Reporting the First World War in the Liminal Zone. British and American Eyewitness Accounts from the Western Front

Prieto, Sara. 2018
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Sara Prieto’s *Reporting the First World War in the Liminal Zone. British and American Eyewitness Accounts from the Western Front* examines the representation of the First World War in a number of testimonies written by British and American reporters who went to the Western Front at different stages of the war. This solid and rigorous research represents a valuable contribution to the study of the First World War, as the author goes beyond the study of journalistic reports by British and American writers in order to fill a void within the field of war reportage.

To start with, by focusing on journalistic accounts written by reporters who visited different war zones, this book seeks to counter current trends in First World War Studies grounded in testimonies from combatants and ex-combatants. This “combat-centred” perspective has been challenged throughout the past thirty years by women scholars committed to the recovery of testimonies written by eyewitnesses, such as nurses. Their attempt to rescue female voices, however, tended to overlook war reportage. Therefore, a second and related aspect that has also been ignored and which the author achieves to reclaim are the testimonies of a number of reporters who went to the front lines and published their experiences during the armed conflict.

Furthermore, this research also provides a thorough exploration of the genre of “literary journalism”. Since the texts under investigation correspond to this genre, the introduction undertakes an overview of the development and evolution of a genre that has not been sufficiently studied. Following the definition provided by the International Association of Literary Journalism, literary journalism can be summarized as “not journalism about literature but journalism that is literature” (Prieto 2018, 2). In other words, literary journalism defies easy categorizations and can be represented as a hybrid that is located...
in-between different disciplines, which leads the author, in turn, to put into dialogue the form and content of texts that she characterizes by their “liminality”.

On the other hand, this book takes into account how nationality and gender affected the authors and their texts. This transatlantic dimension is one of its greatest virtues of the volume, as the inclusion of texts from both sides of the Atlantic allows Prieto to critically reflect on “the extent to which the author’s nationality—and their country’s position at a given stage in the war—affected their style of writing” (Prieto 2018, 13). The emphasis on the differences between those texts written by men and those by women contributes to the awareness of the significant role played by gender in war reporting.

While drawing from canonical approaches to the First World War, such as Paul Fussel and Samuel Hynes’s “Myth of the War”, the author gives innovative insight into journalistic reports by incorporating interdisciplinary approaches and multiple perspectives within the fields of literary studies, literary journalism, anthropology, sociology and history. Doubtlessly, one of the innovative elements is the conceptual framework used, based on theories on liminality. Victor Turner’s formulations of the notion of liminality, that had been previously studied by Arnold van Gennep, are identified as the second stage of a “tripartite process” consisting of “[t]he entry into an unknown realm [which] marks the suspension of one’s original sense of identity with the resulting disorientation and uncertainty, and the eventual prospect of seeing the world with new eyes” (Prieto 2018, 11).

In this regard, the introduction offers a thoroughly documented theoretical foundation that adopts the notion of liminality to study both the authors and their texts. After a beautifully written description of the devastation of “the Great War”, the author proceeds to identify the liminal zone as the years of the conflict, from 1914 to 1918. Liminality, on the other hand, also applies to the texts that are left “in-between historical, generic and literary traditions” (11). The historical context, literary journalism and the texts under examination share this liminality, leading the author to consider the role that the First World War played not only for these testimonies, but also for the development of the genre as a whole.

The following chapters are structured chronologically. The second chapter “Pioneers: Entering the War Zone” deals with texts written by two British and two American reporters, Harold Ashton, Philip Gibbs, Richard Harding Davis and Alexander Powell, two of them male and two female. Written soon after the outbreak of the conflict, these texts focus on the initial difficulties and obstacles in reaching the war zone, the observation of fleeing refugees, along with the ultimate commotion and bewilderment caused by a novel form of warfare that could not be compared to any previous conflict. “The Liminal Tunnel: Authorial Voices in the War Zone” also incorporates accounts from both sides of the Atlantic by both genders in order to delve into the dissonance between the liminal nature of the war experience and the inherited tradition of war writing. Unable to represent the war according to traditional parameters, these writers were compelled to resort to hybrid texts. In this regard, the book compares and contrasts those texts written by British authors like Rudyard Kipling from those by Americans, such as Mary Roberts Rinehart and Edith Wharton. The next two chapters focus exclusively on texts from either Britain or the United States: chapter 4, “The Turning Point?: Journalists at the Somme”, analyzes the testimonies of British journalists of the Battle of the Somme, and “The American Rite of Passage” pays close attention to the representations of the entry of the United States into the war. Since the armed conflict identified as the liminal stage precedes the culmination of the rite passage, the last chapter also explores the rite passage that necessarily corresponds to the period after the war. “Incorporation: Post-war and Disenchantment” is referred to as a “coda” that includes both texts written after 1918 and the main conclusions of Prieto’s research.

To conclude, Reporting the First World War in the Liminal Zone offers not only a pleasant reading, but also an invaluable contribution to the study of war reportage written by British and American journalists during the First World War. All in all, Prieto’s research provides the reader with an original and innovative approach to texts that are exhaustively examined and put into dialogue with a solid theoretical framework. The reviewed book most definitely meets the objective of filling in “the gaps in the literary maps of the First World War and deepen our understanding of the European cataclysm” (188).