

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Samuel Hynes. *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*. New York: Penguin Books, 1997. xvi + 318 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-86585-7.

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Published on H-PCAACA (September, 1997)

The problem with stories about war is that the language available to us—and to the teller—appropriate as it may be, cannot fully convey the reality of the events. The literature of World War I, notes Paul Fussell, presumed this very inadequacy of public language in its descriptions of the trenches and established that inadequacy as one of its themes.

Samuel Hynes writes that “Our imaginations simply can’t encompass all those armies on all those battlefields” (p. xii). A million men lost in a battle. Fifty-five million killed in a war. Eleven million annihilated in the camps. Seventy-five thousand incinerated in a single flash. Hynes suggests that we must “turn away from history and its numbers” (p. xii) in order to understand war. We learn, he writes, through the personal accounts of the soldiers who fought the wars.

There is, of course, no logical reason why the English language, in all its richness, cannot adequately describe war’s sights and sounds and smells. The problem during World War I was not with how the story was told, but with what was told. Very few listeners were interested in the soldiers’ bad story. But the theme of betrayal, that the war had accomplished nothing, that assaults had been futile, still became part of the war’s literary heritage. Fifty years later, in Vietnam, the theme of betrayal—this time by politicians and generals and war protesters—again generated a dissonant, disillusioned content and tone to a literature that many did not want to hear.

On the other hand, during the “good war,” World War II, the narrative tells us that men fought without regret—both at the time and later. They fought with absolute conviction in a war that had a definite beginning and a definite ending. They fought in a war where the hatred was exceptional, especially in the Pacific. But, above all, they fought in a war that was “a great campaign” (p. 281).

Hynes’ book focuses on combat narratives written by soldiers who served in World War I, World War II and

Vietnam. He also includes narratives written by prisoners of war as well as survivors of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb. Included in the text are the works of men who were—or who became—professional writers. But Hynes does not exclude those one-book men who “told their stories and then settled quickly back into their silent lives” (p. 14). Nothing is said of Korea, even though Hynes, participated there as a Marine aviator, because it “came and went without glory—and left no mark on the American imagination” (p. xiii). Is this Hynes’ own form of avoidance?

Why recall what it is like in war? Why give away the one thing that sets soldiers so apart, that makes them, almost, *illuminati*? The American Civil War was the first instance in which large numbers of literary men fought next to common soldiers. These men produced a solid literary tradition of soldier-authors who spoke to the impact of war on our culture. They wrote narratives that described, most often in first person, the extraordinary events they had witnessed as participants. Most often, they wrote to teach a lesson.

Soldiers in subsequent wars have written similar narratives—postscripts to their wars—because we “must believe that human beings can learn from the testimonies of others” (p. 285). How, though, asks Tim O’Brien, “can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there?” (p. 284). Soldiers cannot teach; they can only tell their stories—and, thereby, enable us to engage, vicariously, in their glimpses at the sublime male experience—for good or ill. Out of their tales “our wars-in-the-head come closer to the truth of human experience” (p. 285). That is why the tales are told.

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Citation: Oscar Patterson. Review of Hynes, Samuel, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

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