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Adam Thorpe and the Impossibility of (Not) Writing about the First World War

Ann-Marie Einhaus

Abstract:

This article explores three novels by British contemporary novelist Adam Thorpe, which it situates in the context of a renaissance of rewriting and re-remembering the First World War in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The article discusses three novels: Thorpe's debut novel *Ulverton* (1992), which includes a chapter about the experience of the First World War; *Nineteen Twenty-One* (2001), a full-length treatment of the immediate aftermath of the war; and *Hodd* (2009), in which the war enters by way of fictional footnotes to a fictional translation of a medieval Latin manuscript. It suggests that Thorpe's writing about the First World War consciously acknowledges and interrogates the simultaneous impossibility and compulsion to write about war. Thorpe's work offers a complex exploration of literature's contribution to memory building processes, acknowledging both the limitations of fictional representations of war and the enduring power of fiction to re-imagine the war for successive new generations of readers.

Keywords:

First World War, World War 1, memory, narrative, historical fiction

Author biography:

Ann-Marie Einhaus is Senior Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Literature at Northumbria University, UK, and author of *The Short Story and the First World War* (CUP, 2013). Her research interests include writing about the First World War from 1914 to the present, short fiction, and early twentieth century British literature and culture more generally.

Retrospective war novels, from Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting* (1971) and Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991) to more recent publications in the wake of the war's centenary, are closely linked to processes of memory-building. In looking back and reimagining the First World War, they add important nuances to the way we remember the war. Even though most of these novels ultimately confirm popular memory of the war as a futile struggle, the best of them not only subtly alter the memory of the Great War in a bid to relate to more contemporary concerns, but offer reflection on this process of literary memory-building. They directly or indirectly raise the question of whether it is possible to retrospectively write about a watershed event such as the First World War at all, and invite the reader to question what they think they already know. Adam Thorpe is a contemporary novelist whose work has returned almost as often as Pat Barker's better-known oeuvre to the First World War and its literary heritage. Thorpe's novel *Nineteen Twenty-One* (2001), for instance, offers a retrospective reworking of the First World War that brings to bear contemporary concerns on the war's specifically literary memory. Thorpe's novel differs from other post-2000 First World War narratives in that it focuses on the act of writing itself as a retrospective act that prompts reflection on and questioning of the literary memory of the war. This is the more appropriate as most of the canonical British war novels and memoirs of the late 1920s and early 1930s – Robert Graves's *Good-Bye to All That* (1929), Siegfried Sassoon's *Sherston Trilogy* (1928; 1930; 1936), Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (1929) and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933) – are based on a process of literary reflection and memorialisation, fraught with the difficulties of accurate recall and the appropriate means of representing war experience.

In a 2012 critical essay on reality and the novel, Thorpe himself acknowledged his early realisation that literature is never an uncomplicated representation of life (Thorpe 2012, 265).

He noted that history, ‘however dreadfully real at the time, is a relativist narrative in which no one version can be ultimately and completely reliable.’ (Thorpe 2012, 277) As Jerome de Groot observes, citing Hsu-Ming Teo, ‘if historical fiction is not always history [...] it is always historiography’ (de Groot 2016, 22) – that is, if historical fiction is not always a factually accurate rendition of historical events, it is always an attempt to represent history in meaningful ways. This holds true for Thorpe in so far as he offers his own historiographies of the First World War, which both support and challenge the dominant myths of the war and consequently encourage the reader to question both official narratives and their own perceptions of the conflict. Thorpe’s writing about the First World War consequently illustrates what de Groot elsewhere has noted for ‘the “historical” in popular culture and contemporary society’ more generally, namely that it ‘is multiple, multiplying, and unstable’ (de Groot 2008, 4). Thorpe’s characters, as this article sets out to show, certainly find it so.

Thorpe’s understanding of history informs the way in which he repeatedly tackles the fictional reimagining of the First World War and its aftermath. This article explores how Thorpe’s work fits into the context of a renaissance of rewriting and re-remembering the First World War in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and how it figures in relation to on-going processes of (literary) memory building. Besides *Nineteen Twenty-One*, it discusses two other novels by Thorpe, *Ulverton* (1992) and *Hodd* (2009). I suggest that Thorpe’s writing about the First World War consciously acknowledges that it is both impossible to write about war, and impossible not to write about it, drawing on Kate McLoughlin’s analysis in her book *Authoring War* (2011): like Tolstoy, whose *War and Peace* McLoughlin discusses early on in her book, Thorpe offers us not a novel about the war, but ‘a failed attempt to recount’ war (McLoughlin 2011, 2). Restricting his subject matter to what he can emulate and understand at first hand – the process of researching the First World War, of gathering accounts of combat at second

hand, of visiting the battlefields after the fact – Thorpe’s *Nineteen Twenty-One* is not so much a war novel as a novel ‘about the difficulty of [the war’s] representation’ (McLoughlin 2011, 6).

The First World War and Englishness

Thorpe’s work as a novelist is generally characterised by an engagement not only with the past, but with reflections on the act of re-writing the past. His debut novel *Ulverton* (1992), composed of twelve chapters or stories spanning five centuries of English history, offered a wry commentary on the processes underpinning memory transition and the writing of historical fiction. Beginning with a narrative about a Civil War soldier who returns to the fictional hamlet of Ulverton after many years’ absence only to be murdered by his wife and her new lover, the novel traces the transmission and aftershocks of this initial story as well as a range of other occurrences over time. Each chapter or story is told in a distinct period style and by a new narrative voice, in the form of letters, diary entries, court proceedings or journalism, and each shows how ‘real’ events become distorted in the re-telling, only to reveal at the end of the novel that the initial tale was, in fact, a fiction to begin with; the attempt of a local activist to undermine the credibility of a property developer who wants to transform the village with an extensive new housing and business estate.

In existing criticism, Thorpe’s work is usually read through the lenses of either postmodernism (particularly theories of metafiction) or engagement with national identity and history. Ingrid Gunby, for instance, has offered a detailed analysis of *Ulverton* (and some of Thorpe’s later novels) as an engagement with heritage debates, questions of Englishness, and concerns over artificial attempts to preserve a mythical, unchanging ‘national past’ in which ‘the fragments of recent history are indiscriminately absorbed into an amnesiac “heritage”’ (Gunby 57; 59).

Among other concerns, Gunby traces Thorpe's conflicted relationship to the history he explores and exposes as both a construct and a reality, and his preoccupation with the notion of "'deep' England' (Gunby 47), the South Country and village life, all of which he revisits in a number of novels, beginning with *Ulverton* and including *Nineteen Twenty-One*. Building on these approaches, this article concentrates specifically on the role of the First World War and its literary reception and perpetuation in Thorpe's postmodern explorations of Englishness and English history. The First World War haunts Thorpe's fiction as much as 'deep England' does, most likely because it constitutes not only a key event in modern English history that has become an integral part of national consciousness, but also because the war is the perceived watershed between an innocent past and the sordid, modern present – an understanding invoked poignantly in Philip Larkin's poem 'MCMXIV' (1964).

Like *Ulverton*, *Nineteen Twenty-One* can also be read through the lens of inquiry into Englishness through landscape and heritage (cf. Korte 233), as Thorpe's protagonist Joseph retreats to a country cottage to write his war novel. His move is prompted partly by the need to live cheaply while completing a novel about the First World War, and partly by a desire to connect with an older, more authentic and more quintessentially English way of life which quickly turns out to be far less idyllic than expected. Thanks to the drought of the 1921 summer, Joseph finds himself surrounded by a parched and withered landscape rather than the 'soft green retreat' he had envisioned, and the brittle, desiccated countryside seems to be an extension or reflection of his dried-up inspiration (Thorpe 2001, 61). Rather than becoming part of the village community, Joseph is persistently the outsider, and loneliness sets in quickly. His solitary existence stands in stark contrast with his fledgling war novel, which is 'full of comradeship' of men at war – a comradeship that he has failed to experience himself (Thorpe 2001, 29). The villagers and woodsmen he encounters are, by and large, surly and just as

reluctant to engage with him as he is to interact with them in the tap room of the village pub, and they contrast unfavourably with the ‘robust, jolly fellows’ he remembers from his childhood (Thorpe 2001, 29).

The First World War, and the Western Front, are in *Nineteen Twenty-One* as much a ‘nostalgic national *lieu de mémoire*’, or place of memory, as the English South Country, while Joseph’s expectations of village life prove to be just such a ‘fantasy of a settled, classless, and conflict-free rural society’ as Thorpe had earlier critiqued in *Ulverton* (Gunby 54). Thorpe’s fiction exposes the First World War’s status as a moment of lost innocence, like the supposedly authentic English past and English country life, as a myth constructed by those who desire a simpler past that never existed. The temporal setting of *Nineteen Twenty-One* is particularly apt in this sense, given that the immediate aftermath of the First World War constituted a period in which ‘Englishness’ was under anguished scrutiny as the country passed through a new phase of post-war modernisation. This anxiety over the meaning and future of what it meant to be English is perhaps best expressed in Stanley Baldwin’s notorious, nostalgic evocation of rural England in a speech delivered to the Royal Society of St George in 1924, in which Baldwin accepted the opportunity to speak with ‘a feeling of satisfaction and profound thankfulness’ that he ‘may use the word “England” without some fellow at the back shouting out “Britain”’ (Baldwin 1). Baldwin’s vision of England, in 1924, was caught between post-war internationalism and a loss of specific identity following the First World War, but it was also threatened by modernisation and mechanisation, since it was so essentially connected with the rural sights and ‘sounds of England, the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the village smithy, the corncrake on a dewy morning, the sound of the scythe against the whetstone, and the sight of a plough team coming over the brow of a hill’ (Baldwin 5). Baldwin’s polemical nostalgia, perhaps understandable for an industrialist whose experience of country living was

only ever intermittent, neglects to appreciate that the English countryside had already changed substantially in the course of the industrial revolution: the First World War is retrospectively constructed as a moment of change only because of its perceived watershed status. In *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams showed the assumption that the First World War constituted the moment at which English country life changed irrevocably to be flawed, not least by pointing back to a long tradition of mourning for the loss of authentic country life well before 1914 (Williams 12–17). In *Ulverton*, this perceived moment of change is captured in chapter 10, in which Thorpe's narrator describes the fundamental changes that transform Ulverton from the sleepy, remote village of 1914 to a place in which 'great roads are thronged with motor-cars and lorries, the wireless tinkles, the phone connects us with far-away towns' in 1928 (Thorpe 1992, 237). Thorpe's protagonist in *Nineteen Twenty-One* shares many of Baldwin's ideas of what constitutes the authentic English life, from the plough teams to communal village life, but finds himself confronted with a reality of rural England that challenges his idealised notions. The country village in which Joseph finds himself is neither a place of 'peace, innocence, and simple virtue', nor is it marked by the level of 'backwardness, ignorance, limitation' (Williams 1) he may have expected, as many of the villagers he encounters have that first-hand knowledge of the war he himself lacks. It differs strikingly from the eccentric but peaceful retreat offered by a fictional Yorkshire village to the shell-shocked veteran Tom Birkin in J. L. Carr's *A Month in the Country* (1980), set in 1920. As the novel progresses, both the essence of English country life and the essence of the war that Joseph pursues continue to elude him, and the reader increasingly understands the futility of Joseph's attempts to capture and fix the war through his writing. The war that Joseph seeks to narrate is already in the process of turning mythological and both invites and evades literary interpretation. This is illustrated not only by Joseph's repeatedly frustrated efforts at writing his war novel, but also by his attendance at the 'unveiling of the village war memorial', a 'stark-

white lump' of a monument that appears to embody the impossibility, even at such a short temporal distance, of understanding and retaining what the war had been about (Thorpe 2001, 41–2). The memorial itself and the reveille that ensues, 'rasped' by a cadet 'on a gleaming trumpet', fall short of expectation. Not even the names on the war memorial truly represent the reality of the men who have died: the former village blacksmith and publican, commemorated as 'Lance-Corporal Edward Hamilton', was middle-aged and stocky rather than the 'young fellow wet behind the ears' who Joseph feels is conjured up by the name (Thorpe 2001, 42). Joseph tries to make up for the shortcomings of reality with his own fictional rendition of the war, his war novel, which he 'really wanted [...] to have the force of ritual, of a nature myth; so it raged and devoured today's rottenness like a great ritual fire but always, always poetically' (Thorpe 2001, 22). The novel, however, falls just as short of his expectations as the unveiling of the war memorial, and instead of providing a superior, more lasting memorial to the war, it merely 'talked to itself for page after page' – primarily because Joseph lacks critical distance: he feels he has 'No judgement, no standing apart' (Thorpe 2001, 21–2).

If the scope and variety of centenary commemorations to date have shown anything, they have revealed the continued significance of the First World War to English national identity, though other parts of the United Kingdom have of course also been marking the centenary extensively. Speaking at the Imperial War Museum in the run-up to the war's centenary commemorations in 2012, then Prime Minister David Cameron described the First World War as 'a fundamental part of our national consciousness', arguing that 'the lessons we learned, they changed our nation and they helped to make us who we are today' (Cameron n.p.). War memorials have been forming a crucial part of these commemorations. The Heritage Lottery Fund has been supporting a swathe of local grassroots projects researching war memorials and the lives of those inscribed on them (Heritage Lottery Fund, n.p.), and the Department for Culture, Media

and Sport continues to administer the Memorials Grant Scheme, funded by the UK government at a rate of approx. £0.5 million per year until at least March 2020, to help with the conservation and restoration of local war memorials (Memorials Grant Scheme, n.p.). The ubiquity of the First World War in everyday British life owes much to the kind of war memorial whose unveiling Thorpe describes in *Nineteen Twenty-One*: not just the national memorials and rituals such as the Cenotaph in Whitehall and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Westminster Abbey, but the small, local memorials on the village green or small-town market place, located at the heart of civic life. Thorpe's choice of 1921 is significant not least because the period from 1919 to roughly 1925 saw the inauguration of vast numbers of such memorials following post-war fundraising drives and commissioning processes. Featuring a protagonist who has just missed the war, but is trying to capture its essence as all around him society and individuals attempt the same, *Nineteen Twenty-One* thus pinpoints an early key moment in the process of the war's turning from lived reality into myth and ritual.

War, history and myth-making: *Ulverton* and *Hodd*

The idea of the First World War as part of the mythical fabric of English history surfaces in other novels by Thorpe, too. *Ulverton* includes a chapter on the war that, in Gunby's words, 'reveals the quasi-feudal bullying involved in signing up "volunteers" in 1914' (Gunby 62), and centres on the controversial decision of one villager to stay at home rather than enlist. The First World War narrative in *Ulverton* is told retrospectively from the perspective of the late 1920s by an outsider, Fergusson, a retired civil servant returned from India. It pairs up the narrator's witnessing of the war's effect on the village with the archaeological excavation of a nearby barrow mound, initiated and led by the local squire. The war and the dig are clearly linked even in the narrator's mind, who describes his feelings on the day which sees both Britain's entry into the war and the first find of the excavation – an analogy also borne out in

the shared use of trenches for the archaeological dig and war on the Western Front. Celebrating the find with hastily procured champagne, Fergusson notes that he ‘felt the headiness of victory, and grew momentarily confused as to which great event we were celebrating: the uncovering of the ancient, or the call to arms’ (Thorpe 1992, 219). Percy Cullurne, the peace-loving villager who refuses to join the army at the squire’s behest, also links the two events of the dig and the war, as he previously refused to join the dig with the same steady conviction as he refuses to fight (Thorpe 1992, 219).

The pairing of the war narrative and the dig is doubly significant: not only does the archaeological project speak to the broader endeavour of revealing the past that informs the novel overall, it also suggests that such an endeavour is likely to be futile. The excavators learn little of value, and although they unearth a buried bronze-age skeleton, the treasure rumoured to be buried in the downs which they had hoped to find remains elusive. Instead, the gradual revealing of the skeleton by means of trowels and brushes runs parallel to the gradual revelation of the true nature of the war, which claims the lives of most of the village volunteers and returns the squire’s chauffeur disabled after both his arms have been blown off by a German grenade. The discovery of the skeleton during the dig thus suggests a continuity of violence linking from an unknown prehistory to the chapter’s present, as the narrator describes the news of casualties on the Western Front alongside the gradual progress of the dig. This undercurrent of violence stands in stark contrast to the rather clichéd pastoral fantasies of the retired Fergusson, who dreams of spring blossoms and sees England as ‘so very gentle, compared to the rest of her Empire’, a country of ‘forest and stream, of meadow and vale and tolling downland’ (Thorpe 1992, 216). Just as Fergusson’s hopes for a spring of apple blossom is blighted by a late frost, the illusion of gentleness is shattered by the twin events of war (which kills one of the excavators and maims another) and of the discovery of the skeleton.

The rural idyll is thus disrupted not just by the gradual intrusion of tarmacadam and modern technology, but first and foremost by the impact of war, which claims the lives and limbs of numerous villagers and stokes feelings of bitter resentment both towards the squire and his recruitment drive, and towards Percy Cullurne, nicknamed ‘Bid’m’ after his staunch declaration that he would rather ‘bide at home’ than enlist (Thorpe 1992, 248; 233). The continuity of the violence whose latest eruption is the First World War is also visible in the invocation of Waterloo in the squire’s recruitment speech, during which he brandishes his grandfather’s sabre to persuade the villagers to volunteer. The village crowd is impressed by the ‘golden dazzling moments of British victories’ that the sword seems to represent, but forgets the terrible price at which the victory of Waterloo was achieved (Thorpe 1992, 228). Waterloo has acquired a precisely defined meaning and glamour to the villagers upon which the squire can draw. The battle’s seeming specificity of meaning is also contrasted by Joseph, the novelist-protagonist of *Nineteen Twenty-One*, with the imprecision and daunting scope of the conflict through which he has just lived. Compared to ‘the shallow valley of Waterloo – [...] *easy*, pictures in a frame’, the Western Front, soon to be equally iconic as a site of memory, is incomprehensible, a ‘vastness’, ‘all confused hollows, not a sweeping line in view’ (Thorpe 2001, 64). In *Ulverton*, the First World War is not only paired with the memory of Waterloo, however, but in Fergusson’s mind also recalls the violence of the far more recent South African war of 1899–1902, as he remembers his ‘nephew’s facial injuries’ sustained in that conflict (Thorpe 1992, 229). As in his later novels, *Nineteen Twenty-One* and *Hodd*, Thorpe’s First World War chapter in *Ulverton* exploits readers’ hindsight of the war’s gruesome reality to emphasise a mythical moment of perceived innocence in which modern warfare was still widely understood in terms of earlier conflicts. At the same time, this innocence is undercut by the sobering reference to the South African war. Thorpe makes it clear, moreover, that an

understanding of the First World War as uniquely destructive disregards the actual cost of war at any moment in time, be it the Napoleonic Wars, or the bloody events of the English Civil War and Cromwell's campaign in Ireland, referenced in the novel's first chapter. The latter two events are particularly fraught events in the process of British myth-making, as their disruptive violence is harder to integrate into a positive view of Britain's past. The narrator Fergusson himself is made to reflect on his part in the collective naivety of 1914 from his moment of hindsight in 1928, at which point he has learnt that modern war is made of 'spitting machine-guns and lumbering metal monsters, of men cut down like fairground toys, of hideous waste in a universe of sucking mud, of gas and shrieks and drowning horses' – the antithesis of the rural idyll of which he had dreamed in his colonial exile (Thorpe 1992, 230).

In another, more recent novel of Thorpe's, the First World War reappears once more paired with events of the more remote past whose violent reality is contrasted with their glamorised version enshrined in cultural memory. In *Hodd*, Thorpe offers a troubling re-telling of the Robin Hood myth, in which the popular hero of English folklore is recast as a sinister villain whose story is purportedly told by an ageing monk, plagued by his conscience because his early ballads secured Hood, or Hodd, popular fame for good deeds he never accomplished. The First World War appears – quite literally – in the footnotes of this tale, which has purportedly been translated and annotated by a country squire, Francis Belloes, returned from the war, with a 'Translator's Preface' dated 3 December 1921. In his own introduction, 'A.T.' describes Belloes as a 'wealthy amateur scholar' and war veteran whose 'experience of the First World War was as nasty as any other combatant's, leaving him not only with a head wound and probable shell-shock, but also an anguished grief for at least one close friend' (Thorpe 2009, 4). A.T.'s generic description of Belloes – ending fittingly with the observation that the only available picture of Belloes 'could be anyone's' – subtly hints at the elusive and unspecific

nature of his fictional veteran's experiences. Like Fergusson's summary of the war in chapter ten of *Ulverton*, the footnotes in *Hodd* critique Samuel Hynes's 'collective narrative of significance' (Hynes x): a movement from patriotic enthusiasm to anxious disillusionment.

Fergusson's memoir of his First World War experience in a small South Downs village, the futile attempt of writing a Great War novel in *Nineteen Twenty-One*, and the multiple narrative frames of *Hodd* all highlight the elusive nature of the First World War when subjected to literary treatment. All three novels emphasise the written, mediated nature of their accounts of the war. In *Ulverton*, this is achieved primarily through the prominent narrator, but also through the framing of the First World War chapter as (1) retrospective and (2) part of a longer series of fictional historical accounts that are all characterised, to a greater or lesser extent, by their unreliability and failure to provide a complete picture of their respective pasts. In *Nineteen Twenty-One*, the fundamentally mediated and constructed nature of war writing and indeed war memory is at the centre of attention through Joseph's struggles to commit the war to paper. In *Hodd*, it is not least the generic nature of the translator-commentator's war experience and their pairing with a troubling re-telling of one of the most popular English myths that suggest that the reader needs to be wary of the version of the First World War the footnotes convey. The novel effectively tackles not one, but two English myths in combination – one old, one more recent, but both loaded with implications for what it means to be English and what it means to question the past. The First World War is discussed in the (fictional) footnotes to the (fictional) document on the 'real' Robin Hood in a way that queries the validity or truth of either myth as much as the complicity of literature in establishing and perpetuating such myths. This applies explicitly to the ballads of the remorseful monk and by implication extends to the literary representation of the First World War. The fictitious translator's annotations simultaneously articulate the futility myth of the war and invite its challenging by the reader. The translator-

commentator Belloes has found the fictitious Latin manuscript of *Hodd* in ‘the ruins of a bombarded church in what had lately been an isolated hamlet on the Somme’, its crypt blown open by shells (Thorpe 2009, 5). The sordid reality behind one myth is thus revealed by the sordid reality of another soon-to-be mythical event of English history. A clear connection between the past and present is established by the translator-narrator himself when he jokingly refers to the antiquity of the manuscript in contrast with his own time, in which the war is ‘raging around [him] in the guise of a very modern doomsday’ (Thorpe 2009, 5), a reference not only to the Christian apocalyptic day of judgement, but also to the late-eleventh-century Domesday Book. Fictional translator Belloes notes the ‘extraordinary significance to the deep culture of England’ of the myth of Robin Hood while, in 1921, he has himself barely emerged from another period in history that has, by the early twenty-first century, arguably gained similar significance to understandings of Englishness. As in *Nineteen Twenty-One*, Thorpe once more homes in on 1921 as a key moment in the early myth-making process of the Great War.

Belloes describes his attempt to retrace the physical scenes of the manuscript as impeded by the presence of ‘petrol stations, hosiery, toasted scones, coke smells and the Player’s factory’ and concludes that ‘for all their fidelity, my own conjurings obtruded upon the real thing, which is forever lost, and merely (and rather tantalisingly) haunts.’ (Thorpe 2009, 8) In the same manner, his recollections of the war in which he has been wounded, shell-shocked and robbed of a close friend intrude upon the footnotes accompanying his translation of the medieval manuscript. While the purpose of the footnotes is, initially, purely scholarly (to clarify words or phrases, draw attention to potential sources or allusions, or illuminate the reader as to medieval customs or ideas), Belloes also uses them to compare past and present, and references

his experiences in the war with increasing frequency. The actual footnotes are further annotated, in places, by facetious and finally delusional remarks invoking traumatic events at the front, including on the final page a ‘pencilled scrawl in the margin’ that repeats desperate injunctions to a friend killed in the war: ‘withdraw to safety, Alec – bolt – for Godssake – leg it –’ (Thorpe 2009, 307). Belloes’s footnotes, like the friar’s manuscript, thus seek to revise history: in the medieval author’s case the reputation of Robin Hood, and in Belloes’, the death of his friend on the Western Front.

Writing about writing the First World War in *Nineteen Twenty-One*

The most important question that *Nineteen Twenty-One* tackles is one that is crucial to contemporary writers of fiction looking back at the First World War: is it possible to write about the war without having experienced it, and if so, what kind of war novel can one write without eyewitness experience? Thorpe’s writer-protagonist has experienced the war, but from its fringes – he is too young, has missed out ‘[b]y a whisker’ (Thorpe 2001, 44), not on the effects of war at home, but on the soldier’s experience of war. Joseph’s own war record is one of failure to fight, as his war injury consists of being gassed by accident when he loses his nerve in a training exercise. Following this accident, he only just makes it to the front in time for the Armistice to be declared. Failure to have experienced combat lies at the heart of the protagonist’s struggle to write the war novel he wants to write. Joseph clearly subscribes to what James Campbell has termed ‘combat gnosticism’; that is, he ‘equates the term “war” with the term “combat”’ (Campbell 204), and he believes ‘that combat represents a qualitatively separate order of experience that is difficult if not impossible to communicate to any who have not undergone an identical experience’ (Campbell 203). It remains tantalisingly unclear whether Thorpe shares his protagonist’s views. On the one hand, Joseph fails to write his war novel because he lacks combat experience, and the experience of those who did experience

combat eludes him. But on the other hand, Thorpe does write his own war novel regardless of his own lack of either combat or eyewitness experience, albeit a war novel about a failed attempt to write a war novel. Thorpe's choice of the writer's dilemma as the central theme of his novel speaks to the broader idea of a postmodern 'crisis in representation', a 'deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real' (Bertens 11). Thorpe himself has acknowledged that the novel's narrative focus on 'a would-be writer struggling to compose a novel that will expose the truth about the Great War' gave him a sense of 'a great liberty in being able to write a story without feeling the need to frame it or to justify the narrator's existence' (Thorpe 2012, 277). The focus is on the struggle to write about war, rather than any successful interpretation of the conflict. By making the novelist grappling with the subject of war the subject of his own war novel, Thorpe has thus freed himself from the obligation to provide his own definitive version of the conflict. This obligation is replaced by Joseph's constantly shifting understanding of both the war and of his literary version of it.

Thorpe's work, like that of the postmodern novelists of which Linda Hutcheon writes in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, questions the 'common use of conventions of narrative, of reference, of the inscribing of subjectivity' as well as his own 'implication in ideology' (Hutcheon 106), in this case his drawing on a disillusioned futility narrative about the war that has become its master narrative in the public imagination. Building on Hutcheon's work, Ansgar Nünning observes that '[by] undermining the notion of historical truth, historiographic metafiction calls into question the ontological boundary between fact and fiction, the real and the imaginary' (Nünning 229). Like the novels Nünning analyses in his article, *Nineteen Twenty-One* also 'foreground[s] the paradoxical relation between history and writing' (Nünning 229). Given the important role literature has played in constructing the memory of

the First World War in Britain and beyond, Joseph's desire to write the definitive novel about the war is simultaneously a desire to write (and thus fix) the definitive memory about the war: what it was, what it has been about, and how it can be made meaningful for subsequent generations who, like Joseph, have missed out on the actual experience of this monumental conflict. Joseph's real quandary is not so much writer's block, but the fact that the war's memory eludes him – both because a single narrative can never suffice, given the multitude of different ways in which the war has been experienced, and because narrative memory (unlike physical memorials such as the Cenotaph) can only crystallise and mature over time. Joseph's failed attempts recall Vera Brittain's realisation that her war memories needed to settle and mature before they could be transformed into fiction. Brittain described an earlier, failed attempt at writing up her recollections in the form of a novel shortly after the war in the preface to *Testament of Youth* (1933), published more than a decade after the end of the war:

My original idea was that of a long novel, and I started to plan it. To my dismay it turned out a hopeless failure; I never got much further than the planning, for I found that the people and the events about which I was writing were still too near and too real to be made the subjects of an imaginative, detached reconstruction. (Brittain 11–12)

On the one hand, Joseph himself reflects on the struggle to transform experience into narrative when he voices his frustration at not being able to take advantage of his own lack of damage. He feels he should be able to write about the war sooner precisely because he himself is 'not smeared over with the waxy dullness of shock, the pale satisfaction of having "done his bit" for the country, like the fellows who were veterans, yet to stir themselves into convulsions, wounded anger' (Thorpe 2001, 44). Unlike these veterans 'proper', who are 'yet unable to shape [their anger] into words', Joseph argues, he should be able to respond to his vicarious

experience of war right away, while he predicts (thanks to Thorpe's benefit of hindsight) that the outpouring of veteran writing 'would take time, this stirring out of shock and lethargy, it would take positively years – ten or more of them.' (Thorpe 2001, 44) And yet, Joseph seems to find himself just as incapable of making sense of the war through his writing as these veterans. Not having been a combatant is thus ultimately only a problem, as it strips Joseph's writing of the aura of authenticity without conferring the advantage of impartiality or objectivity. Joseph has 'been gassed "in France" – that was good enough for Ma and Pa and the neighbours' (Thorpe 2001, 11) – but since Joseph himself knows he was gassed in a training exercise because he lost his nerve and tore off his own gas mask, it isn't good enough for him. What he craves, despite his earlier and rather half-hearted flirtation with pacifism, is the combat experience which he has missed. When the Armistice is announced just as Joseph is finally being hustled up to the frontline, his response is devastation:

Joseph sat on the platform among the match-ends and cried like a child, but then a lot of the men were crying. Nobody knew what they were crying for, there were so many reasons and all of them different. The war had been taken away from him, whipped away – from right under his feet. That was why *he* was crying. Big history, taking no account. It might have waited a couple of days. (Thorpe 2001, 12)

What Joseph regrets is his being deprived of a chance to participate in 'Big history' – in an event that he feels has already become part of a larger fabric of historical significance. The novel opens with Joseph's despondent statement 'I feel dwarfish' – not physically, but 'spiritually, in the head', as a result of his lacking war experience (Thorpe 2001, 1). In response to Joseph's claim that he is 'living a half-life', his more sensible (and more successful) friend Baz points out that Joseph likely 'wouldn't be living a life at all, if [he'd] felt the real heat',

and that he might as well ‘get on with building the new world and – shut up’ (Thorpe 2001, 1). Joseph fails to take this advice, and spends the remainder of the novel attempting to make up for his lack of first-hand experience by creating a fictional record of the war he has missed. While the novel is elusive, he does succeed in publishing ‘an article about the war for the *Daily Herald*, highly critical of the murderous dummies at GHQ’ (Thorpe 2001, 14). Joseph’s article seems to channel both the tenor of Siegfried Sassoon’s poetry and the stance of military historians such as B. H. Liddell Hart or Alan Clark. It embroils Joseph in a debate with a mysterious reader who disagrees with his negative views. Their correspondence is conducted by letter, but the reader later comes to suspect the nameless critic may be Joseph’s friend Baz. The exchange perturbs Joseph not least because his correspondent appears to have the first-hand experience he himself lacks. Attempting to overcome his own sense of inferiority, Joseph initially seeks to devalue the experience of his correspondent by arguing that ‘the shrillest lot are often the ones who were there, in the thick of it’, as they feel the need to (in Baz’s words), ‘[j]ustify their suffering’ – Joseph argues that one ‘can put up with suffering’ only as long as it doesn’t feel ‘futile’ (Thorpe 2001, 17). By this argumentative sleight of hand, Joseph’s own lack of first-hand experience makes him capable of more objective judgement than those who ‘were there’, but this interpretation stands in stark contrast to Joseph’s feelings of regret and inferiority throughout the novel. These feelings surface poignantly when he is faced with the reality of the war’s aftermath on a trip to Ypres, where he reflects while contemplating the former battlefields: ‘But he was nothing. He hadn’t even fought, for God’s sake! That was both his strength and his weakness. If he had stuck it out as a pacifist... but it was no good, he was a fraud, and shameful to boot.’ (Thorpe 2001, 156)

Joseph’s desire for authenticity tallies with evaluative criteria applied to war books during and after the war. Throughout the war, ‘true story’ anthologies were marketed on the strength of

their perceived veracity, emphasised not only in titles but in editors' prefaces. Walter Wood's *Soldiers' Stories of the War* (1915), for instance, insisted that 'All of the stories in this volume are told by men who were there personally' and satisfied the editor's desire 'that no unreliable details were knowingly given' (Wood v). McLoughlin, scrutinising the representation of war from the Iliad to the war in Iraq, notes that successful accounts of war must be '*salient* and, crucially, *credible*' (McLoughlin 2011, 22; emphasis in the original). In Joseph's view, this credibility requires experience of combat, a view based on the reception history of literature about the Great War in Britain. The privileging of accounts written by those who had experienced the fighting at first hand is evident in the work of reviewers such as Cyril Falls, whose collected reviews in *War Books* (1930) repeatedly dismiss works as incapable of conveying the reality of war as experienced by combatants, notoriously going so far as to state categorically that 'it is not the place of women to talk of mud; they may leave that to men, who knew more about it and have not hesitated to tell us of it' (Falls 282). Subsequent critics such as Bernard Bergonzi and Paul Fussell cemented this bias towards combatant accounts in their seminal critical works centred almost exclusively on (male) veteran writers. In *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War* (1965), Bergonzi did include a small number of civilian and retrospective writers, but his main argument centres on combatants such as Wilfred Owen, Charles Hamilton Sorley and others. Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) has irritated many scholarly commentators with its 'insistence upon combat experience as the only basis on which truly to know the war' (McLoughlin 2014, 436). Writers themselves also felt the need to highlight their credentials as eyewitnesses. Evelyn Copley notes that they were frequently at pains to cast their literary responses to war as 'alternative history which was scrupulously accurate in its depiction of everyday events', while exhibiting 'considerable ambivalence towards the possibility, if not the actual desirability, of reproducing the war experience' in the first place (Copley 6). Indeed, as Eve Patten notes, 'much of the

writing of the First World War [...] is governed and conditioned by the tropes of autobiography', leading to a reading of even fictional or fictionalised accounts by veterans 'as witness statements, documentaries, historical record' despite the fact that 'each was treated to revision, interpolation, fictionalisation and delay' (Patten 21). *Nineteen Twenty-One* also resembles the war novels of the 1920s in the sense that both Thorpe and writers like Richard Aldington or R. H. Mottram examine the commemorative culture of the inter-war period (Korte 232).

Thorpe's protagonist believes that what hampers his attempts to write the definitive war novel is his lack of first-hand experience – which is only a problem because he seeks to write about aspects of the war's experience he doesn't share at first hand. His sources of 'authentic' information about the war constantly turn out to be flawed and deceptive, such as the testimony of a young war veteran with a mutilated penis whom he encounters in the village. Joseph suspects the young man's mutilation is the result of a genital injury, but it turns out to be the result of sexually transmitted disease (Thorpe 2001, 219–22). 'Real' war experience remains elusive. Having just heard local veteran Walter recount the story of a man hit in the head and walking around with an open head wound crawling with maggots, Joseph realises, if temporarily, the futility of his own endeavour: 'He knew suddenly that words would revivify the slack awfulness of it all – the war, the moment-by-moment movement of it – as effectively as the mammoth's yellow rib in Cholesford church could bring the whole lumbering beast back to life.' (Thorpe 2001, 60) In the end, the war is never quite what Joseph (and, by extension, the reader) expects it to be. This can be seen not least in Joseph's argument with Walter, the real Great War veteran, about the nature of battlefield tours as either tourism or pilgrimage, and Walter's throwaway comments about the sticky feet of the flies in the trenches, which

convey a visceral and yet banal sense of horror that troubles Joseph's own interpretation of the war as either grand tragedy or sordid betrayal (Thorpe 2001, 51; 52).

Joseph's dilemma is, to a certain extent, the general dilemma of the historical novelist. Joseph, like Thorpe, is already a historical novelist, as he sees his remit as quasi-historical: to write the definitive novel about the war, the novel that will expose the war as the crime Joseph feels it was, a novel that 'would *have* to create a scandal' (Thorpe 2001, 156). One of his fundamental problems, besides lack of first-hand knowledge, is that Joseph tries to capture history that is still in the making. Joseph himself realises this when he feels that '[t]he war was too big. It was over, but it was still there, everyone carrying it about with them' (Thorpe 2001, 257). Thorpe himself has noted the futility of his protagonist's attempts to capture the reality of war: 'Yet [Joseph] also feels, when drunk and staring into a gutter, that "sometimes life is too damn actual, thrusting itself forward in every impossible particular, and art withers".' (Thorpe 2012, 277) It seems that there is never a good time to write about the war, as it is either too close (as it is for Joseph), or too distant (as it is for Thorpe, writing nearly a century on), and as it can usually only be grasped at second or third hand through the accounts of others. Like his novelist-protagonist, Thorpe himself is a writer without first-hand experience who has tried repeatedly to get to grips with the First World War. For the most part (in *Ulverton* and *Nineteen Twenty-One*) he has done so through the eyes of narrators and/or protagonists who share his peripheral position of having to approach the war through the testimonials of those who fought in it. Even in *Hodd*, where fictional translator and annotator Belloes has fought in the war, Thorpe's alter ego 'A.T.' has little to go by in interpreting Belloes' war experience. Consequently, Thorpe's own dilemma as a historical novelist finds perfect expression in Joseph Monrow's struggles in *Nineteen Twenty-One*, as Thorpe contrives to write about the First

World War and not write about it at the same time. Unlike other contemporary historical novelists who have tackled the First World War – most notably Sebastian Faulks, whose best-selling *Birdsong* (1993) includes extensive battle scenes – Thorpe does not attempt to render the combatant's experience of the First World War; rather, he concentrates on the literary memory of the war at its point of inception. Thorpe restricts himself to portraying such scenes and experiences as mirror those of the writer writing about the war today: the pilgrimage to original sites, the consulting of eyewitness accounts, the search for traces and insights. All of these are common tools of the trade of historical novelists, as evidenced in interviews with and author notes by authors who have written historical fiction about the First World War, including Susan Hill, Pat Barker, John Boyne, Sebastian Faulks and Louisa Young. Yet in transplanting this process of painstaking research back into the year 1921, Thorpe further demonstrates that any accounts and traces of the war were already shifting as it happened, and certainly so by 1921.

A key example of this process are the multiple versions of the death of village landlady Mrs Hamilton's husband in the war. Her own version, based on the compassionate account of her son-in-law Walter, is the stereotypical consoling narrative of the painless death: in this version of events, her husband Ted died painlessly from a bullet to the head, poetically evoking the image of a single rose petal on his brow (Thorpe 2001, 26). Despite his determination to expose the gritty truth of the war, Joseph finds that this comforting, Victorian version of war symbolised by the rose petal image emerges as his own most convincing literary rendition, whereas his attempts to portray Ted's death as sordid fail miserably: 'He read through the account of Ted's death, with its Tennysonian petal and quiet gallantry; he ought to have been jeering inwardly but he could not, he found it moving.' (Thorpe 2001, 202) Joseph's difficulty highlights, if nothing else, the value of consoling narratives, which may feel less real or truthful,

but are at the same time more compelling and potentially comforting than the unvarnished truth. When Joseph, who has been suspecting the bullet-to-the-head version of Ted Hamilton's death to be a comforting lie all along, learns from the local garage owner and barber that Hamilton had in fact died falling off a train while drunk, reality sabotages his ability to write about the war even more effectively than fiction:

The red petal had burst into a mess on the rails. Joseph could see the mess, clear as day on the rails. And the one piece of writing with which he was pleased had burst likewise. It had lost its dignity. A ridiculous hot-house flower, it was, over-delicate and ridiculous: lotos stuff. Though the *real* death should have been laughable, in its absurd, careless reality. Well, it was; real life turned everything it touched to something laughable. He felt quite bitter. [...] It did not help at all, knowing the truth. (Thorpe 2001, 207)

As Gunby has observed for some of Thorpe's earlier novels, *Nineteen Twenty-One* is a novel that would like to but cannot quite regret 'its own attachment to the compromised "cultural treasures" of England's heritage and its literary tradition'; a novel that '[eschews] parody in favor of a more ambivalent and compromised imitation' (Gunby 69). In this sense, Joseph's grudging preference for the 'rose petal' version of history can be seen to acknowledge the lasting allure of traditional, conservative war narratives, similar to the way Barker's fictional character Billy Prior in *Regeneration* feels stirred by Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' despite himself (Barker 66). Given Thorpe's evident interest, as a historical novelist, in the process of writing about an unknown past, it seems natural that, in *Nineteen Twenty-One* and indeed in *Hodd*, he chose to write about a writer. But his decision also draws on a

crucial element of popular memory about the war: the idea that the First World War was, in the words of Paul Fussell's punning chapter title, a 'literary war', and the trope of the literary veteran. In the 1990s, Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy* (1991–1995) fictionalised the acquaintance of real-life war poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, and fictitious literary veterans make regular appearances in more recent historical fiction, such as the narrator-protagonist of John Boyne's *The Absolutist* (2011). These novels draw on the idea, outlined by Copley, Patten and others, of the literary veteran as a privileged witness, a status that Thorpe questions by offering his readers a failed war novelist instead. Just as most of his historical fiction highlights the pitfalls of writing about historical events, *Nineteen Twenty-One* suggests that the notion of the veteran-writer as an authentic witness is fundamentally flawed, not least because the 'truth' about war is often held by those who cannot or do not want to write about it at all, like Walter, the taciturn veteran whose war experience consistently intrigues, taunts and eludes Joseph. Even where veterans attempt to write about war, their efforts are usually dogged by a crisis of representation encapsulated in Mary Borden's preface to her experimental memoir *The Forbidden Zone* (1929). Borden dedicated her book 'to the *poilus* who passed through our hands during the war, because I believe they would recognise the dimmed reality reflected in these pictures', and voices her belief that '[t]hey know, not only everything that is contained in it, but all the rest that can never be written' (Borden 3). In a similar vein, Richard Aldington's narrator in the short story 'Farewell to Memories' observes: 'They took over a section of the front line. How much that phrase means to those who know, how little it can mean to those who do not know.' (Aldington 302) Neither Borden nor Aldington felt capable of doing more than evoke the full extent of their experience for those without first-hand experience of the war zone. Thorpe's novel revisits these early struggles of representation nearly a century on. Yet novels like *Nineteen Twenty-One* are also a homage to the enduring power of fiction to re-imagine the

war, to make it present for later generations, and thus to contribute to the on-going reshaping of the war's collective memory (cf. Korte 146). In choosing to focus on the war novelist's struggle of representation, Thorpe suggests that nobody can write about the war – and that anybody can.

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