

A Different Perspective (?): Air Warfare in Derek Robinson's Post-Memory Aviation Fiction

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ABSTRACT

The canonical literary epitome of the Great War is, beyond doubt, the infantry soldier trapped in what Paul Fussell called the “troglodyte world” of the notorious trenches. There exists, however, a considerable number of literary accounts devoted to a different ‘space’—and thus allegedly also a different experience—of the conflict. The autobiography by Manfred von Richthofen, and memoirs by Billy Bishop and Cecil Lewis contributed to the fame of the Great War pilots as ‘knights of the air.’ Post-memory literary depictions of air warfare tend to be more ideologically ambivalent. The focus of this paper will be Derek Robinson’s novel *War Story* (1987), constituting in terms of the chosen historical time of its action the first part of his acclaimed Great War aviation trilogy, including also *Goshawk Squadron* and *Hornet's Sting*, to be analyzed within the wider context of the cultural representations of the Royal Flying Corps in 1914–1918. Derek Robinson served in the RAF after the Second World War. He is also the author of the revisionist *Invasion, 1940* and, thus, his literary ‘return’ to the Great War, within the context of air warfare, must raise important questions concerning the extent to which he perpetuates or challenges the prevailing myths of the first global conflict of the twentieth-century.

Keywords: the Great War, aerial combat, aviation fiction, Derek Robinson, war mythology, *Aces High*, *Journey's End*

In *Invasion, 1940: The Truth About the Battle of Britain and What Stopped Hitler*, Derek Robinson begins with a very apt remark that “war, and the origin of war, generates myths, because is usually a lengthy business and always complicated, and most people prefer simplicities” (2006: 11). In the words of Samuel Hynes, “myth” should be understood as “neither history or memory” but as “a compound war-story that gives meaning and coherence to the incoherences of war-in-its-details” (2000: 220). In his Second World War trilogy, including *Piece of Cake* (1983), *A Good Clean Fight* (1993), and *Damned Good Show* (2002), Robinson readily debunks the myth of “Our Finest Hour,” mercilessly stripping his RAF protagonists from their mythopoetically-given ‘glory’ of those who ‘alone’ withstood the allegedly almighty Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain. In the

case of his Great War trilogy, however, one may well wonder whether *Goshawk Squadron* (1971), *War Story* (1987) and *Hornet's Sting* (1999) can be considered at all revisionist endeavors, reading more like a mere reconstruction of a culturally-dominant ideological schemata. The focus of this article will be an analysis of *War Story*, the action of which is set in 1916, the plot thus necessarily involving the Battle of the Somme. This is a novel that most vividly exemplifies how the conventions of the trench warfare literary narratives of disillusionment could effectually be adapted to a different realm of military experience. The argument is that Robinson's novel, as all his novels constituting both the RFC and the RAF trilogies, serve one ideological purpose, one which he made clear in the afterword to *Goshawk Squadron*: "War is not sport. War is not fair" (2005: 230).

Lines of muddy and rat-festered trenches, separated by the desolate landscape of No Man's Land botched with shell-holes and littered with corpses, have come to constitute the mythopoeic space in the British cultural memory of the Great War, the range of iconic soldier-protagonists including the disillusioned volunteer, the shell-shocked, the coward, the deserter, the wounded. It all started in 1929, when, as Gary Sheffield writes, "the dam finally burst," the two "triggers" being the international success of Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* and the domestic popularity of R. C. Sherriff's drama *Journey's End* (2002: 7). The futility myth was born, i.e. the interpretation of the Great War as a senseless slaughter of a whole generation of the best of British youth on the battlefields of Flanders and France, a carnage mercilessly prolonged by insensitive politicians and military commanders, and callously supported by ignorant civilians. This version of the British experience of the Great War was effectively propagated in the inter-war period with the publication of memoirs such as *Goodbye to All That* by Robert Graves (1929), *Undertones of War* by Edmund Blunden (1928), *Blasting and Bombardiering* by Wyndham Lewis (1937) or *The Wet Flanders Plain* by Henry Williamson (1929), as well fiction including *The Death of a Hero* by Richard Aldington (1929) and *Grey Dawn - Red Night* by James Lansdale Hodson (1929). This predominantly literary (hi)story of the Great War was perpetuated after the Second World War, with the rising importance of the so-called trench poets such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Ivor Gurney or Isaac Rosenberg in national memory (see Sheffield, 2002: 18), as well as by means of fiction, the most notable post-memory examples being Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting* (1971), Jennifer Johnston's *How Many Miles to Babylon* (1974), Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong* (1993), Robert Edric's *In Desolate Heaven* (1997), Ben Elton's *The First Casualty* (2005), Jodie Shields *The Crimson Portrait* (2006), or, last but not least, Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991), *The Eye in the Door* (1993), *The Ghost Road* (1995), *Another World* (1998), *Life Class* (2007), *Toby's Room* (2012).

In the words of Samuel Hynes, "in the process of myth-making, [...] narratives both share in the creation and preserve it. Not all of them, to be sure: most narratives, of any war sit dustily on library shelves, unread partly because they are ill-written or dull, no doubt, but partly because they tell the wrong story, because they don't conform to the myth" (2000: 207). Derek Robinson's aviation fiction, fraught with ideological paradoxes, must be viewed in relation to its Great War literary predecessors, as there exists a literary blueprint for writing air warfare. The number of memoirs and fiction on the subject may be viewed as marginal in comparison to the quantity of personal and

literary narratives focusing on trench warfare, yet undoubtedly the conventions of aviation combat narratives were established by such classics as Manfred von Richthofen's 1917 autobiography *Der Rote Kampfflieger*, William A. Bishop's 1918 memoir *Winged Warfare*, Cecil Lewis's memoir *Sagittarius Rising* (1936), and the acclaimed novel by British V. M. Yeates entitled *Winged Victory* (1934), not to mention the "Biggles" series, authored by W. E. Johns, the first novel to appear in 1932. The reason why these works lost their cultural significance resides precisely in their ideological incompatibility with the futility myth. The key adjective used in defining the Great War is 'unprecedented,' in terms of its geographical scope and suffered casualties. It was, after all, the *first* global war, but also one during which there (gradually) developed an entirely new way of waging conflict, in and from the air, a warfare strikingly different from the military stalemate on ground. The term "ace" appeared, denoting a pilot with a given score of shot down enemy aircraft (Haythornthwaite, 1992: 381), and, unlike in the case of ground warfare, war in the air quickly produced 'heroes' of the skies like the internationally famous Max Immelmann, Oswald Boelcke, or the Red Baron (Manfred von Richthofen) and, on the side of the Allies, "the achievements of men such as Albert Ball, William Bishop, James McCudden and Edward Mannock created enduring legends that captivated the minds of a war-weary public" (Steel and Hart, 1997: 240). It would seem that rules of chivalry apparently applied within aerial combat during the Great War. In the "Preface" to the first edition of Richthofen's autobiography, C. G. Grey wrote: "He was buried with full honours by his old enemies of the RFC, as befitted a *gallant* gentleman who died for his Fatherland. [...] There is none of the old RFC who would not cheerfully kill what is left of the 'circus,' and there is probably none who would not gladly shake hands with the survivors after peace is declared. They are worthy enemies and good fighters" (in Richthofen, 2005: 37, original emphasis).

Trench warfare is said to have changed soldiers into helpless victims of the "impersonal" aggressors of chemicals and steel" (Leed, 1979: 106), thus rendering conventional martial ideals obsolete and inadequate: "for once the idea of heroic action is denied, the whole conception of the hero [...] is called into question" (Hynes, 1990: 306). In consequence, "the anti-hero, the victim, the passive men—these became conventions of post-war English writing, [and] they had their literary beginnings [...] in the war that [...] denied them the power to be agents in their own lives and deaths" (306). The opposite was true of air warfare. Not only was "the intense kaleidoscopic nature of aerial combat [...] dramatic and visually exciting," but, even more importantly, "men pitted their wits against other men face-to-face, like the chivalrous knights of old" (Steel and Hart, 1997: 240). Though it was a fact that pilots were as prone to combat fatigue as infantry soldiers, with "the ceaseless grind of photographic reconnaissance and artillery observation work," and "the odds of surviving a prolonged tour of duty in action [being] minimal" (Hart, 2001: 107), nevertheless, the lines from W. B. Yeats's poem "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" perfectly conveys the appeal of the skies: "Nor law, nor duty bade me fight, / Nor public men, nor cheering crowds, / A lonely impulse of delight / Drove to this tumult in the clouds" (Roberts 2012: 88). In the words of the Canadian ace William "Billy" Bishop, "it was not like killing a man so much as just bringing down a bird in sport," and "the moment my machine gun commenced to fire, I felt the old feeling

exultation, and this always remained with me throughout the whole of every fight I have had” (1978: 198).

In contrast to trench warfare narratives, the memoirs and fiction published in the inter-war period never succumbed to the mood of disillusionment. When V. M. Yeates’s novel *Winged Victory* was published in 1934, it was generally interpreted “in the pacifist climate of the time [as] an excellent piece of anti-war propaganda,” yet, as Hugh Cecil underscores, “Yeates’s real aim was to record his experience in all its aspects. In doing so, he had drawn a picture [...] far from the conventional ‘valiant knights of the air’ image, and that showed a wasteful war where fear of nervous collapse stalked every flier. Far from diminishing their heroism, however, this actually made their courage seem the greater” (Cecil, 1996: 84). When republished in 1993, Cecil Lewis’s *Sagittarius Rising* included a new foreword by the author, somewhat apologetic, and yet defending the “picture of extreme youth in action” portrayed in his 1936 memoir. The fascination with flying would remain with Lewis throughout his entire life: “I did not imagine there would be another war for me to fight through or that twenty years later I would rejoin the RAF. Become an instructor and teach the next generation the skills that I myself had learned when I was young. [...] nor did I dream I should have a son, teach him to fly myself and when all that time was over [...] buy my own aeroplane [...]” (Lewis, 2006: vi). There is no indication here of wasted years or the futility of war. Lewis’s Great War experience had not only been worthwhile but also exhilarating.

What Derek Robinson set out to achieve in his Great War trilogy may be defined as a re(de)mythologization of air warfare. What I mean by this term is the author’s strategy of stripping away the aura of chivalry from aerial combat by adopting the ideological formats of the futility myth as constructed in trench warfare narratives, and this is nowhere better to be seen than in *War Story*, published after *Goshawk Squadron*, yet serving as a prequel, set in 1916, with the RFC still in a fledgling phase, the battle of the Somme to prove its testing ground. *Goshawk Squadron*, the action of which is set in 1918, remains Robinson’s most acclaimed novel, shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Published in 1971, it pre-dates the 1976 screening of the film *Aces High*, directed by Jack Gold. It is in the afterword to *Goshawk Squadron* that Robinson explicitly set his aims, namely to debunk the myth of the RFC as “the cavalry of the clouds,” “knights of the air,” “jousting circuses” and “duels in the sky,” deliberately contrasting the enduring “images of glamour and chivalry” with “the truth [...] that air war was just as brutal, squalid and wasteful as the slaughter in the trenches” (2005: 229). Yet, it is *War Story*, published in 1987, that most vividly lays bare Robinson’s strategy of concomitant demythologization and remythologization. It not only reads like an English air warfare version of Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, but also remains (too) strikingly similar to *Aces High*, after which it was published, and the script of which—and this should be duly noted—was based on the trench warfare drama classic *Journey’s End* by R. C. Sherriff (1928). It must be added, as Gary Sheffield aptly notes, that “Sherriff, who remained proud of his service in the East Surrey Regiment until the end of his life, did not intend *Journey’s End* to be an anti-war play. The producer of the first version, however, was a pacifist, and the resulting production (and indeed most subsequent ones) conveyed the message that the war was squalid and futile” (2002: 9-10). Finally, the echoes of Wilfred

Owen may likewise be found in Robinson's ostentatiously anti-war depiction of the strain of aerial combat.

Robinson described *War Story* as "fiction based on a framework of fact" (2001: 341). The otherness of realm of air warfare is all too visible in the discourse where instead of the all-too-familiar phrases such as the front-line, support, firing and communication trenches, saps and shell-holes, the morning and evening stand-to, wiring, digging and carrying parties, night patrols, raiding parties (see Fussell, 2000: 41-47), the reader is confronted with abbreviated designations and names of planes: the BE2c (the so-called 'Quirks'), the FE2d, the Pfalz, the Halberstadt, the Rumpler, the Albatross, the Fokker, the Aviatik, the Nieuport, or the Roland CII (the technical possibilities of all the planes being vital to understanding the evolution of air warfare strategies and tactics), and the duties of the pilots including artillery observation, photographic reconnaissance, offensive patrols, balloon-busting or trench-strafting (Robinson, 2001: 41, 169, 318). Robinson's description of the detrimental psychological impact of offensive patrols has an uncanny effect, almost echoing Owen's poem "Exposure," and thus proving that the 'realities' of air warfare could easily be conveyed through adaptations of existing literary patterns of representing trench warfare experience. Owen's lines, "Our brains ache, [...] / Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent . . . / Low drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient . . . / Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous, / But nothing happens" (Day Lewis, 1965: 48)—are so different—and yet in their overall ideological message—also so similar to what Robinson evokes in the following passage: "Flying offensive patrols was a wearying ground. [...] The great strain was the search, and it grew worse when there was nothing to find. The sky became achingly empty. Impossibly empty. Some pilots and observers lost faith in their own eyes. The less they found the more they worried. Where was the bastard? [...] So they searched, and worried. A man would to be crazy not to worry" (2001: 170).

Robinson put much effort into pinpointing all aspects of the uniqueness of a pilot's experience in comparison to the infantry: "[...] RFC pilots did return from patrols to play cricket or tennis, or to go swimming. Indeed, the contrast between life in a squadron and life in trenches was startling. The latter was cramped and dirty, often wet, usually lousy. The airmen flew home to good meals and warm bed, to games, music and parties in the mess" (2001: 341). And yet, there is an obvious ironically-ideological intent in contrasting two uses of the swimming pool, the first being that for the recreation of officers (Robinson, 2001: 268, 275), the second being a makeshift grave for the casualties of the Somme Battle: "The existence of the pool had saved the CCS a lot of time and effort. [...] four soldiers wearing rubber gloves and sterilized face-masks were carefully stacking bodies on top of the neat rows of bodies already in place. They were working carefully, not out of any sense of respect for the dead, but because it made best use of the space and the last thing they wanted was to have to dig another fucking great hole like this one" (2001: 334). In his "Author's Note" to *War Story*, Robinson asserts that included details such as "the dropping of message-bags by enemy aeroplanes" were historically "authentic" facts (2001: 341). As written into the novel, German pilots would fly over enemy lines in order to drop a bag containing, for example, "the scorched fragment of a British officer's tunic, two fire-blackened medal ribbons, a broken cockpit watch, half a shoe and the remains of a cheque book" (2001: 139). This was one of the (unofficial)

rules of gallant behavior obeyed by the belligerent sides of the conflict, yet it is telling that Robinson, in order to contest such evidence of chivalry, and to reframe air combat in accordance with the prerequisites of the futility myth, chose to include scenes evidently harking back to Erich Maria Remarque.

Remarque's protagonist Paul Bäumer describes the dehumanizing impact of combat upon young men who, in order to survive, descend into a beast-like state: "We have turned into dangerous animals. We are not fighting. We are defending ourselves from annihilation. [...] we are maddened with fury [...] we can destroy and we can kill to save ourselves [...] If your own father came across with those from the other side you wouldn't hesitate to hurl a hand-grenade straight at him!" (Remarque, 2005: 81–82). A scene like this effectively challenges the ethical legitimacy of associating war with honour, glory and willing sacrifice in the name of a noble cause. Robinson's reasons for including a lengthy description of ground-strafting serves a similar anti-war purpose. Two officer-pilots, Stubbs and Goss, fly over to the enemy side searching for "a nice little unit on the march, a couple of hundred men crossing a field or going up a lane, with their rifles slung and no heavy machine guns nearby. That would be perfect" (2001: 304). They spot German soldiers bathing a river, yet they do not attack: "They were not important enough to shoot; and besides, Goss felt squeamish about shooting naked men." Yet, they soon find an easy target, "a company of infantry, standing waiting to be killed." The soldiers stand no chance as the British plane descends upon them: "Stubbs swung his Lewis gun like a scythe and shot fifteen or twenty men before they moved" (2001: 305). One should note here the detached manner in which the scene is described, underscoring the pilots' lack of humane feelings. The ease with which they can instantly transform into heartless murderers is—and was intended to be—ethically disconcerting. Unluckily for Goss and Stubbs, however, a bullet hits the engine and their plane goes down. Equally unluckily for them, they survive the crash only to be surrounded by German soldiers who are not in the mood to take prisoners: "The bayonets went in with great vigour" (2002: 306). Added to this, Robinson includes an incident where one of the British pilots is shot down by a French Nieuport (2001: 184–186). This could well be considered a plausible scenario, as in every war there are always cases of casualties of friendly fire, yet it is the scenario that the author writes afterwards that is telling in terms of its ideological intent. Captain Frank Foster, who—as it turns out later—was homosexual and was in love with the shot-down Lieutenant James Yeo, decides to take revenge on the French: "Foster reached Selincourt and remembered nothing about the journey. [...] The Nieuport came out of the east, as expected. It carried identification letters and numbers on its fuselage but he didn't look for them because he didn't care what they were. [...] This was when the French began firing off rockets, to warn the pilot. Foster's observer killed him before he could look around to see what they meant. [...] dead in the back, as Yeo had been shot. The Nieuport tumbled as if it had tripped over its own feet. Foster climbed away and watched it crashed and burn" (2001: 190). Foster's commanding officer is fully aware of what happened and yet takes no action. As another protagonist adds, when in 1914 the English accidentally shelled the French, their so-called 'allies' simply retaliated with "the same number of shells" (2001: 195). The message here is simple: the reality of war is such that rules of combat engagement are not adhered to and ethical principles are bypassed.

In all his aviation fiction, Robinson consistently “[makes] sure that his period and technical details [are] correct,” so as to more effectively deconstruct “war mythology” (Mackenzie, 2007: 101). The problem is that Robinson’s protagonists are too familiar and his plot solutions too predictable, the most vivid example being *War Story*, its characters all too reminiscent of the protagonists in the film *Aces High* who, in turn, are pilot versions of infantry officers in R. C. Sherriff’s drama *Journey’s End*. Sherriff’s squadron leader, Stanhope, drinks too much and is prone to sudden outbursts of temper, an obvious case of combat fatigue: “He’s never had a rest. Other men come over and go home ill, and young Stanhope goes on sticking it, month in, month out” (Sherriff, 2000: 13). His equivalent in *Aces High* is Gresham (performed by Malcolm McDowell), likewise a war-weary heavy drinker. The film begins with a scene set in an English public school, where Gresham is to encourage young boys to volunteer for the RFC, the head of the school proclaiming that what the war is all about is “playing the game for the game’s sake” (*Aces High*). Gresham knows all too well what service in the newly-born RFC means, pilots with inevitably inadequate training expected to be killed within fourteen days, and himself—always at risk when taking his plane up into the air. The character of Major Rufus Milne in Robinson’s novel has likewise been too long at the front line. He managed to endure the strain insofar as he could force himself to forget all the life-threatening situations in which he had found himself: “His response to danger was to forget it as soon as it had passed. This policy had worked very well: he suffered no nightmares, no spells of depression, none of the crippling anxiety which he knew some other pilots suffered when they were getting ready to fly. For nearly two years, Milne had done his job day by day, sometimes boring, sometimes exciting, and reckoned himself lucky to have it.” Yet, one day, without warning, the memories of all his missions started to come back: “To his surprise he found himself thinking about other matters. In particular, about this war and the number of times it nearly killed him” (2001: 46). In consequence, he commits suicide by deliberately colliding with a Rolland CII (2001: 123-124). He is replaced by Major Hugh Cleve-Cutler (2001: 129), Robinson’s second version of the Stanhope and Gresham characters, as he must deal with a psychologically-troubled man under his command.

In Sherriff’s play, it is the character of Hibbert who allows the play to be read as an anti-war manifesto. For Stanhope, Hibbert is an imposter, feigning illness in order to evade his duty: “Artful little swine! Neuralgia’s a splendid idea. No proof as I can see. [...] How long’s he been out here? Three months, I suppose Now he’s decided to go home and spend the rest of the war in comfortable nerve hospitals. [...] I think he’s going to wriggle off before the attack. [...] No man of mine’s going sick before the attack” (2000: 29). Hibbert’s plea to Stanhope to relieve him of his duties could well be performed on stage as a passionate outcry against the war itself: “Ever since I came out here I’ve hated it and loathed it. Every sound up there makes me all—cold and sick. [...] I’ll never go up those steps again—into the line—with the men looking at me—and knowing—I’d rather die here” (2000: 57). Almost verbatim, the same scene appears in *Aces High*, with officer-pilot Crawford (performed by Simon Ward) refusing to fly, first on grounds of illness, then admitting he simply can take no more of the fear. The film develops Sherriff’s character, including scenes clearly indicating the madness of Crawford—as when he runs around the field pretending to be flying. The film was made before Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder was defined and its symptoms explicated. In Robinson’s *War Story*, Frank

Foster is likewise depicted to be mad rather than—in today’s terms—traumatized; his insanity made explicit by his concocted story of a girlfriend he never had, to whom he asked his fellow-pilots to write that he was killed, then telling them she killed herself. In the end, Foster blows his brains out in front of Oliver Paxton, yet another cliché figure.

In *Journey’s End*, Raleigh is a replacement officer, a youth freshly out of public school, constantly annoying the experienced soldiers with his zeal to ‘do his bit’ in the war. He ends with a spine injury, unable to walk. His equivalent in *Aces High* is the character of Stephen Croft (performed by Peter Firth), idealistic and enthusiastic, always ready to participate in flight missions. Yet, as Michael Paris emphasizes, “demythologizing the air fighters was also the theme of [this] British [film] production,” hence the purpose of a character like Croft “filled with ideas about the nobility about air fighters, and the chivalry of the air,” and so obviously modelled on Sherriff’s Raleigh, was to underscore that “the war in the air [was] as barbarous as that in the trenches” (1995: 46). Robinson’s version of Raleigh and Croft is Lieutenant Oliver Paxton, ostracized by the squadron for idealistic beliefs that all too ostentatiously clash with the experience of the already war-weary pilots. Paxton’s story is one that traces his evolution from patriotism (deriving from his initial ignorance of what air warfare entailed) to a stance that could be defined as cynical realism (deriving from his subsequent combat experience). He comes to the front believing that pilots are “the cavalry of the skies,” which, as Robinson explains in the “Afterword” to *Goshawk Squadron*, was a term first used by Lloyd George for the “purposes of propaganda” (2005: 229). His desire to shoot down as many ‘Huns’ as soon as possible—considering the minimal amount of training he had received—must be viewed as naïve, to say the least, if not outright ridiculous: “he had flown eighteen hours solo, two of them in Quirks.” He was appointed the leader of a group of five new BE2Cs to be flown to France only because “[he] was the tallest of the new pilots awaiting postings” (2001: 3). It is a historical fact that the greatest problem facing the RFC in the first years of the Great War was the limited number of adequately prepared instructors to train new pilots. Either “flying instructors simply lacked the teaching skills needed to impart their own accumulated knowledge in a coherent fashion to their eager pupils,” or, worse still, “instructing was often used to give a rest to pilots who had completed a period of active service” (Steel and Hart, 1997: 84). The opening pages of the novel depict Paxton in an absurd situation when he is desperately lost in the skies over France. Though the flight across the English Channel should have taken no more than a few hours, Paxton has not only been flying for five days but, in the meantime, he also managed to ‘lose’ the other pilots he was supposed to be in charge of. Having lost all sense of direction, he begins to perform aerial acrobatics, only to lose his map and the sandbags serving to balance the plane when attempting to do a loop. He is spotted by other British planes and they lead him to the aerodrome. His bumpy landing results in the destruction of the machine he was supposed to have safely brought across for combat missions: “People watching said [the Quirk] bounced seven times before the tailskid touched, and four times after that, until a tyre burst and the machine skewed to a halt” (2001: 7).

Robinson is renowned for his taste for the ludicrous. Paxton’s pomposity is fully laid bare when, following orders to practice his landings, he all too late realizes that pilots should not drink too much tea before going up in the air. It is with great detail that

Robinson describes Paxton's desperate struggle not to wet himself in the cockpit. He could have landed at one point at an aerodrome, but he noticed pilots playing cricket and it would have been too disgraceful to land and urinate in public view. Paxton thus braces himself for a fight—not with an enemy plane—but with his own bladder: “*You can do it, Oliver, he told himself. [...] Not far now. Grin and bear it. Play the game!*” (2001: 21). There are almost seven pages devoted to a highly meticulous description of Paxton's physiological struggle, the ending, however, to be foreseen. The ‘battle’ is lost: “He was as wet as a baby. He felt like a baby. He felt a depth of shame and hopelessness he had not known since he was a child” (2001: 24). Wishing to redeem himself from all the humiliations that had met him, Paxton craves for a victory in the air. During one combat mission he is convinced he had managed to shoot down an enemy plane. As he is told by the pilots who flew with him, he not only did not score a hit, but with his “gunnery [being] pathetic,” he might as well “have hit some of the men on the ground in the British gun pits” (2001: 128).

As the action of *War Story* is set in 1916, it is not surprising for the Battle of the Somme to be the focal point of the novel. The so-called Big Push that commenced July 1 has become the cornerstone of the futility myth, providing statistical evidence of trench warfare as pointless slaughter, “the worst day in the history of British arms” (Brown, 2002: 92). “To visit the cemeteries of that haunted battlefield,” Malcolm Brown wrote in *Somme*, “is to risk being overwhelmed by a feeling of grief” (2002: xxviii-xxix). In *The First World War*, John Keegan used the phrase “the holocaust of the Somme,” adding that “there is nothing more poignant in British life than to visit the ribbon of cemeteries that marks the front line [...], and to find, on gravestone after gravestone, the fresh wreath, [...] the pinned poppy” (1999: 321). Robinson's view on the Battle of the Somme echoes that of Brown and Keegan. Rather than focus on the Battle itself, Robinson achieves the ironic effect by having his pilot protagonist drive over to witness a trial advance at a makeshift battlefield marked by tapes. Paxton is thrilled: “patriotism glowed in him like plum brandy,” but the reader instantly recognizes the absurdity of the exercise, with waves of troops moving out into a ground where no one is firing at them, with the final ‘breakthrough’ achieved by means of a spectacular cavalry charge. Once the exercise ‘push’ is brought to an end, an announcement is made through the megaphone that “tea now will be served” (2001: 180). Yet even Paxton notices some disturbing details, wondering why the soldiers are ordered to walk at such slow pace, and astonished to see how much they have to carry with them apart from their weapons. As he is about to leave for the aerodrome, Paxton comes across one Private Watkins, a teenager serving in the Bradford Pals, and who is not particularly keen to participate in the real offensive to come: “Fucking trenches, fucking lousy food, fucking sergeant hates my fucking guts, fucking Fritz is going to blow me to fucking bits” (2001: 182-183). The Battle of the Somme becomes the turning point for Oliver Paxton. The pilots of the Hornet Squadron are pushed to their limits with the sudden increase of patrols. Many do not return, and Paxton feels each loss acutely. The novel ends with a symbolic scene that signifies Paxton's change from a pompous and naïve young pilot to a war-weary veteran. He looks at moths drawn to a lightbulb, frantically bumping against it, finally killed by the heat: “It was a gallant battle. Fought against overwhelming odds, a splendid example of heroism and devotion to duty, but in the end they made the supreme sacrifice” (2001:

340). Pilots are like the moths, as vulnerable and equally doomed. “Heroism,” “duty,” and sacrifice” are empty meaningless words.

Robinson consistently underscores his adherence to historical accuracy in his aviation fiction. Yet there are as many truths of war as there were soldiers who experienced it. An entirely different version of the Battle of the Somme from the perspective of the RFC emerges from Cecil Lewis’s *Sagittarius Rising*. First, as “the hurricane bombardment” starts, Lewis recalls his excitement: “It was the greatest bombardment of the war, the greatest in the history of the world. [...] Nothing could live under that rain of splintering steel. A whole nation was behind it [...]” (2006: 103). Then “disappointment” comes: “from our point of view an entire failure,” this assessment explained by the fact the RFC pilots had nothing to report on the advancement of the troops: “the truth was that at many points the attack had not gone according to plan” (105). However, already on July 2, Lewis records that the RFC “started a practice that was to become a habit during the next few months—going down low enough to see the men in the trenches with accuracy, and getting [the] reports this way” (105). In result, “we could see to what extent the great offensive had succeeded. [...] We returned elated. We had helped to win the war” (107). One must remember that this was a memoir published in 1936, in a time when ‘disillusioned’ war narratives were still at the height of their popularity. In other words, Lewis did not succumb to the dominant fashion of ‘remembering’ the war through the prism of the futility myth. Robinson states in the afterword to *War Story* that RFC pilots could not have been aware of what was happening on the ground beneath them: “they could see the entire battlefield, but even they could not see the tragedy” (2001: 344). Except that Lewis’s recollection of his RFC’s perspective of the Battle of the Somme is more in tune with what contemporary historians have to say, namely that the period between July and November “marked the point where [the RFC] came of age as a fighting service,” not only perfecting their skills in “detailed photographic reconnaissance of the trench systems facing their forces,” “harassing raids on the German billeting sectors,” and “bombing raids on strategically significant railway junctions to disrupt the German movement of reserve divisions,” but, most importantly, achieving “the supremacy of the air” (Hart, 2001: 222-223). As reported by German General Fritz von Below, “The beginnings and first weeks of the battle of the Somme were marked by a complete inferiority of our own air forces” (qtd. in Steel and Hart, 1997: 129). In the words of Peter Hart, “the RFC could, and did, look back on the Somme campaign with considerable pride. [...] Most of the [...] RFC casualties suffered on the Western Front [...] were over the Somme battlefields. These figures pale into insignificance compared to the crippling losses suffered by the infantry [...]. In the tragic ledger of the Somme, the losses they suffered were set against the enormous value of their work. For the RFC at least it was a ‘Somme success’” (Hart, 2001: 223).

Catharine Savage Brosman has aptly stated that “war narratives are inevitably shaped and colored by either affirmation or denial of a collective purpose of meaning that presides over the conflict” (1999: 65). In the afterword to *Goshawk Squadron*, Robinson admits it “angered some veterans of the RFC,” as *War Story* and *Hornet’s Sting* must have done also. He argues that “we all tend to forget the bad and remember only the good and it must be tempting for survivors to believe that all the dead were heroes and that in any case victory justified their sacrifice” (2005: 230). Yet, it is also a biased version when

one speaks only of the bad and forgets the good. In “The Prelude” to his war novel *Verdun* (1939), Jules Romains best expounds the difficulties of conveying the war experience, which—in order to be cognitively and ideologically all-comprehensive—requires the God-like “brain capable of envisaging the war as a whole,” and the capability of embracing the nationally-determined “partial visions, their mutual bearing, their composition, perhaps their mutually contradictory contributions,” as well as the mosaic of “the detail of the conflict, the ultimate elements” as experienced by individual bearers of their own particular ‘truths’ of war (2000: 35). Thus, when Robinson asserts “we know that much of the slaughter was pointless,” and that “courage was wasted along with everything else” (2005: 230), he is (perhaps inadvertently) admitting to adopting a strictly ideological framework for his novels. In consequence, his characters and plot development appear as no more than aviation versions of trench warfare narratives written in the vein of Remarque. Do they offer a different perspective on the Great War? The answer must be—no.

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