Contesting Veterans’ Identities: Reflections Upon Gender Roles and History in Pat Barker’s *Regeneration*

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This paper aims to reflect upon the approximations between literature and history in Pat Barker’s novel *Regeneration* (1991). The novel fictionalizes the conversations held by three war veterans who wrote and fought in the First World War (Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves) during their stay at Craiglockart’s Hospital—a war hospital for the treatment of shell-shocked officers, in Scotland. The paper addresses more emphatically how traditional male and female roles are renegotiated in Barker’s metafiction. Finally, it provides some considerations on British women war writing of the First World War, a tradition in which *Regeneration* is rooted and emerges as a remarkable contemporary example.

*Keywords:* women war writing, gender studies, life writing, First World War studies, trauma theory

**Women in War: Myth and History**

Mythically, women war narratives have been associated with the complex weaving of the Greek *moiras*, women weavers who did not just thread plots but also fate. In Greek mythology, three primeval entities were associated with Fate, *Moira*, who lived in a hidden cave.

The idea of a Moira acting on the fate of all mortals evolved in many ways. In Hesiod’s *Theogony* (1998), the thread is associated with human life. Most of the time, fate-related entities are represented by feminine images, once the job of threading, warping, and weaving was delegated to women. The Hellenic influence allowed other women entities to be associated with fate, in different cultures and societies. What is possibly the first literary reference to women and war (the mention of the Amazons) appears in the *Iliad* (1996), the inaugurating war narrative by Homer. The Amazons, also known as a tribe of women warriors, were referred to by Herodotus (2003), in the fifth century BCE, as the Sauromatae from Scythia, “a society where women hunt on horseback alongside men, often wear men’s clothing, and even fight in wars” (p. 117). They fought against several male heroes, namely, Bellerophontes, the young Priam, Heracles, and Achilles.

Mary R. Lefkowitz (2007) acknowledges the Greek historian’s words and mentions the discrepancy between the roles performed by the Amazons and those expected from women in Ancient Greece: “Women did not hunt or go to war; women’s initiation rites did not involve exposure to physical danger; women nursed their children and stayed at home” (p. 4). Such thesis suggests the contradiction between myths preventing women from direct participation in the battlefields, largely reinforced by the Greek patriarchal society and, it may be inferred, some possible intent by women to subvert that idea. The etymological implications of the term...
Amazons imply an idea of counteraction to what was imposed on those women in the first place: A version, according to which the Amazons’ right breast was removed, explained as a-mazos (no-breast), followed by a neglect of matriarchal duties like breastfeeding.

Another reading of the myth of the Amazons inspired German composer Richard Wagner to create the opera “Die Walküre” (1870), based on a supposed equivalence between the Greek women warriors and the Valkyries from Old Norse mythology. In the opera, specifically in the Third Act, the Valkyries are portrayed as women entities who would ride on their winged horses across the battlefields to transport the dead warriors to Walhalla, where they would find joy and eternal life. It was a duty those women performed with dramatic joy because it empowered them with the important task of rewarding heroes for their bravery.

A similar task is conducted, again in the Iliad, by the goddess Thetis towards her heroic son, Achilles. In Book One, he implores his mother to intervene in favor of the Trojans, aware of her significant influence over Zeus. The father of the gods acquiesces in Thetis’s plea on behalf of her son. The goddess’s high status in the Olympus is explained by Laura M. Slatkin (1991) as follows:

No complaint is made against Thetis herself; no mention is made of her less-than-Olympian status; no question is raised as to the appropriateness of her involvement in, as it were, the strategy of the war—in the way, for example, that Aphrodite’s participation on behalf of Aeneas calls for caustic humor at her expense. How is the poem’s audience to make sense of Thetis’s extraordinary authority? It claims a divine consent—and consensus—that is significantly tacit. (p. 54)

The passage stresses Thetis’s high standing in the Olympus, possibly over other gods and even her warrior son who, however invincible, was himself a demi-god and, therefore, a mortal. Also, it makes Thetis’s intervention in the war more evident. Given the mortal condition of her son, she develops a caring attitude that confers on her a far more important role than is apparent.

A question remains: Why does Achilles address his request to Zeus through his mother and not directly? He certainly makes a prayer directly to Zeus in Book Sixteen, in favor of Patroklos. Nevertheless, Achilles’ preference for his mother’s mediation ascribes Thetis another major role: that of intermediary between soldiers in the battlefield and the gods. Slatkin (1991) ponders that “it can be no trivial service that is recalled in exchange for reversing the course of the war, with drastic results that Zeus can anticipate” (p. 64). Moreover, Zeus’s willingness to assent to Thetis’s request enhances her privileged position as a female divinity. Her powerful role is exerted in relation to both mortals (her son) and the gods (Zeus). In addition, her task as a mediatrix can also be read as that of a peacemaker, moderating agent in times of war. As Slatkin (1991) concludes:

The most general, but most telling, statement of Thetis’s power is expressed by the formula “ward off destruction.” The ability to ward off destruction within the Iliad is shared exclusively by Achilles, Apollo, and Zeus. Although others are put in a position to do so and make the attempt, only these three have the power to “ward off destruction,” to be efficacious in restoring order to the world of the poem. (pp. 65-66)

Her skill to confer with Zeus in order to reach a settlement during the Trojan War empowers Thetis with a decisive function over the resolution of that conflict. Her performance is as important, if not more significant, than that played by the warriors in the battlefields. She may be left in a place “outside the line of fire” but she certainly has an unparalleled position between mortals and gods in the war epic.

Another piece of evidence of women’s mythical participation in wars is expressed by Penelope’s controversial, and no less important function, in The Odyssey (1996).
Odysseus’s wife was obviously not a divine entity, but the kind of power she exercises during her husband’s absence, due to the war, makes her an even more intriguing character. She is the Queen of Ithaca, who is capable of evading the expectations imposed by her own family by developing a cunning maneuver to put off her suitors. Although Penelope was an aristocrat, it was common, in Mycenaean societies, to see queens perform house chores, such as washing clothes, making bread and olive oil, looking after children, and weaving. Nonetheless, there are several maids in the Megaron. In The World of Odysseus (1982), M. I. Finley clarifies that:

Denied the right to a heroic way of life, to feats of prowess, competitive games, and leadership in organized activity of any kind, women worked, regardless of class. With her maids, Nausicaa, daughter of the Phaeacian king, did the household laundry. Queen Penelope found in her weaving the trick with which to hold off the suitors. Her stratagem, however, of undoing at night what she had woven in the day, repeated without detection for three full years until one of her maids revealed the secret, suggests that her labor was not exactly indispensable. The women of the aristocracy, like their men, possessed all the necessary work skills, and they used them more often. Nevertheless, their real role was managerial. The house was their domain, the cooking and washing, the cleaning and the clothes-making. (p. 70)

Historically, Penelope would have to yield to the idea of returning to her father’s house while her husband was not around. Instead, she chooses to remain at her house at all costs. Sue Blundell (1995) confirms the nobility of Penelope’s feat but poses a valid question concerning the ambiguous meaning of Penelope’s actions:

Penelope certainly emerges as a clever and determined woman, who is quite capable of evading the pressures placed on her both by the suitors and by her own family. But in order to achieve this she employs the weapons traditionally associated with females; the deceptive use of weaving and of words is typical of the behaviour ascribed to women in the Odyssey, and it lends Penelope a shady and ambiguous character not unlike the one accorded to Helen. (p. 55)

The passage stresses Penelope’s equivocal plan to undo her weaving at night for the sake of keeping the suitors around her for over three years. The obscurity of her plot is compared to Helen’s adultery, which seems to be an overstatement. It is important to note that, before leaving for war, Odysseus had given his wife full powers over the palace at Ithaca. Keeping the household is a job his wife does legitimately and proudly and reveals her sense of personal duty. More importantly, guarding the home gives her control over the property and the serving-maids.

Her failure to remarry is counterbalanced by the power she wields in the palace. The negotiation of power roles between Odysseus and Penelope appears as a challenging issue, much more provocative a questioning than her shadowy inability to deal satisfactorily with her suitors. Blundell (1995) reminds us that:

This model of gender relations is in some ways quite different from anything which can be derived from the later literature of the Classical Age, in which the spheres of activity of male and female are seen as fundamentally distinct. In the Homeric world, where political power is rooted in the royal household, the boundary between the domestic and the political, between the private and the public, is not nearly so rigid. The roles of men and women overlap, and it is for this reason that a woman can come close—in the absence of her husband—to the exercise of political power. (p. 57)

It may be assumed that Penelope’s role played in the narrative surpasses the domestic realm; by insisting on remaining in the palace, and doing her best to keep it running, she plays a leading role as the provider for her own home, something unprecedented in historical terms and largely perpetrated by the Trojan war scenario. By emphasizing the inversion of male and female roles, war narratives have, throughout history, focused on the universal experience of human collapse. This may be understood as an attempt to reinforce the idea that the
lives of men and women can be equally affected during wartime and their social roles, especially the ones delegated to women, may be evenly redefined.

**Women and World War I Writing**

Paradoxically, traditional and archetypical gender roles appear to have been subverted by the First War, which contributed to the evolution of women’s social roles. On one hand, men, had their emotional frailty and susceptibility to psychological collapse revealed in women’s war writings, such as those described in Rebecca West’s novel *The Return of the Soldier* (2004) and in Barker’s novel *Regeneration* (1991). On the other hand, some women started working as political activists, Red Cross volunteers, ambulance drivers, journalists and munitions workers, just to name a few examples from women’s testimonials. Others evolved from the condition of silent witnesses to that of active thinkers, such as Vera Brittain in her autobiography, *Testament of Youth* (1994), and Virginia Woolf, in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1996). The literary writings by Woolf, Brittain, West, and Barker are imbued with precise and latent historical meaning and play significant role in the construction of the cultural memory of the First World War.

In Barker’s contemporary fiction *Regeneration* (1991), psychological implications are suggested, especially with respect to the writer’s mentioning of interpolated male and female roles. War veterans sent to Craiglockhart hospital for psychiatric treatment had, above all, a hard time displacing and sharing the terrible emotional experiences that they underwent in war, mostly because in the Army “[t]hey’d been trained to identify emotional repression as the essence of manliness. Men who broke down, or cried, or admitted to feeling fear, were sissies, weaklings, failures. Not men” (Barker, 1991, p. 48). However, the relationships between soldiers, based mainly on comradeship, as well as the doctor-patient contacts described in Barker’s narrative, suggest the interposition of male and female behavior in those men. Dr. Rivers’ care and compassion for Prior, for instance, is defined as a feminine attitude and represents, in the doctor’s words, “One of the paradoxes of the war—one of the many—was that this most brutal of conflicts should set up a relationship between officers and men that was… domestic. Caring. As Layard would undoubtedly have said, maternal” (Barker, 1991, p. 107). Note the ellipsis that precedes the word “domestic”, a sign of hesitation, and the adjective “Caring” in an isolated position between two periods, as if something shameful was being declared. The most compelling word appears in the end, proffered by another voice, a distant one. Santanu Das (2006) explains that:

> It is a great irony that the world’s first industrial war, which brutalized the male body on such an enormous scale, also nurtured the most intense of human bonds… A very different order of male experience, one that accommodated fear, vulnerability, support and physical tenderness, sprang up in its place. (p. 136)

Despite the presumed disparity between men’s and women’s emotional attitudes, the novel reveals how both roles intercalate in some of the patients at Craiglockhart. Siegfried Sassoon is admired by Rivers for “His love for his men. The need he had to prove his courage. By any rational standard, he’d already proved it, over and over again, but then the need wasn’t altogether rational” (Barker, 1991, p. 118). A feeling like Sassoon’s love for the training of his men would be emotionally understood but never rationally explained by Rivers. The reasons why most men soldiers experienced emotional susceptibility are, in the words of Das (2006):

> Because war places sexuality on a continuum of emotions such as vulnerability, helplessness, fear and the universal need to be loved and cared for: in the meeting of “lips”, the erotics of greed are overwhelmed by the reassurances of affection. Rather than celebrating…the gay love of the trenches, it should be read in the context of imminent mutilation and mortality. (p. 135)
Not only have women’s social roles evolved since the First War but some change in women’s attitude may also be triggered by that tragic event, especially regarding the rise of women’s optimism towards the construction of a society with equal opportunities.

**Interweaving Past and Present in Pat Barker’s *Regeneration***

Contemporary writers, such as Pat Barker, have perpetuated the tradition going far back in time to the Greek *moiras*. Not only does Barker provide a contemporary woman’s gaze on the First War, *Regeneration* also offers particular views on the writing of history.

Barker wrote about 600 pages asking questions about what the boys who went to War had to suffer. *Regeneration* is Barker’s first installment of a trilogy of novels about the First World War, followed by *The Eye in the Door* (1993) and *The Ghost Road* (1995). The novel is the fictionalization of the war poet Siegfried Sassoon’s stay in a mental hospital, Craiglockart, in 1917, shortly after he wrote “A Soldier’s Declaration”, protesting against the First War and its unnecessary extension. While he is treated by a psychiatrist, Dr. Rivers, whose methods were influenced both by Freudian views and Dr. Yealland’s more “orthodox” approach, he meets patients Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen, two other poets. After giving Owen valuable advice on his poem “Anthem for Doomed Youth” (1917), Sassoon and Dr. Rivers become acquainted with Billy Prior, another fictional patient struck by post-traumatic stress disorder and homosexual issues, complex themes to be explored by soldiers in the First War, which were still seen as a threat to a fighting man’s bravery and virility. Although Dr. Rivers’ humanitarian attempts help Sassoon and the other inmates confront the trauma and pain that haunt them, it may be observed that the doctor’s task consists of giving these patients proper care so as to assure their return to the battlefront.

Barker’s use of intense imagination in order to reassess the past (of the First War) is, however, controversial, as far as it concerns historical narratives. Pihlainen (2002) explains that:

> We are here reminded again of Hayden White’s exhortations that historians should make use of forms of narration that are common to contemporary literature; yet the idea that various viewpoints could be presented without assessment seems hostile to the task of historical narration. (p. 10)

Note that White’s explicit encouragement of fictional elements for the writing of history, especially in postmodern historical metafiction, may be directly associated with *Regeneration*.

Nevertheless, Pihlainen (2002) ponders the importance of revisiting the past by means of imagination and seems to approach the essence of Barker’s metafictional exercise, as follows:

> In taking liberties with focalization and attempting to leave out the authoritative voice of the historian-narrator, one possible way to counterbalance the one-sidedness of the perspectives provided by sources, “speaking for themselves” could, of course, be through the introduction of fictional characters presenting alternative perspectives and opinions. (p. 10)

The last two lines of the passage stress the use of many “I’s”, or “eyes” through which the past of the First War is observed in Barker’s fiction. Also contemporary is the concept that historical sources, which would traditionally “speak for themselves”, may do so in fiction.

It is a contemporary approach because this kind of debate has been prompted by Meta and Micro historians. As polemical as Hayden White’s theory may sound, his ability to grasp the fictional technique used by contemporary writers of history is worth admiration.
In the following passage there may be seen a kind of “prophecy” that would define current interdisciplinary debates, involving literary and historical studies. It also addresses the “fictionalization of history”, a key element to Barker’s writing about the War. White (1978) argues the following:

In my view, we experience the “fictionalization” of history as an “explanation” for the same reason that we experience great fiction as an illumination of a world that we inhabit along with the author. In both, we recognize the forms by which consciousness both constitutes and colonizes the world it seeks to inhabit comfortably. (p. 99)

A practical example of White’s above-mentioned postulate is found in Regeneration, when the character Sassoon arrives at Craiglockart Hospital for psychiatric treatment, after having written his anti-war manifest, entitled “A Soldier’s Declaration”. The original document written by him (available at the U.S. Public Domain Organization website) matches the transcription made by Barker in her novel. The dialogue between Graves and Sassoon, supposedly right after the publication of the Manifest, is a fictional representation of the impact that the document might have had on his friend Graves, concerned with the reaction from local authorities. Barker (1991) writes:

“What else could I do? After getting this.” Graves dug into his tunic pocket and produced a crumpled piece of paper. “A covering letter would have been nice.” “I wrote.” “No, you didn’t, Sass. You just sent me this. Couldn’t you at least have talked about it first?” “I thought I’d written.” They sat down, facing each other across a small table. Cold northern light streamed in through the high windows, draining Graves’s face of the little colour it had. “Sass, you’ve got to give this up.” (pp. 5-6)

The passage suggests that Graves bears a copy of “A Soldier’s Declaration”, possibly one that had been printed by local newspapers. It also implies that Graves disapproved of his friend’s way of protest, which was reported by Graves in his own autobiography, Goodbye to All That (1929). Also doubtful is their conversation after the publication. It is important to note, however, that no matter how fictional this dialogue may have been, the document’s authenticity remains intact. Fiction, here, has appeared simply to grant one of the many possible interpretations, an “illumination”, in White’s words, we inhabit with Barker’s fiction.

Another elucidation appears when the character Dr. Rivers receives an envelope from his patient Siegfried (Barker, 1991, p. 24), containing two of Sassoon’s poems, “The General”, and “To the Warmongers”. The doctor’s reaction, according to the narrative, is:

Rivers knew so little about poetry that he was almost embarrassed at the thought of having to comment on these. But then he reminded himself they’d been given to him as a therapist, not as a literary critic, and from that point of view they were certainly interesting, particularly the last. (Barker, 1991, p. 25)

Whether Sassoon wrote the poems as a kind of healing therapy and submitted them to his doctor may not be proved. The doctor’s reading and appreciation of the poems, followed by his preference for “To the Warmongers” is an assumption. However, what is depicted in fiction does not alter Sassoon’s compilation containing these and other poems. Instead, Barker’s fictional representation instigates the reader to think of what might have led Sassoon to write them, without changing a line of their content.

Barker’s interplay of reality/fiction does not dismiss in any respect the author’s intent with the veracity of documents. The original medical report written by Dr. William Rivers, which allowed Sassoon to be readmitted to the Army, is the property of the Imperial War Museum’s permanent archives. It is identical to Barker’s transcription (Barker, 1991, pp. 71-72). In all the above-mentioned writings by Sassoon (the manifest and the two poems), as well as in the letter by Rivers, fidelity to the originals has been maintained by the fiction writer.
In fact, a distinctive printing device warns the reader about the documents’ authenticity: They are printed in the same font as the rest of the text, except that it is one size smaller than the text containing the fictionalized conversations.

Through the use of fiction, war myths and emotions held by a whole generation of men, who fought from 1914-1918, are revisited by Barker. What is peculiar about this contemporary woman’s narrative is the emphasis on men’s recurrent feelings of fear and despair, contrary to the values of masculine repression imposed upon those men. Feelings of vulnerability, largely expected from women, were to be found among soldiers and all the men involved in war activities, too. In the middle of the narrative, it may be seen that Dr. Rivers struggles against his compassionate impulses while assisting one of his patients, Prior. The doctor wonders:

He disliked the term “male mother”. He thought he could remember disliking it even at the time. He distrusted the implication that nurturing, even when done by a man, remains female, as if the ability were in some way borrowed, or even stolen, from women—a sort of moral equivalent of the couvade. (Barker, 1991, p. 107)

It should be reminded that Rivers’ thoughts are tormented, on one hand, by an archetypical view of male behavior embodied by one of his male colleagues, Dr. Layard. On the other hand, his consideration for his patients poses more than an ethical dilemma: a personal tendency to sympathize with the drama lived by his comrades in wartime.

Rivers’ lack of explanation for his deep commitment to the men who suffered in the trenches and sought help at Craiglockart culminates in a “reversed” self-image, according to which he might be acting like a WVAD (Women’s Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurse, not as a military doctor. His thoughts range from cowardice to sexual preferences, and he ponders about the similarity between the faces of his patients, young officers, and a certain kind of woman:

Worrying about socks, boots, blisters, food, hot drinks. And that perpetually harried expression of theirs. Rivers had only seen that look in one other place: in the public wards of hospitals, on the faces of women who were bringing up large families on very low incomes, women who, in their early thirties, could easily be taken for fifty or more. It was the look of people who are totally responsible for lives they have no power to save. (Barker, 1991, p. 107)

The author finds worth mentioning Rivers’ vividness in portraying women’s wartime drama, not only a concern for his woman colleagues, WVAD nurses, but for the women who precociously lost their husbands to war and became the family’s breadwinner. More importantly, it reveals women’s unconditional support for men in the battlefields, despite society restrictions on their direct participation in war.

The importance of women’s intervention in favor of soldiers can be seen in classical literature, mainly by Thetis, towards her son Achilles in the *Iliad*. One of the most elucidating attitudes of the mother goddess for her heroic son, however, has intentionally not been mentioned in Chapter I. It may be found in Book XVIII and it illustrates more emphatically the inversion of men’s and women’s roles, just as Pat Barker’s novel seems to address this topic more specifically than in the three other narratives.

The episode referred to is Achilles’ sorrow for Patroclus’ death. The depth of his grief is described in physical details.1 It is so intense that it causes the women slaves to sympathize with their master’s pain: “From

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1 Fitzgerald’s translation of the *Iliad* describes the pain felt by the most powerful of all Greek warriors as follows: “A black storm-cloud of pain shrouded Achilles./On his bowed head he scattered dust and ash/in handfuls and befouled his beautiful face,/letting black ash sift on his fragrant chiton./Then in the dust he stretched his giant length/and tore his hair with both hands” (*Iliad* 18: 22-27).
CONTESTING VETERANS’ IDENTITIES

the hut/the women who had been spoils of war to him/and to Patroclus flocked in haste around him,/crying loud in grief. All beat their breasts/and trembling came upon their knees” (Iliad 18: 28-31). Next, Achilles weeps profusely, to the extent that his weeping may be heard by his mother, who dwells in the sea. Also moved by the great warrior’s sorrow, Thetis’s sisters, the Nereids, are compelled to join the mother goddess towards the Trojan shore, where her son is calling for help. The spatial motion is important here: the cry resonates to the depths and the help comes ashore. These movements reinforce the idea of inversion, added to the great hero’s vulnerability to pain, which leads him to cry for his mother’s help. In the Iliad, the absurdity of such an inversion may be seen by a long listing of the Nereids’ names (the list comprises ten lines), along with a reference to the place they came from: “and other Nereids of the deep salt sea, filling her glimmering silvery cave” (Iliad 18: 51-52). With great endeavor the women reach the Trojan shore, where the Myrmidon ships lay (Iliad 18: 69-75). The author quotes the dramatic description of the mother's meeting with her son: “Bending near/her groaning son, the gentle goddess wailed and took his head between her hands in pity, saying softly: Child, why are you weeping?/What great sorrow came to you?/Speak out, do not conceal it” (Iliad 18: 76-81).

After partaking in her son’s drama, the immortal mother must, at great pain, reveal her son’s tragic doom in the Trojan War. Achilles accepts his fate, transcribed by Fitzgerald as “destiny”, from the original Greek word moira. Going back to the war and killing Hector, and therefore, avenging Patroclus’ death, no matter if that cost him his life, is the only comfort that will come to Thetis’ son. Aware of her son’s fate, Thetis tells the Nereids to come back to the bosom of the sea, whereupon she goes up to Mount Olympus, where she will plead to Hephaestus to forge new armor for her son:

She rose at this and, turning from her son, told her sisters Nereids: “Go down/into the cool broad body of the sea/to the sea’s Ancient; visit Father’s hall, and make all known to him. Meanwhile, I’ll visit Olympus’ great height and the lord of crafts, Hephaestus, hoping he will give me new and shining armor for my son.” (Iliad 18: 138-144)

Note the reverse of both roles and the importance of distances: The goddess mother intervenes in favor of her son once again, and her mediation is contrasted by references of distance, “go down”, “great height”, and other opposites, such as “Ancient” vs. “new and shining”, “sea” vs. “Olympus”.

Conclusion

In Regeneration, role inversion appears as Rivers behaves not as a male doctor, but as a mother. Those who are supposed to act like war heroes, for they survived a great part of the War, as brave soldiers do, plead to their superiors for help, like children. While Prior yields to Rivers’ care, his lover, Sarah, struggles to maintain their home, as a munitions factory worker. Male and female roles are reversed, fictions and realities intermingle. In the gap between two extremes, history is regenerated: Men disclose their frailty, women workers gain equal

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2 The author quotes the following lines from Fitzgerald’s version: “And now Achilles gave a dreadful cry. Her ladyship/his mother heard him, in the depths offshore/lolling near her ancient father. Nymphs/were gathered round her, all the Nereids/who haunted the green chambers of the sea” (Iliad 18: 35-39).

3 According to the following passage: “Letting a tear fall, Thetis said: ‘You’ll be/swift to meet your end, child, as you say:/your doom comes close on the heels of Hector’s own’” (Iliad 18: 107-109).

4 Emphasis given. It would make more sense to write “Peleus’ son”, for the remarkable men in Ancient Greece were referred to by patronimics. In this passage, however, given the proximity and the importance of the meeting between mother and son, the author refers to Achilles as “Thetis’ son”.

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When seen by contemporary eyes, or I’s, the history of the First War does not appear as a frozen instance in time. What may be observed is that its history is made by human experiences, recognizable by different generations in different times. There is a mimetic aspect to history, as Auerbach presupposed, that is perpetually regenerated, as inevitable as if it had been carefully treaded by a Moira, but in contemporary times.

References


5 Erich Auerbach presents this concept in *Mimesis* (1953), as he states that epochs and societies should be studied according to their own presuppositions. Historical events should not be only apprehended by abstract and general facts, in reality: “Basically, the way in which we view human life and society is the same whether we are concerned with things of the past or things of the present. A change in our manner of viewing history will of necessity soon be transferred to our manner of viewing current conditions. When people realize that epochs and societies are not to be judged in terms of a pattern concept of what is desirable absolutely speaking but rather in every case in terms of their own premises; when people reckon among such premises not only natural factors like climate and soil but also the intellectual and historical factors; when, in other words, they come to develop a sense of historical dynamics, of the incomparability of historical phenomena and of their constant inner mobility; when they come to appreciate the vital unity of individual epochs, so that each epoch appears as a whole whose character is reflected in each of its manifestations; when, finally, they accept the conviction that the meaning of events cannot be grasped in abstract and general forms of cognition and that the material needed to understand it must not be sought exclusively in the upper strata of society and in major political events but also in art, economy, material and intellectual culture, in the depths of the workaday world and its men and women, because it is only there that one can grasp what is unique, what is animated by inner forces, and what, in both a more concrete and a more profound sense, is universally valid: then it is to be expected that those insights will also be transferred to the present and that, in consequence, the present too will be seen as incomparable and unique, as animated by inner forces and in a constant state of development; in other words, as a piece of history whose everyday depths and total inner structure lay claim to our interest both in their origins and in the direction taken by their development” (Auerbach, 1953, pp. 443-444).