Introduction
Authoring war

In *War and Peace* (1865–9), Nikolai Rostov responds enthusiastically to a request from Boris Drubetskoy to describe how and where he got his wound:

> He described the Schön Graben affair exactly as men who have taken part in battles always do describe them – that is, as they would like them to have been, as they have heard them described by others, and as sounds well, but not in the least as they really had been. Rostov was a truthful young man and would never have told a deliberate lie. He began his story with the intention of telling everything exactly as it happened, but imperceptibly, unconsciously and inevitably he passed into falsehood. If he had told the truth to his listeners who, like himself, had heard numerous descriptions of cavalry charges and had formed a definite idea of what a charge was like and were expecting a precisely similar account from him, either they would not have believed him or, worse still, would have thought Rostov himself to blame if what generally happens to those who describe cavalry charges had not happened to him. He could not tell them simply that they had all set out at a trot, that he had fallen off his horse, sprained his arm and then run from the Frenchman into the woods as fast as his legs would carry him. Besides, to tell everything exactly as it had been would have meant the exercise of considerable self-control to confine himself to the facts. It is very difficult to tell the truth and young people are rarely capable of it. His listeners expected to hear how, forgetful of himself and all on fire with excitement, he had rushed down like a hurricane on the enemy's square, hacked his way in, slashing the French right and left; how his sabre had tasted flesh, and he had fallen exhausted, and so on. And that is what he told them.[1]

There is no doubt that Rostov has participated in the 'Schön Graben affair',[2] no doubt that he is eager and willing to speak of his actual experiences there – indeed, that for a number of reasons he *needs* to speak of them – and no doubt that his intention is to do so. But as he talks, he begins to tell a

[1] L. N. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (London: Penguin, 1957, 1982), 279.
[2] Also known as the Battle of Schöngrabern and the Battle of Hollabrunn. The nomenclature reveals further variations in the telling of the matter.

war story he has heard before. His tale 'imperceptibly' and 'unconsciously'[3] metamorphoses from a description of what has happened to him into a handed-down account of war, a depiction of conflict as it is generally believed and imagined to be, but not as he has actually found it to be in his experience. Unable, for various reasons, to convey his own truth about war, Rostov yields to a 'stronger', more established version of belligerent events.

This is curious. And yet, Tolstoy dryly insists, there is nothing unusual about the way in which Rostov's story develops. He describes the engagement 'exactly as men who have taken part in battles always do describe them'. The transition into falsehood is '*inevitable*'.[4] Developing the scene, Tolstoy even arranges for Rostov to confirm his tale, as Prince Andrei Bolkonsky, overhearing it, comments, 'Ah, there are a great number of stories now about that affair!' Under this contrived provocation, Rostov, instead of taking the opportunity to resile from his account, actually endorses it by invoking the authority of first-hand combat experience:

> The stories we tell are the accounts of men who have been under the enemy's fire. *Our* stories carry some weight, they're not the tales of little staff upstarts who get decorations for doing nothing.[5]

The 'false' version is now thoroughly entrenched. So, the reader may wonder, what about those who previously told the tale that Rostov is now relating? Did they accurately recount what happened to them or did they also yield to prior versions (receding to an *ur*-war story?) imagined and believed but not actually experienced? If so, why? What about Tolstoy's own account of his fictional character's rendition of the battle? Why, instead of describing the Schön Graben affair as he, Tolstoy, understood it to be (drawing on his own combat experience as a second lieutenant in the Crimean War), does he present his reader with a description of a failed attempt to recount it?

Such questions persist as variations on the phenomenon occur throughout representations of war, and throughout representations of such representations. (War itself, as this book tries to show, is often left in the distance.) In September 1919, the *Women's Home Companion* carried a short story by Edith Wharton with the self-reflexive title 'Writing a War

[3] The Russian adverbs are 'nezametno' (imperceptibly, with the sense of being unnoticeable) and 'nevol'no' (involuntarily, unintentionally) (L. N. Tolstoy, *Voina i mir* [*War and Peace*] (Moscow: Zakharov, 2000), 288): Rostov cannot control the deviation.
[4] In Russian 'neizbezhno' (inevitably) (Tolstoy, *Voina i mir*, 288).
[5] Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 280, 227–8.

Story'. The example of a depiction of war contained in the piece is again generated by a request, and value is again placed on first-hand experience of conflict as means of authentication. Miss Ivy Spang of Cornwall-on-Hudson, USA, who 'had published a little volume of verse before the war', is asked by a (male) patient in the big Anglo-American hospital in France where she pours tea to contribute a 'war story' to a forthcoming anthology, the significantly titled 'Men-at-Arms'. The request is couched as follows:

> A good rousing story, Miss Spang . . . We want the first number to be an 'actuality', as the French say; all the articles are written by people who've done the thing themselves, or seen it done. You've been at the front, I suppose? As far as Rheims, once? That's capital!

Initially 'dizzy with triumph' at this commission, Miss Spang then struggles to find an opening and a plot. The more she thinks about the matter, the less she seems to understand how a war story is written. All that is apparent is that 'in a war story the flowers must be at the end and not at the beginning'. Ultimately, she is saved only by her old French governess who has a copybook full of stories she took down from soldiers in a military hospital during 1914. 'Mademoiselle' supplies Miss Spang's rendition of one of these tales with 'certain consecutiveness' but polishes the rustic speech in which she originally transcribed the story so that it issues forth 'in the language that a young lady writing a composition on the Battle of Hastings would have used in Mademoiselle's school day'. To the 'purely military' anecdote, Miss Spang adds 'a touch of sentiment'. When the anthology comes out, she is upset that her soldier patients pay exclusive attention to the photograph of her in her nurse's uniform accompanying the piece.[6]

This story highlights a number of the challenges confronting all war writers while making clear that the problems faced by women war writers are particularly egregious. The two women war writers in the story, Ivy Spang and Mademoiselle, both face the primary difficulty of gaining first-hand experience of their subject matter: the story eventually published is at least third-hand. Even to obtain this material, they must perform parapolemical[7] work in hospitals. The interest taken in the photo is monitory: femininity can be a way of gaining access to material (and hence readers) during conflict, but it can also be a bar. The lowly pourer of tea

[6] Edith Wharton, *Collected Stories 1911–1937*, sel. Maureen Howard (New York: Library of America, 2001), 247, 248, 250, 253.

[7] See Kate McLoughlin, *Martha Gellhorn: The War Writer in the Field and in the Text* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 105: parapolemics are the temporal and spatial borders of war, its adjectival phenomena.

finds it impossible to be taken seriously as a writer of war. But beyond this, Mademoiselle and Miss Spang encounter generic difficulty: not specifically a gender issue, it faces all those who seek to convey the complex, massive phenomenon that is war. How indeed to begin, to end, to find appropriate words? Like Rostov, the two women turn, in their helplessness, to established narratives. For Mademoiselle, these are the historical compositions she remembers from school. For Miss Spang, they are sentimental stories with a romantic twist. In each case, as for Nikolai Rostov, inchoate attempts are discarded in favour of a 'strong' version already available. And Wharton herself, who had personally witnessed the Front on a number of visits, does not write about battle but about the difficulties of representing it.

The phenomenon recurs in another intensely self-reflexive war story with a title very similar to Wharton's: Tim O'Brien's 'How to Tell a True War Story' (1990). The title can be understood in two ways: how to distinguish a true war story and how to relate one. In the course of the piece, O'Brien, adopting a narrative persona also called 'Tim O'Brien', suggests that the truest account of war may actually be fictional: 'a thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth'.[8] A 'true war story', in his terms, is, accordingly, often unbelievable, unreal, embarrassing and pointless. It makes no sense, except in the gut. It goes on and on forever and there can be no meaningful response to it – except, perhaps, more questions.

These observations are made in a story which itself is knowingly misleading, kaleidoscopic and self-contradictory. Opening with what seems to be a tale about a GI, Rat Kiley, writing to the sister of his dead friend Curt Lemon, it shifts into an unfinished account of Lemon's death; then into a completely unrelated story told by another GI; then into an amendment of that story; then into a description of Kiley torturing a baby water buffalo; then into a return to the account of Lemon's death, differently angled this time; then into a brief reference to an apocryphal tale; then into an admission that the story is about something else entirely. These divagations make 'How to Tell a True War Story' impossible to grasp: like Rostov's original account or Miss Spang's fumblings, each section is abandoned for a further apparently futile attempt to convey the actuality.

The phenomenon reaches a culmination in another piece of Vietnam War literature – *The Sorrow of War* (1991) – by the Vietnamese writer Bao Ninh, who, like Tim O'Brien, personally served in the conflict. In a novel which is as much about war representation as it is about war, Ninh

[8] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (London: Flamingo, 1991), 79.

presents a writer-combatant protagonist, Kien, whose struggles with the challenges of recording his experiences are never less than excruciating. This is a 'war author [who] cannot even bear to enter a cinema where people may be shooting each other on the screen', an author 'who avoids reading anything about any war, the Vietnam war or any other great wars', an author, indeed, 'who is frightened by war stories'. Nonetheless, as one who has 'perhaps watched more killings and seen more corpses than any contemporary writer', Kien endows the act of authorship with the status of a mission: 'he has to finish his novel and life cannot be ended until the writing is done'.[9]

His writing project synonymous with crisis, Kien reaches a point where 'the novel seem[s] to be in charge'. It has 'its own logic, its own flow' and even seems 'to structure itself, to take its own time, to make its own detours'. The novel, not the writer, is the active agent, 'unfold[ing] on the cluttered desk' in front of him. Kien 'meekly accept[s]' this take-over, 'passively letting the stream of his novel flow as it [will]'.[10] No more than a conduit, the authorial figure in this moment has abdicated all responsibility. It is as though the war has ambushed the writing, assuming the task of expressing itself.

All four writers, then, depict a *surrender* in the face of representing war. In each of the key scenes, an attempt to convey conflict is aborted as a less troublesome option is embraced: in Rostov's and Miss Spang's cases, a popular, stereotypical version; in 'O'Brien's' case, another in the series of discarded vignettes; in Kien's case, a trance-like, automatic state. Now, these examples, at first glance, function in ways similar to those in which literary influence in general is thought to operate. The most influential influence theorist, Harold Bloom, proposed over thirty years ago that 'strong poets make [poetic] history by misreading one another' through such means as 'completion', 'correction' and 'antithesis'.[11] The implication is that the poets who fail to overcome their powerful precursors are somehow wanting: in Bloom's terms, Rostov, Miss Spang, 'Tim O'Brien' and Kien would be characterised as weak war writers, too feeble to deploy the tropes of resistance. Critics of Bloom who reject his 'anxiety of influence' theory as a male-oriented, Oedipal model, nonetheless continue to locate debility in the writer. The 'anxiety of authorship' theory proposed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggests that, far from experiencing anxiety

[9] Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War*, trans. Frank Palmos (London: Minerva, 1994), 51, 82, 180.
[10] *Ibid.*, 81, 81, 91, 81.
[11] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5, 14.

of influence, writers outside the dominant male canon feel anxiety about writing at all. Imbued with 'a radical fear that she cannot create' and 'culturally conditioned timidity', the woman writer struggles with 'isolation that [feels] like illness, alienation that [feels] like madness, [and] obscurity that [feels] like paralysis': unsurprisingly, most lack the 'extraordinary strength' required to produce literature.[12] Other theories of influence – the ideas of intertextuality promulgated by Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, for example – depend upon an understanding of text as boundaryless, receptive, subjectile. 'Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another,' writes Kristeva, drawing on Bakhtin's theory of dialogism,[13] while Barthes, using a battle metaphor for discourse itself, insists that 'a text is . . . a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash'.[14] Though radically opposed to the humanistic ideas of agency on which the approaches of Bloom, Gilbert and Gubar are founded, these theorists also offer concepts which are paradigms of lack of resistance. But, arguably, something else is at work in the 'capitulations' depicted by the four writers under consideration.

Strikingly, these are meta-capitulations. Rostov, Miss Spang, 'Tim O'Brien' and Kien falter in the fiction, but Tolstoy, Wharton, O'Brien and Ninh also fail, in these instances, to write about war, writing instead about the difficulties of its representation. That all four depict authorial anxiety is instructive (and their personal combat experience – in Wharton's case, experience of visiting the Front – has been cited to make the point that none lacked first-hand knowledge of armed conflict). The argument of this book is that the representation of war is inherently anxiogenic – but the anxiety is not primarily related to the problems of influence or authorship characterised by Bloom or Gilbert and Gubar, nor is it primarily a symptom of textual porousness, nor is it primarily a matter of what, after post-modernism, might be termed the ontological indeterminacy of reality. When war writers 'swerve' (the word is a loaded one in influence theory), the moment is an acknowledgement of a complex set of problematics relating now to authorial powers, now to the nature of the subject matter, now to the medium of representation, now to the reader's response – and now to other intangible variables. War, in other words, resists depiction, and

[12] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene Press, 2000), 49, 50, 51, 51.
[13] Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 37.
[14] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 146.

does so in multifarious ways. *Agon*, or the contest for aesthetic supremacy,[15] is transformed in war writing from a wrestling match solely between poet and powerful predecessor into a struggle between writer and Hydra-like adversary with inexhaustible means of defence and attack.

Yet, even as it resists representation, conflict demands it. The reasons that make war's representation imperative are as multitudinous as those which make it impossible: to impose discursive order on the chaos of conflict and so to render it more comprehensible; to keep the record for the self and others (those who were there and can no longer speak for themselves and those who were not there and need to be told); to give some meaning to mass death; to memorialise; to inform civilians of the nature of battle so as to facilitate the reintegration of veterans into peacetime society; to provide cathartic relief; to warn; and even, through the warning, to promote peace. And despite – perhaps because of – the difficulties, depiction of conflict is ubiquitous and of ancient standing. War representation is 12,000 years old, dating from at least the Mesolithic period (10,000–5,000 BCE) in the form of rock-paintings of battle scenes found in the Spanish Levant.[16] The modes by and media in which armed conflict has been recorded over the thousands of years since are multifarious: an inexhaustive list would include all the literary, musical and fine art genres; film, television, radio and the internet; games of every description, battle re-enactments and anti-war demonstrations; advertisements, photographs and posters; dance and movement; post-cards, coinage and papier-mâché models; mugs, cereal bowls, tea towels, thimbles, bow-ties, pencil sharpeners and key-rings;[17] and, unlikeliest of all, the spun sugar from which the Viennese court confectioner wove a model of the Battle of Esztergom for the Empress Maria Theresia.[18] Representations of war can be as long as *War and Peace* or as short as a bloodcurdling battle cry containing all the fury of previous encounters and present intentions (in the *Iliad*, Ares and Poseidon both have war cries as loud as nine or ten thousand warriors (5.860, 14.148)). Analytic and aesthetic discourses have also been imposed *onto* armed conflict, the subject treated by, *inter alia*, anthropological, legal, economic and psychological – as well as literary – analyses and taxonomies. Written war representation itself is thickly textual: depictions of conflict typically contain and comment upon other depictions of conflict and even, in the case of Byron's *Don Juan* (1819–24), petition

[15] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, xxiv.
[16] Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilisation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 27.
[17] Gifts available from the Imperial War Museum, London.
[18] W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Harvill, 1999), 194.

them as aids to inventiveness: 'Oh, ye great bulletins of Bonaparte! / Oh, ye less grand long lists of killed and wounded!'[19] Simultaneously impossible and necessary to convey, war gives rise to representations that are palimpsestic, self-reflexive, hypertextual.

Authoring War sets out to understand this complex set of imperatives: firstly, to identify what makes war impossible or very difficult to write about and, secondly, to explore the means by which it has, nevertheless, been written about with some success. It also offers thoughts on why, despite the obstacles, attempts to write about war are myriad and ongoing and what is achieved when such attempts are made. As is described in more detail later in this Introduction, the subject is approached in terms of specific challenges and responses. *Authoring War* does not seek to give a normative account of war writing – there is no suggestion that one, true version exists or should be striven for, either of war in general or wars in particular – but rather to show *what writing can do* with the ineffable and intractable.

What makes armed conflict such a slippery opponent is its *extremity* as an experience. 'Extremity' is not here defined in any absolute or relative sense. It is conceived in the same terms as Maurice Blanchot's characterisation of 'the disaster' as that which 'couldn't possibly belong to the order of things which come to pass, or which are important, but is rather among the things which export or deport'.[20] 'Export or deport': the extremeness that is war carries the individual who experiences it away from the familiar and the ordinary. In exploring the representation of the extreme, the abnormal, the intractable, *Authoring War* participates in lines of thought about how 'difficult' subjects might be conveyed – thought that takes in concepts of the sublime developed over millennia as well as recent work in Holocaust representation[21] and the depiction of trauma, pain and memory. In the field of 'war studies', it both benefits from and builds upon the movement, originating with Angus Calder's *The People's War: Britain 1939–45* (1969) and Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) and ongoing in, for example, the *Journal of War & Culture Studies* (founded

[19] Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, ed. T. G. Steffan, E. Steffan and W.W. Pratt (London: Penguin, 2004), canto 7, stanza 82, lines 1–2.

[20] Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Anne Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 9.

[21] On the idea of the 'extreme' in Holocaust theory, see, for example, Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 48, and Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 106, 109, 129.

2008), to understand armed conflict in terms of its cultural delivery and consumption[22] – here, specifically, in its written mediation.

In a broader context still, its concern with the nuts and bolts of written expression situates *Authoring War* within the (renewed) formalist tendency in literary analysis. One of the book's premises is the belief that war, as a subject, is the greatest test of a writer's skills of evocation, a belief shared by Ernest Hemingway,[23] who commented in a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald that 'it [war] groups the maximum of material and speeds up the action and brings out all sorts of stuff that normally you have to wait a lifetime to get'.[24] Other areas of human experience – love and grief spring to mind – have their own representational challenges, but war is specially charged because huge in scale, devastating in impact and encompassing of human behaviour in its greatest trials and intimacies. In its formalist approach, *Authoring War* bucks the prevailing conflict-specific trend in war studies, even as it keeps in view the local and particular factors shaping each attempt to convey war's extremeness.

The formalist approach involves the dismantling of some traditional categories, the most significant of which is 'war' itself. Rather than confine itself to a dictionary[25] or legal[26] definition,[27] *Authoring War* embraces all aspects of what Walt Whitman called 'the red business',[28] whose product

[22] See Martin Evans, 'Opening Up the Battlefield: War Studies and the Cultural Turn', *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 1.1 (2008), 47–51. Most recently, this turn has been pursued in Mary A. Favret's *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[23] Though not by Yeats, who notoriously omitted 'certain poems written in the midst of the great war' from his 1936 edition of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* on the questionable grounds that 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry' ('Introduction', *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892–1935*, ed. W. B. Yeats (Oxford: Clarendon, 1936), xiv).

[24] Ernest Hemingway, *Selected Letters 1917–1961*, ed. Carlos Baker (London: Granada, 1981), 176.

[25] 'Any kind of active hostility or contention between living beings' (*Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) I.1.b).

[26] 'In accordance with international treaty law, for an armed conflict to result in a state of affairs governed by international law and constituting a war in the legal sense of that term, the hostilities should be preceded by a reasoned declaration or an ultimatum with a fixed time limit, indicating that a formal declaration would issue if the conditions laid down in the ultimatum were not met' (Leslie C. Green, *The Contemporary Law of Armed Conflict*, 2nd edn (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press / Juris Publishing, 2000), 72). The requirement for war to be declared goes back to Grotius and seems tantamount to saying that war is what war is announced to be.

[27] For extended discussion of the definition of war, see Nick Mansfield, *Theorizing War: From Hobbes to Badiou* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and Hew Strachan, 'The Idea of War', in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, ed. Kate McLoughlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7–14.

[28] Walt Whitman, 'First O Songs for a Prelude' (1861, 1867), *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, sel. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 417.

is what Ivor Gurney called the 'red wet / Thing'.[29] There is no attempt, therefore, to identify 'war writing' as that written by a combatant, produced contemporaneously or related to events on the battlefield (though these distinctions must be recognised in certain contexts, particularly when the issue of credentials is explored in Chapter 1). Rather, the concern is with the extreme experiences (dying, killing, injury, pain, loss, displacement, familial and national upheaval, etc) to which the red business and the red wet thing give rise. These parameters are sufficiently wide to permit the inclusion of 'all strike, / All quarells / contecks, and all cruell iarres':[30] writing about revolutions and counter-revolutions, colonial and civil wars, skirmishes and sieges (though not 'cold' hostilities). Reference is also made to representations of genocide and terrorism, but these phenomena involve special considerations and have accrued their own bodies of theoretical writing (from which *Authoring War* benefits): their *sui generis* status is therefore respected.

The question immediately raised by this scope is whether it is legitimate to take a common approach to 'war writing' when the wars being written about took place in different periods and cultures and varied enormously in kind. That each war differs from every other is beyond question. Indeed, each individual's experience of a war is different: 'When a war is ended it is as if there have been a million wars, or as many wars as there were soldiers.'[31] In particular, it has been noted that twentieth-century wars (especially the world wars) are 'phenomenologically and ontologically discontinuous' with previous conflicts, whether due to their industrial scale or to the fact that 'modern weapons technology has fundamentally altered the locus of agency'.[32] Such differences may account for the impression that each war has its own poesis, its 'natural' way (or ways) of being represented. Sometimes, this is a question of genre: in ancient Rome, warfare was such an entrenched part of epic that *bella* ('wars') became a shorthand for the genre,[33] while it now seems evident that the First World War's natural form was the lyric poem, that the Second World War's was the epic novel, that the Vietnam War's was the movie, that the Iraq Wars' may well turn out to be the blog. Beyond this, how a war may be represented is determined

[29] Ivor Gurney, 'To His Love' (1919), *Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney*, ed. P. J. Kavanagh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 41.
[30] George Gascoigne, *The Fruites of Warre* (1575), *The Complete Works of George Gascoigne*, ed. John W. Cunliffe, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), vol. I, lines 225–6.
[31] Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (London: Flamingo, 1988), 189.
[32] Margot Norris, *Writing War in the Twentieth Century* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 16.
[33] See Virgil, *Eclogues* 6.3; Horace, *Ars Poetica* 73; Ovid, *Amores* 1.1 (L. V. Pitcher, 'Classical War Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, ed. McLoughlin, 73).