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Authoring War Memories: War Memoir Writing and Testimonial Theatre Performances

Abstract

This paper will discuss aspects concerning authorship, memory, and war representation, as well as trauma and healing. In order to do so, I will explore the writing of war memoirs and/or the re-enactment of war experiences on the stage as two ways of expressing and coping with war trauma. In both cases, the concept of the author, a war veteran as first-person narrator or self-performer, is central to the representation of the traumatic memories of war. It is precisely through this interaction between the author, as a legitimate witness, and source of authentic and reliable information, that the readership/audience connects emotionally with the experience of the combatants and can empathise with their situation. A theoretical conceptualisation of war memoir writing, and testimonial theatre will be illustrated with specific examples of texts connected with the Falklands War (UK-Argentina, 1982). The dominant perspective of the reflection are veterans' stories.

Keywords: war memories, witness literature, theatre of testimony, re-enacting war experiences, trauma, autobiographical writing, war memoirs, self-representation.

Introduction: Witness as Authority

A “witness” can be defined as someone who can comply with the following three mandatory provisions: presence, perception and transmission; as Horace Engdahl puts it, “a witness is a person who speaks out and says, ‘I was there, I saw it, I can tell people!’” (2002: 3). A particular claim to truth as first-hand witnesses is granted to war veterans as holders of “the authority of experience” (Scott 1991: 780). Laura Sasu refers to the relationship between witness literature and truth in the following way: “the focus [of witness literature] remains firmly linked to the contents of testimony and its relationship to truth” (2013: 8). Sasu argues that, regardless of the kind of literary or artistic testimony, the one aspect that prevails is the truth of the testimonial text or performance, and its implicit claim to credibility. This sets up a particular type of relationship between the author and the reader/viewer of the testimonial text or performance. Authenticity emerges as an imperative for any war narrative. Yet, even if historians rely on history, memoirs and autobiographies to recover the truth of past experience, there may always be a doubt about what really happened, and about the validity



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and veracity of memory itself. The fact that war veterans play out their own memories on the stage or write down their own war recollections and experiences on paper provides a certain authenticity.

Memory plays a crucial role in the retelling of the past. It is widely agreed that the representation of traumatic experiences is beyond language: language proves insufficient to express the horror of hatred, violence, terror. In *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (2011), Kate McLoughlin argues that “the representation of war is inherently anxiogenic” because “even if it resists representation, conflict demands it” (2011: 6). Memory and the way war is recalled are central elements in the representation of war trauma, and in the healing processes of war victims. These past recollections represent the different ways in which veterans remember, and depend on whether they wish to talk about these war memories and make sense of them on the stage, or on the page. It then may be clear that memories are important and such representational anxieties will function to vocalise the veterans’ struggle with the past. In a stricter sense, they can be understood as a metaphor for spaces where words fail to communicate meaning. Indeed, how does one cross the unbridgeable gap between language and the reality of war? Alongside this eagerness to keep certain experiences fresh and alive in the soldiers’ minds, some memories are inevitably lost, or else they are too painful to bring back to the surface.

In contrast to mass media, literary, artistic, and theatrical creations form an alternative framework for a re-evaluation of war, and a discussion of deeper concepts and dilemmas, enabling the expression of overlooked or repressed voices. The traumatic historical events that took place in the twentieth century, such as the two world wars and genocides, gave rise to a different way of representing war experiences, where witnessing becomes new fodder for literature and drama, in which the victims of history reclaim the story and define how it should be recounted, shared and felt with the audience through a text/play, which is no longer a mere historical document (Malpede 1997). In this manner, the witness enters the category of “flesh-witness” rather than existing as a simple, more neutral “eye-witness” (Harari 2010).

The Writing of War Memoirs

War is a totally transformative and life-changing experience, and, in Samuel Hynes’s words: “No man goes through a war without being changed by it, and in fundamental ways” (1998: 3). Such a traumatic experience produces deep and long-lasting effects in the combatants’ physical as well as mental well-being. As Raghu Raman puts it, “there is no switch in the human mind which can periodically convert a kind soldier, who rescues victims from natural disasters, and then back again [to the battlefield], without affecting his mental state” (2019, para. 12).

The profound changes a combatant undergoes when returning from the battlefield are not always visible. Some veterans struggle to find the courage to share their war traumas. Many combatants endure painful emotions, such as guilt and shame, which prevent them from showing their true feelings in a society that rewards strength and bravery but stigmatises the weak and those seeking help (Farnsworth et al. 2014; Nazarov et al. 2015). Jay Winter thus reflects on the silence of war veterans and their incapacity or unwillingness to narrate their war memories:

Many of those who fought never spoke about what they knew. There were many reasons they placed their memories of war beyond words. Some felt that civilians could not comprehend and did not want to hear what they had to say. Some wanted to leave their nightmares in the dark, where they belonged, and to go on living ordinary lives. Others went further and concluded that the horror of war was beyond speech, beyond images, beyond monuments. What war did was to place itself beyond utterance (2017: 172).

Many war veterans suffer a period of self-denial in accepting the repercussions of war, which is a recurrent feature in those who experienced such traumas. Winter (2017) refers to the type of silence that he calls “essentialist” and that concerns former soldiers who would only share their memories with veteran peers, as if understanding could only come from those who had been through the same experience. Coming to terms with the physical and psychological wounds is usually a laborious process and finding the way to express these traumas is yet another challenge.

Writing is one way of dealing with the ordeal of war recollections. For this reason, war memoirs have long been explored as works of traumatic recovery and personal “scriptotherapy,” a term coined by Suzette Henke (1998) to refer to the therapeutic treatment in which writing is used as an instrument in the process of healing. The re-enactment of traumatic memories on paper provides a valuable discursive space for overcoming psychological wounds. Therefore, writing, especially autobiographical writing, can be a form of generating personal catharsis. Personal narratives can contain numerous disturbing elements that reflect the authors’ traumas. According to Yuval Noah Harari, the aim of modern war memoirs is to reconnect authors to their lives after they had been disrupted by war (2005: 68). The main focus of war memoirs written by soldiers is, according to Jenkins and Woodward, “on the individual’s experience rather than on broader reflection on the rationale for a conflict and its progress through time” (2014: 339). In the same vein, Gary Baines, in *Memoir Writing as Narrative Therapy in War Stories: The War Memoir in History and Literature* (2017) suggests that war memoir-writing is equivalent to, or similar to, a recovery by clinical means. A model of narrative analysis has been put forward to address how the form and content of the stories serve the purpose of reconciliation with general life stories, that is, achieving “harmony between past, present and future” (Hunt 2010: 117). The existence of a fragmented, disrupted life narrative and threatening flashbacks forms a fundamental part of the clinical definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Reconstruction, harmonisation, and the creation of coherent memories are considered by psychologists to be essential for recovery.

The benefits of writing to overcome traumatic experiences have also been described as a process of “active coping” with trauma (Harber and Pennebaker 1992: 372). Writing, by concentrating on the structural rules of grammar, both restricts and channels the emotional flow, thereby transforming the victim of the narrative into the author whose task is to render the events in a comprehensible manner. Moreover, sharing or publishing memoirs may become an important factor for alleviating personal suffering, as the recovery process may then be considered within the context of rebuilding social and political relationships. As suggested by Judith Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), this is a process that joins victim and witness into a common alliance. Sharing personal experiences with a community instead of one-to-one treatment between a single patient and therapist has also been proposed as critical in alternative approaches to PTSD healing. Opening up to the general readership results in broader benefits to the group as well as a sense of relief in collective pain (Tick 2004).

Language is limited and insufficient when it comes to describing human suffering. In effect, war poses several representational challenges and constraints. Other forms of artistic expression can attempt to reflect the true human side of the ordeals of war, at the risk of being too subjective, somehow incomplete, inadequate, or futile; yet, this emotional dimension is a fundamental part of the story, which cannot be fully addressed by historical, fact-based texts. War memoir authors often claim that their accounts are true, but when their purpose is to present facts, they can often be debated and contested.

Representations of war have shifted historically from mere descriptions of facts to expression of emotions. In a historic context of progressive decrease in the tolerance of violence in modern societies, the personal experiences of the soldiers have taken pre-eminence over the

fact-accounting and honour-focused texts traditionally produced by kings, noblemen and high-rank officers. Therefore, the point of view shifted from a mere description of facts to the expression of feelings. Harari (2007) argues that veterans' accounts shifted to a progressive disillusionment and critical attitude towards war during the twentieth century. In *On Military Memoirs: Soldier-Authors, Publishers, Plots and Motives* (2014), Esmeralda Kleinreesink notes that war narrations in nineteenth-century memoirs bear a primary component of disenchantment while memoirs from the twentieth century contain more accounts of personal growth (2014: 272).

Narrating war recollections from the battlefield is nowadays a personal experience that tends to focus on the individual, the inner reactions and subjective experiences of the combatants, as Harari observes in *Military Memoirs: A Historical Overview of the Genre from the Middle Ages to the Late Modern Era* (2007). Modern-day memoirs, then, have shifted from the traditional war stories of military officers, historians, and politicians to those of the people who actually fought and suffered on the battlefield. Personal narratives like these, Jon Begley argues, “deliberately undermine sanitized abstractions of the war by reinscribing the terrifying immediacy and absurd singularity of combat experience [...] into disordered narratives of combat fatigue and brute survival” (2012: 235).

Making use of a model created by Norman Friedman in 1955, Kleinreesink groups war memoirs according to their themes into three broad categories: pure “action” memoirs, “growth” memoirs, and “disenchantment” memoirs. Negative narratives regarding war recollections structured around personal degeneration, shattered ideals, and disillusionment, are commonly authored by traumatised veterans. As Jonathan Shay reveals, such damaging memories show the consequences of “betrayal of what is right” on the part of the soldier (1995: 11). Experience can also be understood as transformative, in that the personal journeys of the soldiers may have a positive outcome. Texts from the period studied suggest that, especially in historically war-involved nations like Britain (Fussell 2000 [1975]), positive outcomes, in terms of personal maturation or lessons learnt, definitely carry an important weight in the published accounts of the professional soldiers of our times. Even personal disappointment is often channelled into positive debate and action, rather than a loss of control (Kleinreesink 2014: 268–69). Kleinreesink's study was primarily based on war memoirs from soldiers deployed to Afghanistan during the years 2001–2010. At this point, it is worth emphasising the wide wave of military memoirs that were published in Great Britain after the war in Afghanistan.¹

The case of Private Ken Lukowiak exemplifies the use of writing as a form of therapy. Lukowiak was a member of the Second Battalion Parachute Regiment of the British Army deployed to the Falkland Islands for the 1982 British-Argentine war. After suffering a long depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the veteran's creative drive motivated him to write down his memories, to help him overcome his war traumas. He needed an organised, written account of his daily experiences during that time to make sense of the war, to understand what he had been through, to heal and move forward. *A Soldier's Song* is Lukowiak's war memoir, first published in 1993. The book describes the actions, thoughts, and feelings of the young private as part of his regiment, sent with the Task Force to recover British sovereignty over the Falkland Islands, following the Argentine invasion in April 1982. *A Soldier's Song* is one of the three best known personal accounts of the Falklands War written by veterans, together with Vincent Bramley's *Excursion to Hell* (1992), *Forward into Hell* (2006) and John and Robert Lawrence's *When the*

¹ The table of publications details were shared by Rachel Woodward and K. Nail Jenkins in their article “‘This place isn't worth the left boot of one of our boys’: Geopolitics, militarism and memoirs of the Afghanistan war” (2012).

Fighting is Over: Tumbledown (1988). Because of its rich composition, *A Soldier's Song* has been praised for its literary merits that go beyond those of simple, crude veterans' accounts. McGuirk regards the book as "by far the most literary of combatants' memoirs" (2007: 101) and worthy of literary analysis along with novels, plays, and poetry. In fact, the book has been adapted for the stage. In 1998, Guy Masterson adapted, directed, and solo-performed the theatrical piece, and, in 2012, the show was revived but this time with Lukowiak on stage, performing his own memories.

For Lukowiak, writing was not part of a medical procedure that he had been advised to follow by therapists or counsellors to find a cure for his PTSD. In the foreword to the 1999 edition, Lukowiak explains his creative process in writing the book. For him, writing was more of an impulse and not something that he had considered doing previously with a specific purpose in mind; he became a writer by accident: "One day, during a period of total despair, I picked up a pen and began to write down my memories of Goose Green" (1999: xiv). Writing was not then conceived as part of a medical procedure Lukowiak had been advised to follow but was a way of expressing himself and of sharing his inner emotions, his artistic drive, and personal creation. Moreover, it was a salvation from the unpleasant, chaotic, and painful life he was leading: "And that despair, which I now look back on as emotionally the blackest period of my life [...]. I was a fine description of broke in every sense of the word" (Lukowiak 1999: xiv–xv).

In fact, when he began writing, little did he imagine that writing would come to signify so much in his future life. Writing became his only way of making sense of the world and of understanding the war. Writing became a refuge, a source of happiness, and soon he became addicted to it and needed to do it to remain sane; it was like a drug:

I couldn't stop writing. The only description I've been able to come up with to explain the feeling, the absolute click of the fingers change in me, is that it was like a drug had been injected into my veins. I wrote and wrote and wrote. Couldn't stop. If I was sleeping, I was writing [...]. As my war poured out, I relived memories that had torn me apart. One time I even remembered the fear [...]. Once I finished putting down a particular memory, I always felt some sense of achievement, pride in myself (Lukowiak 1999: xvii–xviii).

Performing the Testimonial in the Theatre

There are diverse kinds of performances that invite direct testimony, such as theatre of testimony, theatre of fact, theatre of witness, applied theatre, as well as verbatim theatre. These kinds of performances share similar characteristics: they are created to narrate real experiences and to give voice to real people, real testimonies, and witness accounts. Therefore, the notion of authorship and authenticity are central in documentary performances.

The majority of the plays that are created to show a real-life experience of a specific person or group tend to avoid conventional forms: the performances are free in style, innovative in terms of structures, departing from linear narratives. The use of vernacular language becomes an essential part, as the actor/performer on stage needs to sound as authentic as possible. Documentary performances usually take place in small premises; this close distance and proximity of bodies between actors and spectators is sought to provoke not only an emotional but a physical involvement. The reduced space allows for occasional interaction between the actors and members of the audience: actors/performers can speak directly to the spectators and acknowledge their reactions (Jeffers 2006).

Testimonial theatre productions function to enable protagonists to recall traumatic events, while, at the same time, provoking an emotional response from the viewers. Playwrights, who take a secondary role in this kind of theatre, aim to elicit an emotional response from the audience (Jeffers 2006).

Empowering the audience can lead to political action, or more specifically, to “political mimesis,” as Wake (2013: 118) suggests, using Gaines’s terms (1999). This implies that viewers might replicate, re-enact or body-back the theatrical experiences and the ideals and beliefs triggered by what they have seen on the stage in different social contexts. Consequently, due to its claim to credibility, documentary drama has this potential of raising social consciousness about sensitive issues in society. Moreover, free from the pressure of hegemonic media, independent theatre productions can revive critical responses and activate the political conscience and assessment. As Collieran argues: “politically engaged theatre [...] can employ its own [specific language] to call attention to the constructedness of media presentations. It can expose the incompleteness, subjectivity or partiality of news reportage” (2003: 631).

As many of these plays are crafted as collaborative and collective projects, involving veterans of war and directors, the very concept of authorship – in the traditional sense of the author having the authority over the text – fades away. The performers are usually non-professional actors, veterans who witnessed the war at first hand. A great deal of personal and professional responsibility is placed on the cast members. Not only do they have to act in a public performance, but they also must perform as themselves by enacting their own very personal and subjective war experiences and memories.

In testimonial theatre productions, technology is regarded as an integral part of performance and a means to embody memory; it is also necessary for the verification of the factual accuracy of both the text and the performance. Virtual archives “confer legitimacy and give a strong feeling of ‘being there,’ of the ‘real thing’” (Martin 2006: 10). Plays are created from a specific body of archived material such as videos, photographs on the screen, direct testimony from first-hand witnesses, among other documentary records. As Martin argues, “replication and simulation are used to capture and reproduce ‘what really happened’” (2006: 9).

This kind of theatre is a performance of evidence and testimony. Jennifer Miller points out that when the performers are re-enacting as themselves, audience members tend to be grateful for their bravery on the stage and their willingness to be both vulnerable and open in public (2018: 53). Thus, testimonial theatre productions make it possible for both protagonists and audiences to recall traumatic events, and, at the same time, to re-examine, reconsider, and question previous conceptions. That is why documentary theatre not only acts as mere streamers of film or audio footage, but it also seeks to challenge grand narratives through complicating and interrogating archival truth. In the United States, for instance, testimonial theatre became very popular after 9/11 as a means for dealing with post-trauma.

One example of testimonial theatre is the so-called Theatre of Witness (TOW), a project created by artistic director Teya Sepinuck in the 1980s in the US. TOW places the performers’ life experiences at the centre of the whole spectacle. According to its website, TOW develops from the performers’ “sharing their personal and collective stories of suffering, transformation and peace”. In Europe, TOW has offered several performances in Northern Ireland since 2009. All the performances were centred on “The Troubles,” and aimed to bring together people from both sides of the conflict. All the performers of this kind of theatre of witness share similar characteristics: the actors are non-professionals who have experienced or witnessed a conflictive or traumatic situation. Performers range from refugees, prisoners, victims of abuse, survivors of war – “people whose stories haven’t been heard”.² As Chou and Bleiker reflect, “theatre can give voice to a multitude of real characters and under-represented perspectives” and “give expression to a range of voices and perspectives that would otherwise remain silenced or side-lined” (2010: 561).

² <http://www.theaterofwitness.org/about/>

One of the main goals in testimonial theatre is, as Miller (2018) suggests, the development of empathy by humanising the “other” on the stage. By bearing witness to the process the actors undergo while performing, the spectators develop empathy towards them. As Miller puts it,

TOW has shown itself to be an effective form of testimonial theatre. The audience develops a connection to the participants and witnesses their healing and transformation. It helps to humanize the other, see other as self, and see our common humanity. It is transformative in developing empathy in the participants and the audience. The cross-cultural communication and interaction create awareness of the multiple angles/sides of events and conflicts (Miller 2018: 54).

Because of its essential involvement in the retelling of historical events and its reliance on first-hand testimony, testimonial theatre is better understood as a form of realistic stage theatre which, in Caroline Wake’s words, might convey “an ethically risky proposition” (Wake 2013: 117) when these events are explicitly traumatic. Jordana Blejmar (2017) conceives of autobiographical theatre as a privileged space for representing a complex, layered and split subject. Likewise, Deirdre Heddon (2008) argues that theatre can become an effective space of empowerment and enunciation for traumatised individuals.

The theatre of self-performance has been used widely as a therapeutic practice for war veterans suffering from PTSD. The re-enactment of the combatants’ war memories can bring about flashbacks of forgotten episodes. In this sense, the stage becomes a battlefield on which it is possible to revive shocking moments and to recover blocked memories, but also a space to heal open wounds and move forward. What Chou and Bleiker argue about verbatim performance also applies to testimonial theatre, as it “offers a mechanism to problematize how we represent war; what we see as real or how we draw the boundaries between truth and untruth” (2010: 569). As with verbatim performance, since testimonial theatre provides an alternate frame of reference, it “offers audiences a means to reassess political reality freed from the distortions of censorship and misinformation” (Chou & Bleiker 2010: 570).

In dealing with PTSD, treatment methods attempt to access, integrate, and repair the damaged memories. Many of these approaches encourage patients to reexperience, recount, replay, and re-enact traumatic scenes. In their article, “Drama Therapy in the Treatment of Combat-related Post-traumatic Stress Disorder” (1997), Miller and Johnson illustrate how the use of the arts has become an established treatment option for such patients. Nowadays, dramatherapy is, in many countries, a regulated form of therapy which uses the performance arts as the central element within the therapeutic relationship (Jones 2015).

Verbatim theatre is a form of documentary theatre which has been widely practised in the UK since the mid-1970s. However, the term “verbatim,” which literally means “word-by-word,” was used by Derek Paget to refer to this form of documentary theatre in 1987. A verbatim play is created from taped interviews with real-life people whose true stories are later portrayed on stage. The performances are based on testimonial stories adapted into a theatrical script that is often performed by professional actors in verbatim theatre. The ways in which playwrights work with the testimonies raise questions about authenticity, aesthetics, and ethics of this practice. This is “speaking for the ‘Other’.”

A stage representation of the Falklands War that is worth mentioning here is *Falkland Sound/Voces de Malvinas* (Louise Page 1983), a documentary verbatim play that was first released in 1983 – one year after the end of the war – in the Royal Court Theatre with Louise Page as writer and editor. The play is divided into two parts: the first part is composed of letters from Lieutenant David Tinker, a Falkland naval officer who was killed in action, while the second part brings into stage the testimony of five people, five “voices” involved in the war but not the fighting itself.

A more recent example of a stage representation of the Falklands War is *Minefield/Campo Minado* (2016), a bilingual play by Argentine writer, theatre and film director Lola Arias. The play explores the lives and memories of six veterans of the Falklands war – three British and three Argentine. After its premiere in London in June 2016 as part of the LIFT festival, *Minefield/Campo Minado* has been staged repeatedly in several venues across the UK, Argentina, and other countries, such as Spain. The play has received excellent reviews from critics and spectators alike. Its success lies in its originality and authenticity, in uniting war veterans from the two nations involved in the dispute, its bilingualism, its experimental form and its creativity in terms of themes and staging.

Minefield/Campo Minado was crafted as a collaborative and collective project involving British and Argentine war veterans. The fact that the scripts were written jointly by the performers and the director challenges the very concept of authorship and reflects, at the same time, the overt initial intention of the director to give voice to those who were first-hand witnesses of the conflict. More than an author or a playwright, Arias acts as an editor, a collector of the veterans' stories and a facilitator guiding the performers, who are not professional actors, but witnesses of the war.

Conclusion

The interaction between historical facts and personal subjective experiences in war autobiographies and testimonial performances inspires wide-ranging texts that call upon diverse narrative strategies to shape individual and collective memory. The role of war memoirs, theatrical and other artistic expressions is also important as a counterbalance narrative of war trauma in a world dominated by hegemonic mass media. Emotions, reflections, and criticism can be formed and delivered to the readership/audience by means that can form a counternarrative, or alternative view, even if less constrained by requirements of historical or factual accuracy.

In drawing from documentary records, the theatre of testimony has become a genre of rupture that responds to the trauma of war: it calls upon the conceptual framework of witness literature to react to the devastation of war. The success of these types of performances depends on their originality and authenticity. They produce the effects of estrangement and instability that represent the enormity of war trauma, inviting the reader/viewer to participate in an ethical, social, and cultural act of reading/watching but also of bearing witness.

To summarise, a war veteran, as someone who was directly involved in the story, continues to be a valuable source of authority and truth, since a veteran is regarded as an authorised agent who is able to describe their own suffering or to respond compassionately to the stories of others.

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