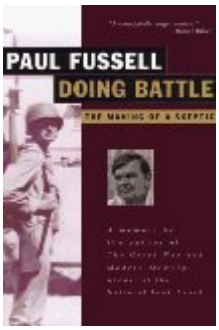
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Paul Fussell, ed.. *Doing Battle: The Making of a Skeptic.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996. 310 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-316-29717-2.

Reviewed by Laurent Ditmann

Published on H-Film (March, 1998)

Readers of Stendhal remember that his Fabrice, eager to experience the romantic thrills of war, chooses to follow a French cavalry troop through the confusion of the Waterloo battlefield. Trying to make sense of the onslaught of sensations and ideas he faces, Fabrice asks one of the soldiers whether this is indeed a battle, to which the weary hussar responds: "Un peu." This quizzical answer materializes the difficulty of talking about modern war: beyond theory, philosophy, strategy, and other "intellectual" discourses, war appears above all as neither this nor that. It asserts itself as a supreme entity that dwarfs human essence and defies understanding, destroying one's capacity for reason and leaving the individual, though in most direct contact with history in action and motion, without any kind of definitive answer on anything. Possibly the most intense of all human experiences, it forces social groups and individual alike to confront--and concede defeat to--chaos and mortality, while leaving survivors, in a way, speechless.

Societies, intolerant of ambiguity, gloss over this silence. Cultural celebrations of war through ritual or text, from ancient epics to modern state commemorations, fulfill no other purpose than to ward off death through the assignment of meaning to the dead for the benefice of the living. In this respect, the many ways in which World War II has been memorialized, especially around the 50th anniversary of its conclusion, are exemplary. Historians and politicians alike expatiated at great length on the "Good War," easily forgetting that Stud Terkel's famous use of the word was mostly ironic. As if a sort of statute of limitation of memory had been reached, all searched for a neat and convenient closure, a stabilization of meaning, a sense of healing and reconciliation. In the United States, World War II veterans were feted as living heroes and very much taken for granted in the sense that we chose to look at them as characters or extras in a pacified story--as opposed to creatures of flesh and blood.

Yet nothing in war should be so simple and clear cut, especially when it comes to 20th century wars and their cultural aftermath, as astutely demonstrated by Samuel Hynes in his *The Soldier's Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*

(1997). Hynes reminds us that no matter what the individual's experience of war has been, its narration and memorialization remain highly problematic processes. No matter what is said about war, it is only un peu. This reviewer assumes that Paul Fussell, author of the somber and disturbingly sincere *Doing Battle: The Making of a Skeptic, would not disagree with this point*. Limiting the discussion of World War II, for America, to victory, parades and placated remembrance, leaves immense areas of suffering, death, failure, and other unromantic notions unexplored and unexpressed. As far as the unresolved and largely unresolvable aspects of war are concerned, Fussell still has to get even in a way that many will find almost unacceptable (this reviewer remembers a scholarly conference where one participant referred to Fussell's "mean-spirited" *Thank God for the Atom Bomb*). The author of *The Great War* and *Modern Memory and Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, probably two of the best books ever written on the culture of war, Fussell is also a combat veteran of the European Theater of Operation. A second lieutenant in the 410th Infantry Regiment (103rd Infantry Division), he participated in the liberation of Eastern France during which he was seriously wounded. Fifty years later, "PF" still cannot begin to comprehend this injury in all its historical, metaphysical, and personal implications. He simply wishes to show his readers how one goes on after such an experience and how culture, though by no means an antidote to the evil of war, can be an individual's best hope to make some limited sense out of it all.

Readers of this marvelous book should not expect a military history of the Battle of Alsace, preferring on this topic the 1993 oral history collection edited by Richard M. Stannard, *Infantry: An Oral History of an American Infantry Battalion*, which deals with the 2nd Battalion of Fussell's regiment. Fussell's book will also disappoint amateurs of highly readable, glamorized war memoirs. Though one senses that Fussell is not entirely at ease with the disappearance of the past--his musings on his return to what was once the location of his OCS training camp are somewhat telling--there is not an ounce of nostalgia in *Doing Battle*. There is nothing cute, pretty, or pat about Fussell's war memories, the fact that he came back as a decorated winner becoming a mere object of self-sarcasm. Likewise, the Proust-like evocation of his childhood (complete with his Combray, Balboa, California and madeleines, in this case barbecued chicken) is simply a pretext to posit the personality of a reasonably privileged, somewhat indolent middle-class young man, a would-be printer or photographer superficially interested in scholarly pursuits. All details in the first part of this autobiography are not equally interesting but all converge toward the idea that, though nothing unfair should have been allowed to happen to young Fussell, war showed him that incomprehensible, unfair things happen to all sorts of people. In this framework, war could precisely be defined as an infinite collection of personal confrontations with death, all ultimately untranslatable in their totality, all easily forgotten, and all equally tragic.

Fussell is not in the business of doing anybody favors, especially not when it comes to himself. He remembers unbelievably stupid officers who contributed to making basic training "nineteen months of abuse and humiliation" (p. 101), portrays American soldiers mistreating prisoners or shooting Germans trying to surrender, paints a hair-raising picture of the effects of an air-burst on a German squad, describes the repugnant effects of an especially bad case of food poisoning, and insists on the various ways in which a supposedly normal human being was turned into a War Machine (to borrow Deleuze's term), one that "relish[es] the prospect of killing" (p. 80). One could argue that such repetitive pessimism could turn the book into a pretty boring and irritating read, were it not for three saving graces. Firstly, there is a wonderful sense of self-derision which gives each sentence an exceptional sheen. One

should be extremely thankful to Fussell for avoiding any kind of self-pity or self-aggrandizement, and generally for staying away from the glorification of "trauma," the dominant concept in recent scholarly discussions of the cultural effects of war. The possibility of Fussell having experienced Post-Traumatic Syndrome is actually disposed of in one paragraph, suggesting that readers interested in soul-baring psycho babble should not bother with this book.

Secondly, Fussell is not by any means oblivious to the global dimension of the war in history. He accepts the fact that, no matter how horrifying his experience was, other people had it worse than himself. There are striking parallels between Fussell's personal chronology and the unfolding of the Genocide, "PF" having for instance entered Pomona college practically on the same day poison gas was first experimented in Auschwitz. There is also the vague and recurrent silhouette of Sergeant Hudson, killed in the same engagement where Fussell was wounded. Eschewing the maudlin tone which would offer an easy way out and into dime-store psychology, Fussell can lament the loss of the man while exposing the posthumous citation Hudson received as a fabrication, the result of a well-orchestrated conspiracy of survivors. Not everybody will enjoy such honesty, but others might feel that Fussel's voice is rendered almost refreshing, and certainly highly original, because it incorporates connotations, specifically anger and the desire for vengeance, which seem to have become socially unacceptable from people who remember their past. True to his patron-writer Mencken, Fussell writes and calls things as he sees them, warts and all (he for instance refers to Nixon as "swinish" and "mendacious," 229). This book is all about honesty and truth; in the words of a Civil War general, "war means fighting and fighting means killing."

Thirdly, and pursuant to this recognition of all that is ugly, Fussell also acknowledges the power of literature, possibly the only intellectual construct to which he assigns any sort of value, on the war-torn mind. The book is also a chronicle of his discovery of World War I poetry filtered through his own war experience. His narrative can instantly turn into exceptional flashes of literary criticism covering his favorite war poets, the sacred and scarred trilogy of Owen, Sassoon, and Graves, as well as Whitman and Pound. There are actually two different--though not separate--books in ***Doing Battle***, two interwoven texts whose connection is the near-fatal engagement, narrated in two segments, first in the opening pages of the book, then in its very center (Chapter ´Five). After the narrative of Fussell's stay in a military hospital and his discovery of reading (whose reward and purpose are literally his survival), the book turns to the birth of Fussell the scholar. Again, this could become a rather dull narrative (and with all due respect to Fussell the family man, some parts of it actually are). Yet, Fussell chooses to apply to the Academy the same caustic sense of observation he used to describe the universe of battle. Fussell, though paying tribute when necessary to exceptional educators he has met, proceeds with the task of reducing to rubble the hypocrisy, pettiness, and pomposity of this profession as encountered though his years of writing and teaching at Rutgers and University of Pennsylvania. Coming to terms with a number of pet-peeves, from dubious scholarship to multiple choice tests, seems to be Fussell's primary concern. This time, however, the environment being more ridiculous than lethal, the resulting prose is often quite amusing:

The resolutions most people make at New Year's the professor makes at the beginning of a new college year, and they may go like this: I will be nicer to students, trying harder to conceal my boredom as they tell me things I've heard hundreds of times before, and affecting belief as they retail their phony excuses for late papers; I will get that article finished and send it out; I will be more careful not to ridicule my colleagues' preposterous theories or raise my eyebrows at their

stupid remarks; and I will quit dropping comments suggesting dissatisfaction at working in a female seminary and implying the mediocrity of those satisfied with such a life (p. 220).

To make a long story short, one should say that accounting for a book as intensely idiosyncratic as ***Doing Battle*** probably is, in the final analysis, a matter of personal judgment and reaction. One could point out that Fussell's work is not the only piece of that nature to be recently published and could be contrasted for instance with Louis R. Harlan's ***All at Sea: Coming of Age in the World War II*** (1996), the autobiography of another veteran turned English professor. One could also see parallels between Fussell's work and the gripping memoir recently published by writer and journalist Robert Kotlowitz, Before Their Time. Yet these three books are quite different in content and style, and this reviewer does not wish to get into arguments as to which text is more "accurate" or relevant to the experience of war. He simply enjoyed Doing Battle, and much more than un peu. He would recommend this magnificent book to anybody interested in the basic GI's experience in World War II. Furthermore, he wishes it could be required reading in graduate programs in the humanities throughout this country. He regrets that Fussell's professional insights were not made available to him before he embarked on an academic career, and thanks his lucky stars that he never had to partake in any form of combat.

Citation: Laurent Ditmann. Review of Fussell, Paul, ed. *Doing Battle: The Making of a Skeptic.* H-Film, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1835