his parents had forgotten to write to him for his birthday. The enemy's attack results in the order for his unit to move to an unknown destination and, one might suggest, to an unknown fate. The pessimism about the outcomes are revealed by the reference to the Christian path of sacrifice 'the via crucis has started' and is stressed further by the hypothesis of imminent and sudden death. This fear, no matter how well-grounded and how understandable given the situation, should also be considered as a way of 'punishing' his parents for their forgetfulness, neglect and lack of empathy. Nonetheless, he ends his letter by promising to keep them constantly informed of his condition. However, even this resolution will not be kept: the postal chaos following the Rout meant that his messages were never regular. He writes to his parents a postcard on 27 October from Valstagna complaining that he still does not know where he is to be sent. On 31 October, his anxiety and resentfulness for his parents' silence has increased to the point that more than half of his letter is dedicated to pouring out his disappointment:

Zona di Guerra 31-10-17 Carissimi, non so a qual causa attribuire il vostro silenzio. Verrebbe forse a significare un rimprovero? Ma se così fosse sarebbe più lealtà e franchezza il manifestarlo apertamente. Dopo tutto sapete bene che posso disporre della mia libertà in certi casi e ne so spprofittare. L'esigere da voi almeno un saluto in cartolina da 5 dopo quindici giorni, non credo sia troppo. Vi annoio forse co' miei scritti, concisi, sì, ma frequenti? Del resto non credo che in un momento simile si possa ancora badare alle dicerie e accusare gli individui che anelano ardentemente ad essere utili a qualche cosa in quest'ora suprema.
Purtroppo sono ancora qui a Sasso. Il mio desiderio sarebbe di trovarmi dove più occorre di buona volontà e di sacrificio. Ma non si sa ancora nulla di certo sulle intenzioni nemiche in questo settore. Aspettando presto vostre nuove vi bacio.
Vostro Beppino

Another interesting trait emerges from this letter and it is a relevant one, namely that he formulates the hypothesis that his parents might be disappointed with his conduct to the point that he interprets their lack of writing as a sign of discontent. This should be evaluated in connection with that widespread sense of guilt which haunted men in uniform during and after the Rout. Peppino's fear that his family might think negatively of him leads him to utter the wish to be closer to the action in order to have the chance to sacrifice himself for the national cause. From a thorough evaluation of his letter collection however, it is possible to question such a narrative projection that is, in fact, distant from Zanivolti. Of further interest here is

the reference to the 'dicerie' which betrays Peppino's worry that his parents have mistaken assumptions about his conduct as a result of things they may have heard through the grapevine. The exceptional circumstances he faces have made him feel insecure about his family's affection to the point that he believes they are ready to think anything about him. The feelings permeating Peppino's letter appear similar, to a certain extent, to those felt by certain teenagers who one minute are self-confident about their looks and potential, and then, following a bully's attack, suddenly lose their self-confidence and develop a paranoid filter while projecting other people's perspectives on them. This metamorphosis of Peppino from bold and 'goliardico'[619] youngster to insecure little boy fearing the loss of his loved ones' affection reinforces the idea, exposed elsewhere in this chapter, that the Rout came to represent such a shocking rupture that it was able to challenge not only any form of previously accepted military assumptions but, along with them, any individual and collective identity-protection.

What is worse, however, is that due to the lack of communication and to the greater divide between the front and home front that it provoked, the Rout started undermining one of the main coping resources of men at war: family communication. In his letter of 1 November, Peppino finally states he received his parents' letter of the 26th. These five days seem to him an endless wait. It emerges that he feels hurt by their neglect as he dedicates more than half of his letter to expressing his disappointment for it and urges them to keep writing even if they do

[619] This term identifies the set of irreverent attitudes and jokes pertaining to student societies in Italian universities.

not receive his correspondence. It would be possible to argue that his parents are considered guilty of having forgotten their son's birthday, and, in so doing, they have failed to give 'stroke' him in a such a meaningful moment.[620] Their neglect twofold: it comprises both the response to an individual need (the desire for birthday wishes) and the complete absence of empathy for the practical and psychological difficulties posed by the exceptional historical moment:

Sasso, 1-11-1917 Ho ricevuto oggi la vostra del 26 scorso. Non credevo che i miei scritti vi dovessero giungere così in ritardo; ad ogni modo non è un buon metodo quello di non scrivermi se non ricevete miei scritti. Se facessi così anch'io, non ci scriveremmo più.

Credo che in questi gioni vi sarà giunta una buona quantità di posta mia. Vi siete dimenticati che il 25 compivo i 22 anni? Pare di sì. S'è ricordata la Teresa Casagrande soltanto. Ad ogni modo li ho compiuti ugualmente e inesorabilmente. Oggi è il giorno dei Santi. Bel giorno; e diffatti splende un sole d'oro che entusiasma. Domani si commemoreranno i nostri morti. Io non potrò mai cessare di benedire il Signore, che ha voluto presso di sé un santo, che intercede per me. La fortuna che in questi momenti mi assiste si deve tutta a lui. Chissà quanti del nostro paese a quest'ora saranno passati nel numero dei beati? Forse la maggior parte di quelli che non scrivono più saranno prigionieri in Austria. Io per ora sono ancora fortunato. Qui c'è ancora una grande calura e non sembra neppur vero che questi medesimi tedeschi, che ci stanno davanti abbiano invaso tanta parte del nostro suolo.

[620] see Berne on 'stroking'.

Coraggio sempre. La fortuna non arriderà sempre alle loro armi. Sorgerà anche per noi il sereno della vittoria e speriamo sia presto. Vi bacio. Beppino

Of interest here, along with the condemnation of his parents' forgetfulness, is the reference to divine protection. This is used by Peppino to stress once more the risks that he is and might still be, exposed to. However, the idea of providence is also part of a Catholic background that serves here to reinforce effective communication with the family. This series of letters by Zanivolti appear as an insightful breakthrough into epistolary communication during the traumatic time of Caporetto, which, in Zanivolti's case, will last and worsen over time, due to capture. During his time in the prison camp, Zanivolti limits his writing to food and parcel requests, and to providing his parents with detailed guidelines on the most effective ways to send them. His messages from the prison camp of Reichenberg (Bohemia) lies out of the scope of this investigation, however, the broader transformation of writing taking place after the Rout, as a consequence of capture and of life in a prison camp are explored through the analysis of Carlo Emilio Gadda' writings.

The Rout in Retrospect

Gadda's records of the Rout in his notebook and memoir, written respectively during the Rout and from the prison camp, are worth analyzing and comparing because they reflect on Caporetto at different stages, are accomplished in totally different circumstances and characterized by distinct intentions. The inclusion of Gadda offers an opportunity to tackle a theme that is central to this chapter: the

impact of the Rout on writing activity, and more specifically, the necessity, felt by many officers, to consider, evaluate and reflect upon the Rout in retrospect. Among the officers considered in the sample of sources is the correspondence of Franco Michelini Tocci and Augusto Vivanti who, during the first and second phases of the Rout, promise their parents to send more detailed accounts as soon as they can. Moreover, Michelini Tocci felt the need to write about the Rout in retrospect, even after a few months, as if moved by the will to correct some (inevitably partial) observations he made when he was still directly involved in it.[621]

Gadda's memoir on Caporetto is particularly insightful in light of the redefinition of the very term 'battle' in World War I. The boundaries became blurred between single battles and the continuity of violence and sacrifice in this long-lasting conflict of unprecedented violence and destruction; which relied on the increasing work of hundreds of thousands of men.[622] In considering Gadda's memoir the battle is equated with work and with both the physical and emotional endurance connected with life at war, along with a lack of certainty about what is going to happen next. The title of this memoir 'The Battle of the Isonzo' thus deserves attention, because if the term 'battle' is considered in traditional terms, it contrasts sharply with what Gadda actually experienced on 25 October 1917 and with what he jots down at the time in his retrospective recollection. This title also suggests a continuity with what happened before Caporetto, given that this was only the twelfth battle of the Isonzo.

[621] See the letter sent on 20 January 1918.

[622] Alan Kramer, 'Recent Historiography on the First World War (part 1)' p. 23.

As far as the memoir on Caporetto is concerned, it is vital to realize that it was written in prison camp at a specific time of his imprisonment: 7 November - 10 December. The detailed information provided on the circumstances of writing suggests that Gadda considered them very relevant. He notes down with obsessive precision when and where the distinct passages of his memoir were written and, from time to time, even explains which days of October were recalled in each section. His memoir is divided into 32 'capi'/'sections' that could be considered numbered sections meant to signal the correct order in which events should be recalled while also maintaining the order of writing.[623] At the end of the section 12, Gadda notes:

Fine del capo 12 Scritto con memoria fresca nel campo di concentramento, tra le 13 e le 16 del giorno 7 Novembre 1917. Do assicurazione delle date e dei fatti[624]

Similar observations concerning the circumstances of writing are placed in section 26 where he writes 'Scritto con memoria fresca fino al 18 ottobre 1917. / Written with fresh memory up until 18 October 1917'.[625] It is an indication that is also useful for him as he will then know from where exactly he has to start any subsequent recollection. At the end of his memoir he writes 'Concluded on 10 December 1917

[623] For a complete discussion on the editions of Gadda's notebooks, see Dante Isella 'Note ai testi' in Dante Isella, ed., *Opere di Carlo Emilio Gadda*, vol. 4 (Milano: Garzanti, 1992) pp. 1103-1122.

[624] Gadda'La Battaglia dell'Isonzo Memoriale', pp. 265-309, in C. E. Gadda, *Giornale*, p. 270.

[625] Ibid., p.290.

[625] Ibid., p.290.

in Rastatt'.[626] This appears to be of key importance when exploring the relationship between the subjective and objective temporalities of the Rout. The description of the structure and chronology of this text thus precedes here the discussion on the implicit and explicit motivations, and audiences ascribable to Gadda's memoir. The writing is very detailed and covers a timespan from 17 October until the fateful 25 October. It presents a remarkable disproportion, out of a total of forty pages, twenty focus solely on the events of 25 October.

While exploring his daily entry of 25 October, it is striking how he manages to convey the overwhelming confusion in extremely concise style. In the few lines written on 25 October, Gadda notes down a few observations, which quickly lead the reader to what is the end of his war, his capture and the loss of hope:

Lasciammo la linea dopo averla vigilata e mantenuta il 25 ottobre 1917 dopo le tre, essendo venuto l'ordine di ritirata. Portammo con noi tutte le quattro mitragliatrici, dal Krasjj (Krasii) all'Isonzo (tra Ternova e Caporetto), a prezzo di estrema fatica. All'Isonzo, mentre invano cercavamo di passarlo, fummo fatti prigionieri. -La fila di soldati sulla strada d'oltre Isonzo: li credo rinforzi italiani. Sono tedeschi![627] Gli orrori spirituali della giornata (artiglieie abbandonate, mitragliatrici fracassate, ecc.) Io guastai le mie due armi. A sera la marcia faticosissima fino a Tolmino ed oltre, per luoghi ignoti.[628]

[626] Ibid., p.308.

[627] From Tedeschi to gli Orrori the moment of capture is omitted.

[628] Carlo Emilio Gadda, 'Diario di Guerra per l'anno 1917, 407 comagnia mitragliatrici' in C.E. Gadda, *Giornale*, pp.225-261, here p.231.

As far as the recollection of 25 October provided in his diary entry is concerned, worth noting is the use of what in Italian is called the 'passato remoto', translated into English as the simple past. This is not meant to signal an emotional distance from what is told but rather the impossibility to change it and emphasize it as important.[629] Of further interest is also the fact that the exact moment of capture is not described.[630] However, this omitted trauma leaves a mark on the narrative strategy and writing style: from the moment of capture onwards, Gadda switches to the simple present to describe his actual condition. This use of verbal tenses can be grasped further with reference to the role of writing, the emphasis it gives to different events and to the self-projection that it puts forward.[631] Gadda started his war diary as a monument to heroism, as a private act of witnessing of what was perceived to be an exceptional time in history and as a way to testify his own role and active involvement in it. From 26 October until 31 October, the notebook becomes the hopeless, directionless notes of a POW: a coping tool to survive and witness the horror he is exposed to. There is no heroic place in history for this chapter of Gadda's life, one which is recounted in the simple present as a mere

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[629] Michele Prandi, *Le regole e le scelte. Introduzione alla grammatica italiana*, (Torino: UTET, 2006), p. 205.

[629] Michele Prandi, *Le regole e le scelte. Introduzione alla grammatica italiana*, (Torino: UTET, 2006), p. 205.

[630] The same omission is noticed for the Gadda's memoir in Manuela Bertone, 'Gadda in guerra: Strategie dell'autorappresentazione' in *Chroniques italiennes web* 15, (1/2009)

[631] Elisabetta Mauroni 'La difficile alternanza di imperfetto e passato prossimo in Italiano: tempo, aspetto, azione' in Acme 1/2 2013 DOI 10.13130/2282-0035/3878 pp. 247-294, here p. 253.

recording of movements, people, objects and details pertaining to the 'non-life' of a prisoner. It is only on 31 October that Gadda finds his narrator's voice again and refers to the moving memory of the hurtful and forced separation from his beloved orderly. To frame this war, life, memory and fix it in writing he again uses 'passato remoto':

Si separò da me sotto la pioggia dirotta, nel campo dove migliaia di prigionieri eran mescolati. Una tristezza terrible sul suo viso. Mi lascò perchè venne l'ordine che gli attendenti lasciasser gli ufficiali. Io ora sono finito: nella sventura, nell'orrore anche questo amico ho perduto![632]

The sections that precede section 26 were written from 7 and 18 November and provide all the details concerning the circumstances before the 25th, described on the basis of his own diary entries, along with the information collected at a later stage. After a couple of sections that mention the lack of news, Gadda reports the order brought by his orderly, Sassella:

Quest'ordine mi fulminò, mi stordì: ricordo che la mia mente fu come percossa da un'idea come una scena e riempita da un lampo. "Lasciare il Monte Nero!" Lasciare questa rupe, costata tanto, e presso il Wrata , il Vrsic; lasciare, ritirarsi [633]

[632] Gadda, Ibid. p. 233.

[633] Gadda, Ibid., p.290.

This passage witnesses further the fact that the title does not stand for what Gadda writes in his memoir. In fact, from the time of the order relayed by Sassella, what Gadda experiences could be defined as a retreat rather than a battle. The title is intended to represent the author's need to think of Caporetto through his last battle, which is characterized by his efficient and brave conduct in spite of the final negative outcome. The retrospective point of view thus influenced not only the bulk of the information included in the memoir (and explicitly signalled as details collected at a later stage) but also, and more significantly, the role ascribed to the Rout as an anchor to his lost and terribly-mourned combatant identity. This idea of mourning appears crucial here, not simply in the light of what has been defined 'paper monument', but also as a proper written obituary. The activity of writing this memoir represents *per se* a way to cope with mourning and a way to grieve. Since this writing is carried out in parallel with the writing of the day-by-day account of life in a prison camp, it takes a month for Gadda to put together this memoir, and to come to terms with his loss of status, identity and sense of community. The memoir, should therefore also be seen as the sign of a difficult demobilization, which is made worse by the fact that the war still rages and by Gadda's new status as a prisoner of war**.** Focusing on the last moments of war is also a way to stick to a memory that, no matter how tragic, lifts him from sense of isolation, solitude and the lack of bonds experienced in the prison camp.

This memoir, conceived as a defence in case of future accusations, becomes something else. It becomes a virtual 'escape in writing' from prison camp life and from his being a captive, although that status is ingrained in the writing and is

detectable when reading between the lines. For instance, in the excessive exaltation of the time at war and the heroism attached to it, but also in the sensation of being deceived that permeates it. The memoir becomes an extension of war through the description of its final act, which, in turn, can be seen as an epitaph and posthumous celebration.

Gadda's memoir is a revealing document with which to disentangle a series of aspects pertaining to war writings, both accomplished at the time of events and in retrospect. If one considers the way in which capture is addressed in his diary and in the subsequent memoir, one would see that this differs significantly. In his diary entries, any heroic acts and justifications are left out in favour of a more concise and objective account. 'All'Isonzo, mentre invano cercavamo di passarlo, fummo fatti prigionieri'. Even the spontaneous way in which his confusion in realizing that the troops he saw are German rather than Italian enters the pages is of interest here. This is even more striking when compared to the narrative built upon later in his memoir:

Così marciando avvistammo sul bellissimo stradale della sponda opposta una fila di soldati neri, che provenivano da Caporetto, preceduti da alcuni a cavallo, il cuore mi s'allargò pensando che fossero nostri rincalzi, e al momento quell'uniforme nera mi fece pensare (che stupido) ai bersaglieri; non pensavo che questi, in combatt., hanno l'uniforme grigio-verde. Al dubbio espresso da alcuni gridai: 'Ma sono i nostri rincalzi, che prendono posizione sull'altra riva del fiume!" e la cosa era logica, poichè, essendo saltato il ponte di Caporetto, io immaginavo che i tedeschi fossero

innanzi a Caporetto, ma sempre sulla sinistra idrografica dell'Isonzo. Mai più immaginavo la strada che fecero! Poco dopo il crepito di una mitragliatrice e qualche colpo di fucile: cominciai allora a temere e intravedere la verità: 'I Tedeschi saliti da Tolmino!Stanno per circondarci ' [634] (chap. 31)

Even while sensing the truth Gadda is still convinced that the shots are the sign of fighting between Italian and German troops and only at the very last moment does he realise that the shots are being directed at them and that there is no sign of reserve troops. He then begins to grasp that there is no hope left.

In less than twenty-four hours, 25 October leads him and his regiment to the tragic epilogue of their war. It could be argued that Gadda's experience of Caporetto is the opposite of Monelli's in terms of temporalities. Finding himself far from the Val Peumica, the first phase of the Rout is experienced by Monelli only through a series of echoes, orders and characterized by an anxious wait. The Rout becomes lived experience only on 13 November, that is to say in its third military phase. Monelli's direct involvement in the Rout, and written recording of it, are anticipated and deeply influenced by narratives and rumours. The opposite is true for Gadda whose own collapse and tragic end to the war happen at the beginning of the first phase ascribed to Caporetto and characterized by total chaos. The first phase of Caporetto coincides with Gadda's last day as a combatant. At the same time, 25 October also represents for him a terrible initiation that forces him to come to terms with a new identity, that is to say that of a despised and hopeless

[634] Carlo Emilio Gadda, *La battaglia dell'Isonzo*, Ibid. p. 303.

prisoner. It is no accident that he starts writing his memoir as early as 7 November, when the troops had even been reorganized on a stable line. The echo of his own shame and harsh self-judgement weighs on him, along with those included in official communication, and pervades what will be his life in the prison camp (and one might argue his life to come).

The investigation of the different writings by Gadda has been proved insightful while exploring other sources considered in this chapter. Its diachronic dimension and the clear attempt on the part of the author to downplay contradictions challenges certain assumptions concerning the temporalities and the target of writing, the writer's self-projection thus posing some further questions concerning the sources examined.[635]

Conclusion

This chapter proposed an investigation of the Rout of Caporetto as a both private and collective trauma. It directed attention to the spreading of rumours in the immediate aftermath of the Rout. A vital compass to undertake this analysis was represented by Bloch's observations on witnessing in circumstances of collective

[635] Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007).

emotional state and by the work conducted by Kramer and Horne on the multilayered diachronic nature and multiple versions of the narratives on German atrocities, and the effect they retain in both private and collective memory.[636] The local newspaper *La Provincia Pavese* for the year 1917, consulted in relation to certain letter exchanges between Augusto and Cesare Vivanti, was also considered as it adopted the narratives of German terror in Belgium to remobilize the population for war.[637]

Combining Bakhtin's theory on different perspectives and on what he defines as a 'polyphony of voices' and Smith's observations on the construction of a narrator through writing, led to a further understanding of writing attitudes in the aftermath of the Rout.[638] The dialogic principle of Bachtin in fact, helped to see the oral dimension, already investigated as inherent to epistolary exchanges, as a prevailing feature in notebooks and diaries dealing with Caporetto.[639]

The literary studies on the role, forms and narrative needs associated with the use of teichoscopy have revealed new aspects of these writings and possibly of

[636]Alan Kramer and John Horne *German Atrocities, 1914. A History of Denial*, (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

[637] The need to remobilize the local population for war is witnessed further by the publication of the following book: Nino Bazzetta, *Atrocità degli austriaci nel 1848 a Milano e dintorni*, (Pavia: Tipografia popolare, 1917).

[638] Leonard V. Smith *The Embattled Self* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007) and G. Bert, 'Punti di vista, aspetti pragmatici della narrazione Narrative medicine: pragmatic aspects and points of view' pp. 27-36, in *Medicina Narrativa* No. 1 2011, p.31.

[639] Tzvetan Todorov, 'Intertestualità' in Todorov *Mihail Bakhtin Il Principio dialogico* (Torino: Einuadi: 1981) pp.85-103, here p. 86.

the experience of the Rout.[640] From the very beginning, the Rout seems to be narrated through a series of subsequent teichoscopic narrations, that necessarily vary according to the chain of 'witnesses' that spread them. Officers are active participants in the events following the Rout but are excluded from the main important event recounted, in relation to which they feel inadequate given their role as second-hand or indirect 'spectators'.[641] The chapter addresses attention to the coexistence of different perspectives on the Rout, both in notebooks and in letters. The exploration conducted on epistolary communication at the time of the Rout revealed it as a particularly challenging moment for family communication. This was not solely due to the delay in postal delivery but also to officers' difficulty in formulating a coherent, possibly reassuring message, at least in the initial moments following the breakthrough.

Because of this exclusion from the traumatic core event, i.e. the breakthrough, which resulted in a sense of powerlessness and sense of guilt due to the impossibility to prevent and witness it, there is a widespread need to write retrospectively about the Rout. This responds to officers' necessity to self-justify their conduct first of all to themselves and then, eventually, to others. Due to the discrepancy between the declared intentions and the actual content, narratives and style, Gadda's memoir dedicated to the Rout, come to epitomize the subtle bond

[640]Eugenio Spedicato, *Il Male Passionale, La Pentesilea di Kleist*, (Pisa: ETS, 2002) p. 47 and Anna Lamari, 'Narrative, Intertext and Space in Euripides' *Phoenissae*

[641] Adriano Zamperini, 'Lo spettatore nella psicologia sociale' in Adriano Zamperini *Psicologia dell'inerzia e della solidarietà Lo spettatore di fronte alle atrocità collettive*, (Torino: Einuadi, 2001), pp. 19-41, here p. 21.

linking experience and writing, and of the ambivalent bond that might exist between the self who actually experiences war and he who records and recalls it in writing. The split between projected and actual soldier identity is further nurtured by the highly traumatic and symbolically charged moment of capture, and by the prolonged existential struggle represented by life in the prison camp.

Conclusion

This thesis has undertaken an exploration of war as both the result of transformation and as an unprecedented cause of metamorphosis. After the outbreak of the conclict everything was transformed in both content and form. Old assumptions and values, along with the words and the communicative universes that used to sustain them, were eroded by the experience of war. This change was articulated in different phases and marked by different speeds and features that are observable through the language and writing of the letters and diaries considered.

Investigating several aspects of communication and values in wartime (family and military lexicons, echoes borrowed from literature and other narratives and interaction with the family) and focusing on the description of the experience of landscape, combat and the breakdown of Caporetto, these chapters have built an analysis of the several aspects that accompany a common process of metamorphosis. The term 'metamorphosis' is understood here as it is presented in the field of mythology and through the meaning ascribed to it by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrandt in their *Dictionary of Symbols*: as a transformation that, at one and the same time, changes and preserves pre-existing aspects.[642] In spite of its incredibly transformative potential, war, similar to metamorphosis, maintains certain pre-existing features and, at times, even strengthens them. These might be distorted, corrupted or shifted to new areas but are still detectable in different forms at the end of the conflict. War is a metamorphosis played out at the edge of the old and the new, the

[642] Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrandt, *Dizionario dei simboli*, entry on 'Metamorfosi' (Milano BUR, 2005) vol. II, p. 90.

known and the unknown, the reactionary and the revolutionary, even at an individual level.

Drawing on a focused set of sources, this thesis provides an exploration of fifteen Italian junior officers' war writings, recording what could be defined an 'encounter with war'. The concept of encounter is intended as a complex and multifaceted experience as explored in the seminal research project *Militarized Cultural Encounters in the Long Nineteenth Century - Making War, Mapping Europe*.[643] The insights offered by this project on war as an occasion of linguistic cultural and religious encounter has informed the theoretical approach of this thesis and proved to be especially informative while reassessing the analysis conducted on sources.
This thesis focused primarily on language and writing in connection with the direct experience of the conflict. The analysis of each source and the comparison undertaken on the whole set considered has revealed that both language and writing were deeply influenced by war.

In their Introduction, Joseph Clarke and John Horne investigate wars 'in the long Nineteenth Century' as occasions for soldiers to go 'to the borders of Europe and beyond'.[644] While only a few officers among those examined in this thesis went to the borders of Europe, it could be argued that all of them went 'beyond'. Not beyond the geographical European borders but beyond their family milieux, local villages, comfort

[643] Joseph Clarke and John Horne, eds., *Militarized Cultural Encounters in the Long Nineteenth Century - Making War, Mapping Europe*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[644] Joseph Clarke and John Horne, 'Introduction: Peripheral visions - militarized cultural encounters in the long Nineteenth century', in idem, eds., *Militarized Cultural Encounters in the Long Nineteenth Century* pp. 1-21, here p. 2.

zones, and beyond the set of expectations, images, phrases, mottos, norms, values and understanding pre-dating their 'encounter' with war. The 'beyond' they had access to because of their participation in war represents a rather peculiar 'somewhere' in time and space with unfamiliar, sometimes uncanny and inconceivable features. As such, this 'beyond' imposes a rethinking of language intended as both a communicative and, even more relevantly, as an internal cognitive tool fostering resilience and enabling the endurance of life at war.

The war writings considered in this thesis bear witness to the encounter with war, but also to the meeting with different language varieties, jargons, local traditions, religious cults and sets of norms and values. Many aspects investigated in this focused set of war writings are far from unique for Italian combatants' experience, as testified by the rich literature on the topic. A common denominator for men at war in other historical periods, and in other countries, is also the sense of amazement at the encounter with unknown places. However, the passionate and detailed description of the landscape in war zones or on the home front (for instance during hospitalization), and the evaluation of both common denominators and differences characterizing military comrades and populations, testify to the fact that Italy is largely unknown to the officers considered.[645] Even the vision of military, governmental institutions throughout the conflict and the sense of belonging to the small unit have been studied extensively in other countries.

[645] On this, see Joseph Clarke, 'Encountering the Sacred: British and French Soldiers in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Mediterranean', in Joseph Clarke and John Horne, eds., *Militarized Cultural Encounters in the Long Nineteenth Century*, *Making War, Mapping Europe*, pp. 49-73.

However, even here, the First World War in Italy, due to its specific 'collocation' within the Italian historical frame, conveys a special flavour to all these features pertaining to war experience and leaves specific marks on junior officers' writing in war and of war. Thus, the sense of belonging to a small unit (which, in the case of Italy, were generally heterogeneous as far as regional provenance is concerned) could be seen as the citizens-soldiers' 'test-bench' of the newly-born Italy. Their discontent or disillusionment towards the government and the army should be assessed in the light of the discrepancy between the grandiose discourse about the mobilizing utopia of 'Italy that is not' and the actual institutional counterparts embodying it.[646] So, their tendency to experience sense of belonging within the small unit, again a common trait in other armies, in the Italian case is redolent of the need to replicate the reassuring structure of localism so deeply ingrained in regional tradition. Similarly, the linguistic and religious encounter fostered by the conflict, take on the symbolical weight of a cultural and linguistic nationalization.

The attentive and detailed recording of the practices encountered, and the evaluation of both common denominators and differences characterizing military comrades and populations in other regions of Italy are far from unique to the experience of Italian officers.[647] It would be possible, in fact, to interpret the sense of confusion experienced by Catholic officers like Guerrieri and Zanivolti when detecting

[646] Arisi Rota, *Risorgimento*, p. 9.

[647] On this, see Joseph Clarke, 'Encountering the Sacred: British and French Soldiers in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Mediterranean', in Joseph Clarke and John Horne, eds., *Militarized Cultural Encounters in the Long Nineteenth Century*, *Making War, Mapping Europe*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) pp. 49-73,

similar Catholic rituals, cults and practices among the Austrian enemies in the light of the 'affinity in the midst of enmity' described as a mark of the encounter with the Sacred among other cultures and countries.[648]

Conversely, the different forms of belief, ritual and adhesion to religion across Italy bear witness to the varied and heterogeneous declination of faith pertaining to different local and regional contexts. Even this variety is hardly unique for Italy. Nonetheless, in the Italian case, it is highly influenced by the events of the *Risorgimento* and by the emotional and cognitive legacies connected to it. It thus proved insightful to consider them, even if only briefly, in order to evaluate the presence of myths, narratives, phrases and images in both officers' writings and in the specific communicative universes in which they are immersed.

The actual encounter with war is described in the documents investigated as being either pleasant or unbearable, either tedious or exciting, depending on the events and on the circumstances of writing. The encounter with war might either confirm or challenge previous assumptions but a common denominator is that it demanded, from junior officers, a high degree of flexibility and creativity. These might take the form of military resilience and inventiveness, responses that are particularly important and that emerged from the writings considered as vital competences. This was especially true for Italian junior officers, who, often sent to the sharp end, represent the connection between distant, unsympathetic and higher-ranked officers of the Italian army and soldiers, whose respect is vital for their leading role within the company. A case in point is described by Lussu when Captain Zavattari pretends to

[648] Ibid., p. 51.

obey a superior's order rather than openly dispute it. In doing so, he not only saves one of his men but also remains close and faithful to the only straightforward, linear communicative milieu that he safeguards in his small community.

Linguistic creativity could be considered as a vital tool with which to acknowledge, grasp, internalize, digest and elaborate the experience of war. The sense of disorientation and vertigo experienced by officers exposed to the unsettling complexity and contradictions of war provoked a deep transformation of the individual use of language, one that Saussure described with the term '*parole'*.

From the investigation of the set of writings considered, language appears as both an anchor to pre-wartime and a flexible organism adjusting to the new, ever-changing circumstances engendered by the conflict. This *parole*, observed in the war writings considered, is described by Saussure as the individual, creative, and responsive use of language.

This language *in fieri*, characterizing the evolution of junior officers' war writings, could be paralleled to a liquid compass adopted for navigation. The liquid nature of compasses suitable for navigation enables them to be both more precise and more flexible at the same time. They can follow the wave movement while also repositioning the needle with more precision.

This invaluable flexibility, leading to a transformation of language, writing styles and attitudes in response to the experience of, and encounter with, war was detected, to a different degree, in all the sources analysed. All war writings considered present the use of linguistic hybridization, metaphors, different styles, literary quotes and religious resonances in response to the new demands posed by an unprecedented

event. The level of flexibility might vary depending on the author, on the circumstances of writing, and on the events of war.

As investigated more closely in the chapters on landscape and combat, war circumstances and military experience conducted within specific groups and with defined roles certainly impact on the war experience, writing activity, attitudes, frequency and style.

The diary entries, letters, notebooks and memoirs recording the Rout appeared particularly relevant in discussing the continuity between past legacies, wartime features and future projections. It is no accident, therefore, that the chapter on Caporetto is chosen as the final act of this study. In the writings considered, the trauma of the Rout, the sense of betrayal connected to the Pope's Call for Peace, the remobilizing discourse on atrocities attributed to the German and Austrian enemies as well as the attack on the imagined internal enemy, enter officers' writings. Their influence testifies to the porous nature of these texts, the blurred boundaries between public and private writing, especially under the extreme circumstances engendered by war, and, even more, by military collapse.[649] Nonetheless, even in this context, private writings respond differently to the confusing institutional public narratives and to the omissions, half-truths or complete lies that followed Caporetto. Private writings bear witness, not only through their content but also through their syntax and style, to the doubts and to the anguish connected with the symbolical weight of the Rout.

[649] John Horne, 'Pubblica o Privata? La corrispondenza intima durante la Grande Guerra' in Caffarena and Nancy Murzilli, eds., *In Guerra con le Parole*, pp. 55-64.

A critical observation of the traces of existing narratives in the sources considerd was one of the goals of this study, one that tried to see documents in connection with prevailing narratives on war (both on the home front and at the front) but which also investigated the distances between the collective and the subjective take on the war experience and the forms through which this is expressed.

What can be detected is a thread that transcends the *hic et nunc* of the war experience and wartime and forms the grain of the public discourse in war and on war. The lines followed by this public discourse are important as they can be understood, to some extent, as forming the structure of a cognitive, psychological communicative and emotional collective cage.

What emerged from the investigation conducted in this thesis is a difference between individual and collective coverage on war. Most of the time the *parole*, namely the flexible and creative potential of the individual linguistic, written and witnessing act, is able to elevate officers from the communicative trap and enable them to continue their difficult navigation throughout the waves of the conflict. Conversely, the flexibility, and the capacity to readjust and envisage a new language willing and able to grasp the inconsistencies and to go 'beyond' pre-war interventionist myths and narratives, is distant from the prerogatives of public discourse. Throughout 1917 and after the Rout, in fact, interventionist narratives blindly stuck even more rigidly to pre-war mottos and assumptions thus giving up, in the long run, a chance to acquire reliability. Not adopting a more flexible and liquid compass, the language of public institutional discourse dangerously crystallized and distanced itself from the actual sea on which it had to navigate.

At an institutional level, in fact, Caporetto resulted in a renewed intent to remobilize at all costs, hence the increasing role attributed to censorship and propaganda. The language and mindsets refused to come to terms with the events and preferred to stick to traditional mobilizing strategies. Epitomizing this is the widespread use of the internal enemy; this was also adopted before Caporetto and associated to condemn the Pope's call for Peace that was perceived and framed as a betrayal of the national cause.

The attacks against presumed internal enemies were too violent (see the poem by Bertoldo in the appendix) to be solely a response to a diminished support for war in 1917. The risk that the nationalist discourse attempted to exorcise was much more relevant: it tried to combat the unveiling of the inconsistency of interventionist and nationalist myths and narratives. This inconsistency, resulting from the distance between the longed for, imagined 'Italy that is not' held as the motivation for any sacrifice, on the one hand, and the real Italy, embodied by distant and delusive institutions is sensed by combatants when they experience the deafness towards their basic needs.

The inadequacy of institutional communication at a time of emergency, as revealed by the verbal violence, the negation and the imposition of traditional communicative structures, indicates the immaturity of a state that had not yet mastered its experiences and narratives and proves unable to build new communicative responses to crucial collective events.

Merging the analysis of the *balbettio*, the loss of authorial voice, the cognitive vertigo and emotional acceleration detected in the war writings on Caporetto with the

rigidity, violence and denial of institutional remobilizing discourse, led to the hypothesis that some of the tragic national outcomes and legacies of war could be attributed to this communicative trap. This snare, which is also detectable in private writings, has been investigated through the lens of the double bind. This is borrowed from Bateson, and it is intended as that dysfunctional communication that negates reality and imposes a coercive narrative that contrasts with what is experienced and witnessed. At the core of the double-bind communication characterizing Italy in wartime lies the irreconcilable dichotomy between the idealized motherland and the actual 'schizophrenic' and distant country encountered while at war and sensed with particular clarity at the Rout.

The Rout reveals what was already clear, namely that the idealized nation combatants were fighting for would not result from a military enterprise conducted by distant and badly-organized institutions. The Pope with his Call for Peace might be seen as the child in the story who dares to say that the emperor has no clothes, and the Rout is the occasion that tragically reveals the inexistence of the regal national dress everybody claims to see for Italy. However, what is revealed is something even worse. In fact, Italy is not naked like the emperor in the story, rather it wears two outfits: the first is as inadequate, uncomfortable and coercive as the uniform provided to its soldiers; the second is only a projected chimera.

Jahier's definition of Italy as a young, inexperienced mother adopted to justify its deficiencies, negligence, distance and forgetfulness, and the definition proposed by the less committed Zanivolti calling Italy 'madre matrigna' (evil mother) testify to the pervasiveness of this allegory. Reasoning further on it on the basis of the investigation

conducted on language, family communication and the war experience, along with the debate on projected and actual Italy, a further issue was detected and a new research question was formulated: what communication, what memory and what identity can such a schizophrenic motherland engender?

This question reinforces the relevance of the selection criteria of this research and its specific focus on middle-class literate junior officers and on their language and writing. They, in fact, were traditionally raised, more than other groups, within the frame of idealized national narratives. At the same time, due to their role and participation in war, they were more exposed to sense the inconsistencies of these narratives. If life at war was worse and less comfortable for soldiers, one might venture that junior combat officers were the principal victims of the conundrums of the national communicative double-bind cage.

The terms of the impossibility to elaborate a complete and mature independence from the early myth of the nation sought for and supported, paying a high price, is rooted in the nature of the communication, imagery, representation and creations with which it has been apprehended and from which it is so difficult to be distanced. Even when Italy as an actual entity is criticized, the idea that lurks between the lines is that 'Italy that is not' is somewhere behind the curtains of that young and inexperienced motherland and that it is thus necessary to fight even harder to reach it. The conundrums thus seem to lie not solely in the war experience, but, rather, more relevantly in the framework within which it is situated and in the reasoning and linguistic wrong-loops through which it is thought and conveyed.

Marco Francesconi reflects upon the role of autobiographic writing considered on the complex terrain of the conscious and unconscious in its diachronic dimension.[650] Referring to the work and reasoning undertaken in the field of psychoanalysis, Francesconi argues that translation is part of, and plays a crucial role in, the evolution of individuals. Translation is explored in Francesconi's essay as the transposition of early internal objects as they were perceived and conceived in childhood into the - functional and dysfunctional - versions of adulthood. Francesconi's peculiar perspective on translation as a moment of self-development, enables us to observe the selection of letters and diary entries investigated in this thesis as an important unconscious attempt at translation undertaken by junior combat officers.

The activity of writing and the linguistic and communicative renegotiation underlying it can thus be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the traumatic discrepancy between the early internal object of the mother-nation seen through the idealizing eyes of its newborn children and the actual mother-nation with its most indigestive aspects. The idealistic image of the former drove officers' self-mobilization whereas the latter, lurking behind the actual encounter with war, can be detected by reading between the lines of these war writings. Depending on the circumstances, it can be negated, removed, embellished, at times revealed, condemned and then negated again as the awareness and vertigo surrounding it generate deep anguish.

[650] Marco Francesconi in 'Lo Straniero in noi. Inconscio, traduzioni e trasformazioni', in *Parola di sè Le autobiografie linguistiche tra parola e didattica*, Gianpaolo Anfosso, Giuseppe Polimeni, Eleonora Salvadori, eds., (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2016) (pp. 34-41).

This conclusion proposes the idea that this is the reason why the inventiveness, both military and linguistic, which helped junior combat officers cope with war, did not result, in the post-war era, in the capacity of Italian society to resiliently come to terms with and overcome the trauma of war and to fully demobilize. The constant confrontation and renegotiation of language structures and potential undertaken at an individual level was not accompanied by a public growth in discussing and confronting war. The language spoken within the frame of a dysfunctional communicative arena was unable to elaborate the emotions and loss of the community.

War could be seen as 'a missed occasion'; missed in that the disenchantment for the actual Italy revealed by war failed to be completely digested and re-elaborated; 'translated' to use Francesconi's suggestion in a more mature vision of it.[651] The public Italian communication on the nation and on war was so biased that it prevented the development of the tools for proper and stable emotional growth f the country. In spite of their individual evolution, literacy, culture and high level of education (both pre-dating war and further developed throughout it), the Italian junior officers returning from the front failed to develop a shared language or communication able to make sense of events, challenge old assumptions and narratives, overcome past legacies and project possible future paths. (Some managed to do so but in their private sphere).

[651] The term and concept is borrowed from Marco Mondini, *Fiume 1919, Una guerra civile italiana* (Roma: Aculei, 2019), p. 15.

The paramilitary violence breaking out within society could thus be seen as a subsequent form of an internal and visceral negation of an uncomfortable view of the motherland by its highly mobilized citizen-sons. A negation that required a re-mobilizing narrative and found it in the myth, the mutilated victory of which the 'mediatic invention' of Fiume is a direct product.[652] The resentfulness at the insecure, viscous, attachment to the motherland and the resulting impossibility to come to terms with the war fought for it could be considered as the premise for the Fiume campaign, for the civil war, for the paramilitary violence of post-war Italy.

This thesis welcomes the idea that paramilitary violence is a common denominator for many countries after war, as investigated by Horne and Gherwarth and that, as they suggest, the cycle of violence should be investigated with a broader spatial scope and timeframe in mind.[653] From the analysis conducted on this focused set of writings, and on their connection with their legacies, one could argue that the cycle to be studied in Italy is not only that of violence preceding, accompanying and following war, but rather the cycle of violence, coercive potential, denial, unreliability and, more relevantly, the ambivalence characterizing the institutional coverage of nationalist discourse and the war experience.[654] This results from the immaturity of

[652] Ibid. p. 37.

[653] Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, 'Il Paramilitarismo in Europa dopo la Grande Guerra. Un'introduzione' in Robert Gerwarth and John Horne *Guerra in Pace, Violenza paramilitare in Europa dopo la Grande Guerra*, (Milano: Mondadori, 2013) pp. 1-26.

[654] On the legacies and escalation of violence in Italy see, Emilio Gentile, 'La violenza paramilitare fascista e le origini del paramilitarismo in Italia', in Gerwarth and John Horne *Guerra in Pace*, pp. 127-154.

the newborn nation state unable to coordinate its institutional 'voices' but also, and possibly even more relevantly, from the dysfunctional nature of its national discourse. Rather than finding a resolution through the watershed of war, these discrepancies and conundrums result in a paradoxical outcome, namely the emergence of the Fascist regime.

Adapting Bateson and Francesconi's theories to observe the outcomes of war, Fascism could be seen as a disproportionate and pathological response of a 'teenage' country.[655] As such, it aims to suffocate the anguish deriving from the doubts about the idealized motherland and, even more, about the necessity of the war enterprise enthusiastically undertaken by blaming institutions, through unprecedented communicative, political and military violence.

What this study aimed to propose is an innovative methodological perspective and to provide an incomplete but, hopefully insightful, angle on a problem which is rooted in language and which, as such, enters the realm of witnessing, of family communication, of self and collective projection through writing.

As far as methodology is concerned, combining historiography on WW1 with linguistics, semantics, translation and literary studies proved extremely insightful. For instance, the idea of adopting Natalia Ginzburg's family lexicon to observe letters and diaries emerged from the renewed attention of cultural history for war cultures and war mentalities. These were combined with the historiography on epistolary exchange by Petrucci. The 'foreignizing' approach derived from Venuti, aimed at reproducing disorientation in the reader, was meant to replicate the sense of bewilderment,

[655] 'teenage' is adopted to define the level of maturity rather than the actual age.

discovery and satisfaction engendered by the unmediated confrontation with the sources, and throughout the translation, analysis and comparison. The unmediated experience of texts initially responded to a need not to be influenced by the misleading information often provided by families and friends curating the publication of sources. However, this initial neglect towards paratextual elements was maintained as it proved particularly insightful. This approach was also adopted in the case of literary authors, whose subsequent literary production, cultural or political developments are not investigated in this thesis.

Matching the work on atrocities with Bakhtin's dialogical principle, and with the notion of teichoscopy derived from literary studies, enabled a slightly different grasp on the writing of the Rout. It led to a further understanding of the experience of Caporetto as a tragedy in which the main traumatic event is removed from sight, and therefore knowledge, of all the officers considered. The work on atrocities helped to understand further certain dynamics characterizing the process of the remobilization of the city of Pavia in 1917 and the reference to specific legacies. The studies on intertextuality and hermeneutics by Ezio Raimondi have been applied to the analysis of texts. They helped to detect an important feature in the sources considered, namely transtextuality. This has been considered in chapters two and three as the presence of images and phrases from literary texts and newspaper articles, used as a further communicative tool and as a reassuring identity anchor. However, in this thesis, Genette's method and observation on transtextuality have been adopted as a lens to broaden the observation to other echoes and resonances from other periods. Understanding the enthusiasm displayed by Vivanti in his letter of 23 November 1916

at the death of Ceco Beppo without referring to Giusti's *Dies Irae* would have been reductive.[656] Reading the letters without keeping in mind the differences characterizing the various military units would have meant missing an important part of the construction of a sense of belonging within the military.[657] The hypothesis formulated here is that the legacies of the past, the emotions attached to the *Risorgimento* as it was lived by previous generations in different areas of Italy, but even more as it was recounted and mythologized in specific contexts and timeframes, not only impacted on the perception of war events and on the nuances of its experience, but also left their traces on writing in many different ways. This connection between past legacies, present experience and future projection is not a peculiar Italian trait but rather a general aspect pertaining to the continuum of experience and, as such, it has been widely studied even in connection to the activity of writing.[658] Even so, in Italy it assumes specific features that are connected both with the nation-building process and, more relevantly, with the words, phrases, images, emotions and forms of political commitment that it was attributed over time by the social group of which this set of sources represents a small but insightful sample. This set of features structures the background and repertoire which, transmitted through family and state education, infuse the mindset of the officers considered, orienting their assumptions and expectations before and throughout the conflict. If one considers volunteering and the political commitment to war, for instance, this is the result of a long-established

[656] Vivanti, *Scrivimi*, p. 232.

[657] See soldiers' songs in the appendix.

[658] Philip Dwyer, 'Making sense of the muddle War memoirs and the culture of remembering', in *War stories the war memoir in history and literature*, (Oxford: Berghahn, 2017), pp. 1-25.

tradition that is rooted in the Risorgimento when students left their universities to join 'Le cinque giornate' of Milan, the war against Austrian domination and the Expedition of the Thousand. Young educated males are traditionally active in the nation-building process, not only and not solely out of idealism but also because of a habit of commitment that derives from the past and is meant to lead them to find their role in the emerging nation.

The theories developed in the study of space and on the social renegotiation of it have proved insightful for envisaging the role of writing as a renegotiation of time and space, which resembles that described by De Certeau in his work. Writing becomes an act of renegotiation, witnessing and reappropriation in response to an imposed, depersonalizing war. It could also be seen as either complying to or breaking silence intended, in line with Jay Winter's reasoning, as a socially negotiated space.

The comparative investigation of this set of war writings revealed more clearly another aspect of war: the coexistence of the transformative potential of the war experience alongside a conservative, even reactionary, tendency inherent to it.[659] This thesis detected the coexistence of these elements within individual 'trajectories' throughout the conflict. The exploration of writing attitudes, and of the role of writing, sheds further light on these coexisting yet conflicting aspects. Writing, in fact, was an attempt to resist transformation while also representing the acceptance and re-elaboration of it. It thus becomes representative of war itself, in its specific aspect of metamorphosis that suspends it between what it was, what it is and what it could be.

[659] More insights on this in Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, 'Il Paramilitarismo in Europa dopo la Grande Guerra', in Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, eds., *Guerra in Pace violenza militare in Eropa dopo la Grande Guerra* (Milano: Mondadori, 2013) pp. 1-26.

Some acts of creative appropriation of war clarify these points. An example of this is provided in the appendix: a shell case that caused a soldier's death is collected by his comrades and turned into a memorial sculpture. It is signed by them all and posted to his mother. Traditional mourning is at one and the same time negated in war due to a lack of time and to the contexts that often prevent a funeral taking place. War also exacerbated mourning given that precisely because of the mass exposure to death and the impossibility to mourn comrades resulted in a different idea that obliges one of the simulacra of war, i.e. a shell case, to become an eternal war memorial for their beloved comrade's family. The need and the tradition for rituals does not disappear in war; they take on different forms and are enriched with new meanings. However, they remain and might even be reinforced.[660]

This study led to a further understanding of writing as a tool with which to witness not solely the experience of war, but, more relevantly, the experience of linguistic and mental transfromation that marked it.

Intended as such, language, meant as the *parole* proper of the war writings investigated, we might call it *parole de guerre* in order to decline the term by Saussure to the investigation undertaken, could be seen not solely as a liquid compass for navigation but also as a pocket dictionary able to constantly re-adjust and translate the war experience. This makes it intelligible and endurable for the officers mastering it and, most of the time, this *parole de guerre* renegotiated at the encounter with the 'beyond' is able to bridge the dis-synchrony existing between men at war and families

[660] For an in-depth investigation, see Jay Winter, *Sites of memory, sites of mourning*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014; 1995).

on the home front. The *parole de guerre* proves able to translate the evolution of individual identities throughout the conflict, a capacity lacked by the *langue de guerre*, being more rigid and slow in welcoming, accepting and adjusting to change.

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