KATHLEEN HARRINGTON

Representations of Return: Preset War Narrative Arcs from Woolf to Robinson

Philip Beidler asserts that, "[w]e live now in a world where increasingly the function of the nation state seems to be its capacity to make war. Accordingly, it must now seem ubiquitously clear that the endless new unfoldings of its representations will likely, if anything, continue ever more relentlessly to inscribe themselves upon our own visions of daily life" (2016, 7). But, what are our visions of daily life? And how are those visions bounded by preset expectations regarding narratives? In this essay I will examine the narrative arc suggested by three texts about soldiers returning from war: specifically, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939), and Roxana Robinson's *Sparta* (2013). Both Trumbo and Robinson provide readers with a singular expectation of how to see the effects of war – trauma to the body and trauma to the soul. In other words, the representations in their texts are visible and invisible (respectively); however, these representations still follow a conventional (good to bad) movement. While each of the three novels depicts a war-rattled soldier, making war up-close and personal, ironically it is Woolf's narrative (the earliest) that does not allow us to simply fill in the blanks regarding the horrors of war. And, when we study Woolf alongside Lalage Snow's photo journalism collection, *We Are The Not Dead*, we find in both a relief from a preset war narrative arc. I argue that Snow and Woolf disrupt narrative expectations in their subtlety and in their solicitation of uniquely meditative pauses. In other words, we do not expect one thing; in fact, we do not know what to expect from their complicated, but familiar, good to bad movement. When we sit there studying them, something else happens.

The visible representation of war manifest in Dalton Trumbo's character reminds us that the worst thing in war might be to live: "You'll have a chance to die for your country. And you may not die you may come back like this. Not everybody dies little kiddies" (Trumbo 1939, 228). We learn with Joe that he has returned imprisoned by the stump of a body – no arms, no legs, blind, and deaf; yet his mind remains sharp. We know intuitively as human beings that the before state included a whole body. So what, then, do we make of this kind of return where the extent of the physical damage confounds our imagination, if not our basic humanity? And to what group, in what society does the returning-soldier-human being-spectacle now belong?

Trumbo might say we make nothing of this, and Joe belongs to no one. The ironic freedom Joe experiences in returning home primarily stems from the end of his pain; in fact, almost jokingly, "[Joe] thought well kid you're deaf as a post but there isn't the pain. You've got no arms but you don't hurt. You'll never burn your hand or cut your finger or smash a nail you lucky stiff. You're alive and you don't hurt and that's much better than being alive and hurting" (59). Even the depths of despair are met with black humor; suicide is not an option when the only way you can kill yourself is to hold your breath.

Trumbo screams to all readers against the war: "This is a war and war is hell and what the hell and so to hell with it" (4). He screams against ideals that are not shared by all, and against bureaucrats who will not pay the price. He rallies anti-war sentiment in predictable ways, challenging what is worth dying for: Whose ideals are
at risk? What does it mean to sacrifice and die for your country? However, Joe's extended cameo appearance changes the trajectory of his fervent protest. While Joe's corporal loss is irrecoverable (quite expectedly), we are left not with national rhetoric and politics, but rather with the literally unspeakable, internal torment of a soul. In other words, Trumbo has exhausted the extent of the bodily damage to the point where Joe must inch toward humanity: "The only thing he could do was wait and feel out with his skin and catch every second of the change every slow movement of time and temperature as they offered him a return of life" (137). Joe is the stripped-down embodiment of suffering anew as he tries to reconstruct time, understand his space, and communicate. Through Joe, Trumbo reinforces Jan Mieszkowski's characterization of the First World War as a total war, which "no longer respect[ed] epic conventions of time, space, and pacing," but which was "distinguished [instead] by radical discontinuity, as if with each subsequent day, hour, or minute the proceeding began anew with no regard for what had just taken place" (2012, 152). Joe's cumulative frustration – expressed by the repeated banging of his body against his hospital bed – showcases discontinuity; ultimately, his only way out is through continuity, connectedness, and belonging. He wants to belong: "For the first time in his whole life he felt that it would be a little pleasant a little comforting to be in the hands of his own people" (Trumbo 1939, 147). Yet he was not, and their attempts to reach him and make him belong come about only through shallow ritual, such as when Joe figures out he has been awarded a medal (161). Joe's horrific, irrecoverable trauma disgusts us, but the narrative arc of his return is no surprise. Wounded soldiers return home isolated, and these wounded, disfigured, and maimed soldiers simply have no happy endings.

Yet, war narratives and rituals to a great degree have offered us ways in which we can celebrate events and cheer homecomings. And amidst the ticker-tape parades, the welcome home celebrations, we take joy in the conclusive end of the event. In other words, the staggering losses in World Wars I and II and Vietnam allow us the luxury of defining the war's severity – mourning traumatic loss without bringing the war home. Those who return with visible injuries receive sympathy; they are thanked for their service. Again, this preset war narrative has become all too expected and shallow in its chorus.

Modern day wars are not immune to preset narratives, but they too complicate notions of return and belonging. We know, for example, that drone pilots are found to get stress disorders as much as those in combat do (cf. Dao 2013). We also know that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) inhibits soldiers' re-integration. Roxana Robinson's Sparta represents this very different, invisible return from war. The main character, Conrad, is haunted by what he has seen and done in combat; he has become disconnected if not alienated from civilian life; he is longing for the camaraderie and understanding of his fellow soldiers; and, all the while he is utterly adrift without purpose – drowning. Robinson's rendering of Conrad's near suicide exposes a spectrum of deep and personal despair after returning from war. It is a psychological journey of such intensity that it belies the work's classification as fiction. Unlike Trumbo's Joe, Conrad has language, he gets help, and, he has support both from his family and from former members of his battalion. Yet, this narrative of invisible (psychological) trauma is just as predictable as other narratives with visible (physical) trauma. In this respect, Sparta is an important contribution to the body of war literature because it reminds us that survivors navigate a complex recovery; indeed, "Sparta made young boys into warriors; it was left to the warriors to restore themselves to men" (Robinson...
2013, 383). However, we still expect a singular decline of a troubled soldier. The novel then is bounded by a preset war narrative, and ultimately, it is not surprising to hear that the personal price of combat is steep.

What then causes us to linger over certain war narratives? I argue that indirect narrative movements are more compelling than the narrative arc of preset war story forms. Consider the complications of war images as text and the openness of such images' narratives. For example, in 2010, Lalage Snow embarked on an eight-month-long project featuring portraits of British soldiers on deployment in Afghanistan. Snow describes the intent of her project as "bearing witness to how many young men return as shadows of their former selves and, in many cases, with deep, psychological scars;" this project, she continues, "is an attempt at giving the brave young men and women the chance to explain how it really is" (Snow 2010). Snow's triptychs prime this discussion of World War I texts. The photos in Fig. 1 below, which are representative of her entire collection, were all taken within the course of a year; there is no special lighting, and no other enhancement. We are presented with a series of soldiers' faces, which subject themselves to a host of questions: Is the center photo more distinctive than the final one? What do we make of how other photos reveal close-up images of a Black British soldier and then a woman soldier (Fig. 2)? Is the ordering here chronological? Obvious or not? Could we mistake the first photo for the third? In Snow's collection, each triptych is accompanied by a series of captions from the particular soldier. How do we read the images with or without the soldiers' comments as depicted in Fig. 3? The captions in their own right reveal and add to the corpus of the soldiers' psychological transformation. Snow's work then provides an interesting transitory space from ubiquitous war scenes (whether they be landscapes or groups of combatants) to singularly narrow, distinctive spaces distinguished by the subtle and not-so subtle changes in the faces of returning soldiers. These faces (physically unmarred, living) draw us in in ways counter to, or different from, horrific scenes of war-torn, ravaged bodies. In other words, the movement regarding a single soldier is not prescribed as good to bad or better to worse; there is no obvious decline; there is no horrific scene. The subtlety of the photos,¹ therefore, causes us to pause and reflect on what we are seeing.

Fig. 1

---

¹ Reproduced with kind permission by the photographer.
Private Chris MacGregor, 24. Before: "Obviously I'll miss family but other than that I am going to miss my dogs more than anything. They are my de-stressers and keep me sane. I think I'll miss TV too though I try not to think about the worst case scenario. After: My legs just gave up. I think it was the weight – 135 pounds or something. I just had to accept, my body was telling me to give up as I had pushed it. I was telling it to go, it was telling me to stop. When squaddies come back they still have a bit of adrenaline and anger in them. I had to have anger management after Iraq. If I get like that now, I just go for a walk with the dogs. It is the best way to deal with it, instead of being all tense and ready to snap at folk.

Images like Snow's extend the conversation about the ambivalence that comes with defining and interpreting such space. Her images renew the tension outlined by Wendy Kozol in her work *Distant Wars Visible*: on the one hand, images read as necessary in order "to mobilize empathy and action" or, on the other hand, images read simply as "spectacle" promoting "corporate and statist agendas" (2014, 32). Snow would probably agree with Kozol that "witnessing for American viewers is a vexed practice" (22). Similarly, Jan Mieszkowski, in *Watching War*, critiques the "dynamics" of war-watching over a broader range of historical conflicts. He argues that "two hundred years after Waterloo, improvements in what can be observed and recorded have not altered the fact that the experience of the battlefield audience is still largely defined by what it does not or cannot see" (2012, 14). Snow's photos disrupt a war narrative arc with open questions on sequencing, gender, race, and captions – a list which defies preset war story arcs. We linger with these photos because of the unanswered questions or perhaps because we look for ourselves in them. This lingering effect, an opening of reflective and meditative space, does get us close(r) to what we cannot see and, therefore, continues the cultural work necessary for soldiers' returning home and belonging.

*Mrs. Dalloway*, particularly Woolf's portrayal of Septimus Smith, is the textual equivalent of Snow's work. Septimus does not take-up much narrative space in *Mrs.*
Dalloway, so what we see/read is what we get. We meet him as a soldier who suffers from "shell shock" and the deep loss of his battle-buddy, Evans. Although Septimus returns to a loving and supportive wife, his daily existence is fraught with harrowing memories of the war. For Woolf the juxtaposition of this character with the snobbery and aloofness of Clarissa's parties and party guests makes a bold demarcation between the "haves" and the "have-nots" – in this case, those condemned to bear the burden of war and those privileged others, who quite willfully choose to remain unsympathetic and unaware.

The most empathetic character, Septimus' wife Lucrezia, is worried that her husband's episodes will be seen by others; after all, Septimus' eyes make "complete strangers apprehensive too" (Woolf 2003, 206). How compelling do the narrative descriptors have to be to align with the power of Lalage Snow's photographs, in other words to "see" psychological trauma like Septimus'? Woolf briefly considers a single trait: "[…] was there, after all, anything to draw attention to [Mr and Mrs Smith], anything to make a passer-by suspect here is a young man who carries in him the greatest message in the world, and is, moreover, the happiest man in the world, and the most miserable? Perhaps they walk more slowly than other people, and there was something hesitating, trailing, in the man's walk" (269).

But Woolf calls us to do more than note his walk. Septimus' looks, his babbling, his outbursts either remain unseen or are utterly misread. The appearance of his psychological symptoms is muted by other narratives: he cannot kill himself because "he works too hard" (213); he cannot kill himself because "he had fought," "he was brave" (213). According to Dr. Holmes, he just had to "notice real things, go to a music hall, play cricket, […] a nice out-of-door game" (215). The remedy for Dr Holmes' 'expert' diagnosis of "funk" is for Septimus to "throw [himself] into outside interests: take up some hobby" (277). There is also a call to normalization – war as normal – returning from war as normal because "such things happen to everyone. Everyone has friends who were killed in the War" (253).

Woolf's work here stands more directly as a narrative of return and not-belonging rather than a novel that works to establish and re-establish anti-war sentiment alone. In stark contrast to others such as Siegfried Sassoon and Stephen Crane, who would de-mystify the glory of war, Woolf's attention to a single returning soldier almost does the unthinkable – it brings the war home and haunts party-goers with the problem of where Septimus belongs. Certainly, the conflicted-ness of Septimus' interiority should not surprise us. He believes he was "dead," but is "now alive;" he wants to "rest still" (255): "He was right there. The last shells missed him. He watched them explode with indifference" (272). We do not get the sense that his suicide is planned, for at the time it occurs, Septimus' own feelings are rendered as, "He would wait until the very last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good" (329).

Septimus' death does nothing to jar Woolf's other characters into reality – particularly the physicians: "Dr. Holmes could not conceive […] why the devil he did it …" (330). Sir William never even speaks of it in terms of madness – no: "he called it not having a sense of proportion" (281). For Woolf, everything is out of proportion. Ironically, the mention of Septimus' suicide at the party is more than Clarissa can bear: "The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him […]. She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. […] She must assemble" (362).
Yet, nothing is "assembled" in ways in which the character or the author may wish it to be. The party's tea, linen, flowers, gloves, invited guests, and dress – this orderly type of assembled world affords no entry to returning soldiers haunted by war. Those who return from war are complicated, complex and messy; they are no longer part and parcel of the world they knew, and they certainly are not mirror images of those spared from war. Clarissa can see beyond orderly form and she can see beyond an expected narrative. She sees herself as we do in Snow's photos and, therefore, we cease to be the other, the soldier, after we have stared into their eyes trying to find what we expect.

The work of war narrative is to do just this – break a preset (good to bad) narrative arc. Find a way to give us not what we expect and to make the return of soldiers completely ours. War narratives also extend beyond the expression of anti-war sentiment. The not dead return to us and the ability to read them and be accountable to them matters. Yet, the experience of going to war and coming home is now possible for less than 1 percent of America's population; in World War II it was 12% who served. My point is that it is often only through such war novels that members of the military and civilians can understand the burdens soldiers carry home and acknowledge the power it takes for humanity to be restored. We must bear witness. At the very minimum, we need to think like Conrad, who "thought that there was some sort of compact – wasn't there? He was offering his life for his country, and his country would be there when he came home" (Robinson 2013, 135). Narratives of return and belonging are needed and necessary for re-entry into the world. We must "light the danger up," as Emily Dickinson told her relatives during the Civil War, "so we can distinguish it" (1986, 183). All war literature, to some extent, helps generations of the not dead live among us. Trumbo's and Robinson's work stands naked before us. It compels us to examine the reasons for going to war; it reminds us that the choice for many soldiers to do something greater than themselves may be starkly reduced and realigned to an even greater battle – surviving at home. Personal darkness accumulates. But Lalage Snow and Virginia Woolf further important distinctions in war narratives. Nothing is preset. If, as Clarissa's lover Peter Walsh claims, "one must pay back from this secret deposit of exquisite moments" (Woolf 2003, 219), then we must disavow ourselves of the images of "[b]oys in uniform, carrying guns, [who] marched with their eyes ahead of them, marched, their arms stiff, and on their faces an expression like the letters of a legend written round the base of a statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England" (239). We must also disavow ourselves of an expected war narrative arc and of trying to impose it.

Works Cited

Snow, Lalage. "We Are The Not Dead" ["We Are Not The Dead"] (2010) http://lalagesnow.photoshelter.com/gallery/We-Are-The-Not-Dead/G0000s_eT5QooYaCY. Web. 21 April 2018.