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One Writer, many Writings. The War Diary and Letters of Guerrino Botteri

Un écrivain, beaucoup d'écrits. Le journal de guerre et les lettres de Guerrino Botteri

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Résumés

English Français

The article examines the entrée en guerre of Italian-speaking soldiers of Austria-Hungary through the multiple war writings of Guerrino Botteri, an infantry soldier from Trentino serving in the 2nd Landesschützen Regiment (Bozen). These include his war diary; his letters to his wife Anselma Ongari; his letters to his family of origin; and his letters to his brother-in-law Valerio Ongari. Each writing served its own purposes. For Guerrino, writing to his wife Anselma meant communicating his love, reinforcing his and his wife's faith, and reassuring her that his life was not in danger. The main purpose of Guerrino's letters to his mother and sisters was to reassure them as well, while that of his letters to his brother-in-law Valerio was to share his war experience. Sharing his war experience was also one of the two main purposes of Guerrino's daily memoirs, along with explaining his war experience to himself.

L'article examine l'entrée en guerre des soldats italophones de l'Autriche-Hongrie à travers les multiples écrits de guerre de Guerrino Botteri, un soldat d'infanterie originaire du Trentin servant dans le 2^e régiment de fusiliers de campagne (Landesschützen), basé à Bozen. Il faut y compter son journal de guerre, ses lettres à sa femme, Anselma Ongari, ses lettres à sa famille d'origine, et ses lettres à son beau-frère, Valerio Ongari. Chaque écrit avait une finalité propre. Pour Guerrino, écrire à sa femme Anselma, c'était lui dire son amour, consolider leur foi et la rassurer sur sa sécurité. Les lettres à sa mère et ses sœurs avaient aussi pour but de les rassurer, tandis qu'avec son beau-frère, il partageait son expérience de guerre. C'est ce dernier dessein aussi qu'il poursuivait dans son journal, en même temps qu'il essayait de comprendre cette expérience.

Texte intégral

Introduction



As John Horne reminded us in his 2005 *Conférence Marc Bloch on the French soldiers of the Great War*, the narratives produced by soldiers were as diverse as the recipients to whom

they were addressed. Soldiers would not tell their brothers in arms the same story that they would tell to their relatives, and vice versa. However, there is no reason to consider some narratives more truthful than others, since each one, including diaries, is subject to its own particular form of self-censorship.¹

2 This subjectivity is why I chose to examine the *entrée en guerre* of the Italian-speaking soldiers of Austria-Hungary through the multiple war writings of Guerrino Botteri, an infantry soldier from Trentino serving in the 2nd Landesschützen Regiment (Bozen). These include: his war diary (2-18 October 1914); his letters to his wife, Anselma Ongari (57 letters and postcards sent between 4 August and 30 December 1914); his letters to his family of origin (8 letters and postcards sent between 10 August and 10 November 1914); and his letters to his brother-in-law, Valerio Ongari (2 letters sent respectively on 2 October and on 2 November 1914).²

3 Of course, Guerrino Botteri was just one of the roughly 40,000 Italian speaking soldiers from Trentino called up to serve in the Austro-Hungarian Army between August and December 1914.³ He was subjected to the same external conditions as the other 40,000, or at least as those attached to one of the three Landesschützen Regiments. His writings, therefore, reflect a common war experience, even though they do so through the particular lens of their author's culture. Using a microhistorical approach, the present article takes into account both the shared conditions of experience related to the *entrée en guerre* of the Italian-speaking soldiers of Austria-Hungary, and Guerrino Botteri's personal responses to the conflict.⁴

4 Guerrino Botteri was born in Trieste on 5 June 1882, but his family hailed from Strembo, a small village located in the Val Rendena. In Trieste, his father worked as a travelling vendor of cured meats. After his father's death in 1907, Guerrino came back to Strembo with his family. He completed his secondary school education at the *Istituto magistrale* of Rovereto, where he earned his elementary school teacher certification. Before the war he worked as an elementary school teacher in various Val Rendena villages. He married Anselma Ongari, a postal service employee, on 11 May 1914. She was from Spiazzo, a nearby village. After the war, Guerrino worked as a director of studies in Trento, where he died in 1941. As an elementary school teacher, he occupied a special position in the rural communities in which he lived and worked. In addition, his unusual social status was augmented by the fact that he had a better education than most of his fellow soldiers, the majority of whom were peasants, artisans, bricklayers, woodsmen and minor merchants. Even so, the literacy rate in Trentino was about 96.6% – one that makes the Italian-speaking people of Trentino one of the most literate populations in Austria-Hungary.⁵ Thus, contrary to the Italian peasants,⁶ those from Trentino were almost all able to read and write. This also accounts for the considerable number of popular writings that are now preserved in the archives of the region.⁷ But even in light of this extraordinary literacy rate, the linguistic competence of Guerrino Botteri was far higher than that of his fellow soldiers. He was able to use not only an extensive range of styles and devices, including irony, but even different languages, namely Italian, dialect, and German. His education in both Italian and non-Italian literature also helped him understand his war experience and communicate it to others. For example, when he did not know how to express the experience of marching through the mud, he could rely on Dante's *Inferno*, “my firm foot always was the one below”⁸ (*dove 'il piè fermo è sempre il più basso*).⁹

5 To what extent is Guerrino Botteri representative of the 40,000 Italian speaking soldiers from Trentino called up to serve in the Austro-Hungarian Army between August and December 1914? His special position as an elementary school teacher, and his above-average education, made Guerrino a quite exceptional case. At the same time, his status as an infantry soldier serving in the 2nd Landesschützen Regiment makes him an ordinary case. As a consequence, his *entrée en guerre* has to be seen as an uncommon response to a common experience – one of being separated from the family and sent to fight to the Eastern Front.

6 The analysis of the multiple war writings of Guerrino Botteri will allow us not only to overcome the different forms of self-censorship associated with various kinds of writing, but also to cast a light on how self-censorship was practised. Indeed, the multiple war writings of Guerrino Botteri are nothing but different narratives of the same war experience, each of which reflects some aspects but not others. A comparative analysis of these writings therefore reveals what soldiers would and would not tell each interlocutor. Most interestingly, this analysis also



displays the different functions and purposes of each source. Why would a soldier put pen to paper and write to his wife, or to his mother, or to his sisters, or to a brother-in-law, or even to himself, as in the case of a personal diary?

7 Guerrino Botteri's war diary consists of one square notebook of 65 pages measuring 14.5 x 9 cm. It starts on 2 October 1914, when Guerrino arrived in Galicia; it ends on 18 October 1914, when Guerrino was wounded on the battlefield. It contains 15 daily notes, five of which are accompanied by a drawing.¹⁰ Despite the fact that it has daily entries, it seems to have been written in the days that immediately followed Guerrino's wounding,¹¹ for after becoming wounded he was hospitalised in Przemyśl, then transferred to Kraków (26-28 October) and later to Innsbruck (31 October-10 November), where he left to return home on leave. The diary was presumably composed during that period. For the sake of brevity, I will continue to refer to it as a diary. However, "daily memoirs," or something similar, may be a better definition. When his leave ended, at the end of November, Guerrino left the diary at home, and his wife Selma asked her brother to type it up so that Guerrino's mother could read it.¹² The diary is now preserved in the archives of the Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino (Trento), together with Guerrino's correspondence. In 1998, the diary and the letters to Guerrino's brother-in-law, Valerio Ongari, were published in the eighth volume of *Scritture di guerra (War Writings)*, a series of edited primary sources issued by the Museo storico in Trento and the Museo storico italiano della guerra in Rovereto between 1994 and 2002.¹³

8 Let us start with the classic issue of war enthusiasm.¹⁴ Guerrino addresses it in the very first entry of his diary, commenting on his fellow soldiers' reaction to their arrival in Galicia. Guerrino and his comrades came from a five daylong train trip, at the end of which they came across troops coming back from the front – the "baptized" ones, as Guerrino put it, that is, those who had already experienced the "Galician fire, hunger, cold, and mud." Guerrino put his own and his fellow soldiers' reaction to this encounter thusly:

The enthusiasm of the most agitated ones has passed: there is indolence on the faces of the people who are looking at us, if not fatalism: we need to find the strength inside, not outside us...¹⁵

9 According to Guerrino's war diary, there was some enthusiasm among the soldiers going to the front, although it was limited to the "most agitated ones." However, this enthusiasm plummeted as soon as Guerrino and his comrades reached the front. Guerrino's description of the soldiers' reaction upon their arrival in Galicia in the first days of October 1914 corresponds to Federico

10 Mazzini's analysis of other soldiers' reaction to mobilization,¹⁶ although Guerrino seems to refer to all the soldiers of the Regiment, not only to the Italian-speaking ones from Trentino, as in the case of Federico Mazzini. In both cases, soldiers' emotional response is one made up of resignation ("indolence," as Guerrino put it), if not fatalism. Commenting on this critical situation, Guerrino added: "we need to find the strength inside, not outside us..." What did he mean? He was referring to religion as a means of enduring the situation. In his diary entry on 9 October, after describing a day-long march through mud, Guerrino would write:

I thank God I have faith in Him: the world is too dark in such days! He gave me the strength to carry on in silence. Thanks to Him!¹⁷

11 The first part of the diary relates Guerrino and his comrades' march towards the battlefield (2-13 October 1914). From the very beginning of his account of the march, Guerrino vents his sarcasm on German-speaking military officers. For him, they were responsible for the irrational conduct of the war: why, for example, had they given the order to march back and forth for about three hours?¹⁸ Resentment towards German-speaking military officers seemed to be another common response, shared by almost all the Italian-speaking soldiers from Trentino.¹⁹ However, they were not the only ones who experienced this feeling. For example, ordinary German soldiers tended to direct their hatred against their officers, too.²⁰ In turn, German-speaking officers seemed to reciprocate the same feelings Italian-speaking soldiers had towards them.²¹

2 Guerrino and his fellow soldiers' march towards the battlefield was marked by food-, water-



and sleep-deprivation. But even more exhausting was the monotony of the landscape, according to Guerrino's diary:

[It is] Always the same valleys, exhausting in their almost perfect similarity; [it is] always the same mud, always the same huts, always the same people!²²

13 Guerrino's perception of the landscape was especially marked by mud:

[It is] all mud, mud, mud! Mud in the water, in the air, in streets, in lawns, in fields, everywhere. It also seems that people are made of mud [...].²³

14 All this, led Guerrino to desperation:

9 October. Infamous day! I have never been so close to desperation: I have never heard my companions and fellow soldiers invoking death to free them from such an atrocious torture before.²⁴

15 But all this did not lead him only to desperation. It also provoked some lucid insights into modern warfare:

We are cannon fodder, used to fill up the decimated Companies returning from the front line [literally: the old active Companies reduced to skin and bones – SL]. The deprivations, the offences, the harshness of military life make us mechanically apathetic: death does not scare us, the lack of food scares us!²⁵

16 In this context, writing was declared to be “useless,” as Guerrino put it in his diary entry of 4 October 1914:

Writing is useless! Only the person who has experienced the silent desperation of a mass of hungry men led through mud roads “so that the firm foot ever was the lower”²⁶ – only that person can imagine that desperation. The others cannot do that through written words.²⁷

17 This declaration notwithstanding, Guerrino kept writing and trying to communicate his and his fellow soldiers' war experience. Writing was extremely helpful, if not vital: Guerrino kept doing it even though he felt it was worthless. Drawing on feelings such as those expressed by Guerrino's diary, many critics and historians have concluded that the war was an incommunicable experience.²⁸ There is no doubt that the feeling of being unable to communicate the war was widespread among soldiers of all armies. This resulted from the unprecedented character of the war, in the face of which language turned out to be no longer appropriate, especially the traditional language of war.²⁹ But instead of resigning themselves to silence, the majority of soldiers tried to stretch their language, not only to create new words, but also to transform their traditional system of communication.³⁰ As a consequence, they became not “poorer in communicable experience”, as argued by Walter Benjamin in a famous passage of his *The Storyteller* (1936),³¹ but richer.

18 At least in the case of Guerrino, when ordinary language was not enough to describe the terrible reality of the war, literature helped the writer express his feelings. This is the case, as we have seen, of the description of “the silent desperation of a mass of hungry men led through mud roads so that *my firm foot always was the one below*,” in which Dante's quotation from *Inferno*, I, 30 served not only to further describe Guerrino and his fellow soldiers' march, but also and especially to suggest the kind of experience they were going through: hell on earth. Literature was part of Guerrino's everyday experience, as further demonstrated by his diary entry of 10 October:

After a night, like the last one, the march of 10 October reminds me constantly of the “nightly march” so well described by De Amicis in his “Vita militare” (Military Life).³²

19 Guerrino referred to a short story entitled *Una marcia notturna*, which is contained in the book *La vita militare. Bozzetti (Military Life. Sketches)* (Treves: Milano, 1906).

20 The second part of the diary tells of Guerrino's experience of the fighting (14-18 October 1914). His baptism by fire occurred on 14 October:

The trench ends: I am out in the open! The heart is quiet, I am not upset, nor am I scared.



I am confused and amazed: I am laughing! I take the rifle... and I rush off towards the village, in a similar way to when you run from one house gutter to another during a thunderstorm.³³

- 21 Guerrino's first emotional response to the fighting is laughter. It is hard to say whether he burst out laughing in order to show himself and his comrades that he was not scared, or simply in order to neutralize fear. Whatever its psychological reason, Guerrino's emotional response confused Guerrino himself, who expected to react in a very different way. He was not upset, nor scared – at least not consciously. The quotation above also shows how much ordinary language could be stretched in order to understand and communicate the experience of the war. One of the most effective ways, if not the most effective, to adapt ordinary language to the new context of experience was metaphor. This was indeed the case with the simile "... and I rush off towards the village, in a similar way to when you run from one house gutter to another during a thunderstorm," which is built on a metaphorical rain of bullets. In a well-known passage of *The Dehumanization of Art* (1925), José Ortega y Gasset wrote:

The metaphor is perhaps one of man's most fruitful potentialities. Its efficacy verges on magic, and it seems a tool for creation which God forgot inside one of His creatures when He made him.³⁴

- 22 Ortega y Gasset was certainly right. There is something magic in understanding and communicating the unprecedented experience of modern warfare in terms of that of a thunderstorm.
- 23 Sarcasm was another useful tool for coping with the horrible reality of the war.³⁵ Guerrino uses it to describe himself and his fellow soldiers building their first trenches:

We take a couple of minutes to catch our breath, then we are ordered to entrench, 'eingraben'. No sooner said than done. We are near a church, on the edge of sparse woods covering no more than a hectare – the edge oriented towards the East. We drop to the ground and start digging: it is 4 o'clock in the afternoon. The soil is light and the trench grows deeper before our eyes. Instead of stones, we find... macabre discovery! Skulls, bones of dead people. We look more carefully: we are in a graveyard. 'Dig cheerfully', I say to my fellow soldiers, 'if we die here, at least we will be buried in a holy place!'³⁶

- 24 The most (literally) "horrible" experience recorded by Guerrino in his diary was probably that of burying two of his fellow soldiers, whose bodies had been disfigured by the explosion of a grenade.³⁷ Guerrino's reaction to this experience was to pray: "I prayed, I prayed at length." But Guerrino did not pray for his life, which he had already "sacrificed." He prayed for himself to have the strength to endure all the horrors of the war, and for his loved ones to adapt to the loss of their dear Guerrino, to whom it seemed "impossible to get out from that hell alive."³⁸

Guerrino Botteri's' entrée en guerre as Reflected in his Letters to his Brother-in-Law

- 25 This is how Guerrino's *entrée en guerre* is reflected in his war diary. It is reflected in a similar manner in his letters to his brother-in-law Valerio, clearly evidenced through the comparison of a letter sent by Guerrino to Valerio on 2 November 1914 with Guerrino's diary entry of 7 October 1914. Here are two excerpts (in Italian, otherwise the comparison would be impossible). The first is taken from Guerrino's diary entry of 7 October 1914, the second from the letter sent by Guerrino to Valerio on 2 November 1914. In the latter, the words that differ from the diary have been put in italics:

Ci si ferma prima d'uscire dalla città, il nostro Battaglione un "Marsh-Battaillon", viene diviso. Noi siamo carne che deve rimpolpare le scheletriche vecchie compagnie attive, e si scindono gli amici, i colleghi per appiccicare carne dove manca. Sono attaccato alla V Compagnia di campo. Vi trovo pochi amici fra i connazionali; mi restano alcuni vecchi



compagni. Il cuore sanguina e sembra s'indurisce. Le privazioni, le offese, la rudezza della vita di campo rende meccanicamente apatici: la morte non fa paura, fa paura l'apparente dimenticanza nel darci del cibo!³⁹

[...] *A Brzozow ci dividono*: noi *che siamo giunti ora* siamo carne che deve rimpolpare le scheletrite vecchie compagnie attive, e si scindono gli amici, i colleghi per appiccicare carne dove manca. Sono attaccato alla V Compagnia [*di campo* has been deleted from the text –SL]. Vi trovo pochi amici fra i connazionali; mi restano alcuni vecchi compagni. Il cuore sanguina e sembra s'indurisce. Le privazioni, le offese, la rudezza della vita di campo rende meccanicamente apatici: la morte non fa paura, fa paura l'apparente dimenticanza nel darci del cibo.⁴⁰

- 26 The last section of Guerrino's letter to his brother-in-law Valerio is taken directly from his daily memoirs. Their correspondence therefore does not seem to be subjected to any kind of self-censorship. This is probably also due to the fact that, when Guerrino wrote his letter to Valerio, he was no longer in danger. He no longer needed to reassure his interlocutor by hiding the reality of the war from him. The comparison between Guerrino's war diary and letters to his brother-in-law Valerio tells us something about the diary as well. Like any other writing of the self, its main purpose lies in self-communication, as a means by which the author explores their own feelings, thoughts and actions, and, if possible, finds some coherence among them. In the case of Guerrino's personal diary, this search for coherence produces one main result: religion.⁴¹ As we have seen, for Guerrino religion was the only effective means of enduring the war – one that he did not believe in, but he was morally obligated to fight, both for his sense of duty and his religion. This notwithstanding, Guerrino's daily memoirs were not only a matter of self-communication, but also and especially one of mutual communication, as demonstrated by the fact that Guerrino used them as a source for the letters to his brother-in-law. For Guerrino, the need to communicate his war experience was as important as the need to understand it.

Guerrino Botteri's' entrée en guerre as Reflected in his Letters to his Wife

- 27 On 1 November 1914, the day before he wrote to his brother-in-law Valerio, Guerrino had written to his wife Selma. Comparing the two letters allows us to better understand unifying themes and images in Botteri's experience of war; in this case, the image of guns that have been silenced. As he wrote to his wife Selma:

Selma mia, Pensando a te, ora, che il rombo del cannone, il sibilo delle granate, il fischio sibilante come serpente velenoso delle palle è passato, mi sembra di pensare a un paradiso soave, quieto, tranquillo, quasi immeritato; e cuore e animo mio mi si riempiono di una gioia così intimamente delicata e commovente che mi fa veramente piangere di commozione. E quelle lagrime che tacite e dolci mi scendon lente per le guancie sento che inaffiano e fanno fiorire il fiore delicato di un amore infinito.⁴²

My Selma, Now that the rumble of the cannon, the whistle of the grenades, and the poisonous, serpent-like hissing of the bullets have passed, thinking about you means thinking about a pleasant, quiet, calm, almost undeserved heaven; and my heart and soul are filled with joy, one so intimately delicate and moving that it makes me cry. And these tacit, sweet tears slowly rolling down my cheeks water the delicate flower of an infinite love and make it blossom.

- 28 The text of the letter to his brother-in-law Valerio reads:

Valerio carissimo, [new line] Ora che sul mio capo non v'è più l'aria satura di proiettili di ogni specie, continuo la mia relazione.⁴³
Dearest Valerio, Now that the air over my head is not full of any kind of projectile anymore, I can resume my report.



- 29 Despite the fact that they are very different in style, the letter to Selma being more poetic than the one to Valerio, the two texts are built on the same image: weapons that have fallen silent. But the opening image is all the two letters have in common; they then take different

paths. As we have seen, in his letter to his brother-in-law, Guerrino provides an accurate report of his and his fellow soldiers' march towards the battlefield, a report which is completely neglected in his letter to his wife Selma. Where does this difference come from? The easiest answer would be from self-censorship, in order to hide the terrible reality of the war from Selma. But here the simplest explanation is not the right one; indeed, there are at least three main reasons for rejecting it. First, only a few days after having written to his wife, Guerrino returned home and left his daily memoirs with her. Obviously, he could have changed his mind about letting Selma know about his war experience, but it is unlikely. Second, Valerio had the habit of showing the letters he received from Guerrino to his sister Selma, a behaviour of which Guerrino was well aware. Third, and most importantly, Guerrino had another reason not to write about his and his fellow soldiers' march towards the battlefield: love, which is not only the main subject of the letter sent by Guerrino to Selma on 1 November, but of their whole correspondence.

30 Guerrino's 1 November letter reveals much about his understanding of love, both for Selma and for God. The former is depicted as "infinite, white, delicate"

31 the latter as "deep, arcane, immense."⁴⁴ Then, Guerrino focuses on the merit of suffering, which puts man in contact with Christ.⁴⁵ However, suffering is not endless, and Guerrino thanks God for that.⁴⁶ From Selma to God, and from God to Selma: this is the trajectory of the letter, which goes on expressing Guerrino's happiness for the fact that he will soon see Selma again.⁴⁷

32 The same trajectory characterizes the entire corpus of Guerrino's letters to Selma. Love is so dominant that, when Guerrino is forced to write about something else, he apologizes. This is the case of the letter sent on 16 August 1914 from Bolzano. The bulk of the letter concerns the duration of the war. Guerrino tells Selma not to delude herself into thinking that the war will be over soon; for him, the war is likely to last "quite a long time," perhaps three or four months.⁴⁸ Then, Guerrino realizes that he has forgotten to express his love to Selma, and writes:

Selma, I wrote about a lot of issues that might be interesting, but I did not leave enough room for love.⁴⁹

33 For Guerrino, expressing his twofold love for Selma and God was as hard as expressing his war experience. Words were not enough:

I am angry with words, with the pencil, with the alphabet, because they don't want to give me stronger words to shout out all my love for you.⁵⁰

34 But precisely as in the case of expressing his war experience, Guerrino did not stop trying to express his love.

35 The fact that the correspondence between Selma and Guerrino can be classified as love letters does not mean that it cannot also be classified as war correspondence. This is true in a dual sense. First, the war caused the physical separation between the husband and the wife, which in turn generated their correspondence. It is not by chance that the correspondence started before the war, in July, when Guerrino was away from home: "This is the first time that I write to you as a wife," Selma wrote to Guerrino on 7 July, "because this is the first day that I am away from you."⁵¹ Even one day of separation needed to be compensated by correspondence.

36 Second, the war service implied not only physical separation, but also the risk of dying at the front. This is why Selma and Guerrino experienced the moment of their separation as one of the most solemn in their life, along with their marriage.⁵² In this context, their correspondence has a performative dimension, in that they remind each other of the vow they made before separating: "Fiat Voluntas Tua! [Thy will be done!]" These are the profound and meaningful words that we murmured forcefully yesterday evening," Selma wrote to Guerrino on 1 August.⁵³ They keep repeating to each other the same words, "Thy will be done," throughout the entire correspondence, as a means to remind each other of the merit of suffering, and to better endure the separation. However, religion was not always capable of making sense of the war and helping Selma and Guerrino endure it. For example, faced with the risk of her husband



leaving for the front again, Selma broke down and wrote, in December 1914:

You know that if you leave again [and go to the front], I will no longer endure it, don't you?
Nor will I mind dying with my child [Selma and Guerrino are expecting their first child].
Maybe I am overexcited tonight, but I feel it will be so.⁵⁴

37 As soon as he had received this letter, Guerrino answered:

Selma, Selma, why do you write me such thoughts? Why do you think them? Why do you feel them? Why do you not push them away more strongly than you would push away a grave sin?⁵⁵

38 As we have seen, Guerrino's letters to his wife Selma served a number of purposes: communicating his love, reinforcing his and his wife's faith, and providing psychological support to his wife. In addition to these purposes, Guerrino's letters to his wife Selma were also intended to reassure her that his life was not in danger. For instance, on 28 August 1914, he wrote:

What we do here is a military secret, but it is not forbidden to say that, as long as we stay here, there is no danger at all for us [...]⁵⁶

39 It is worth noting that Guerrino's letters were based on truth. He wouldn't lie to his wife Selma to reassure her, for it would have meant betraying her. Their romantic relationship was indeed based on openness. Aware that Guerrino could lie to her not only about the danger he could be in, but also about his feelings, in her very first letter Selma asked him: "Write everything to me, even if you suffer."⁵⁷ On 8 September 1914, Guerrino made the same request to Selma: "Keep telling me how you are, my Selma, and if you are sad; tell me everything, even if it would hurt me."⁵⁸ Selma and Guerrino kept their promise. On 1 October, he even shared his fear of being sent to Kraków, where the "great battle" between the Austro-Hungarian Army and the Russian Army was taking place, as Guerrino himself had told Selma on 8 September.⁵⁹ Despite the fact that he still did not know where he was headed,⁶⁰ on 1 October he wrote:

Mia carissima, [new line] Sono ancora in viaggio: mi trovo nella valle del Waag, fra monti che confinano l'Ungheria, la Galizia e la Slesia. [new line] Quale destinazione abbiamo non si sa ancora. Sembra andiamo a Cracovia. Io sono contento pensando che così la nostra sorte potrà decidersi più presto. Non addolorarti, faresti torto a Dio. Saluta tutti. [new line] Ti bacio lungamente. [new line] Tuo Guerrino.⁶¹
My dearest, I am still travelling: I am in the valley of the Haag river, between mountains that border Hungary, Galicia and Silesia. Our destination is still unknown. It seems that we are going to Kraków. I am happy because our destiny will be decided sooner that way. Don't be sad. Say hello to everyone for me. I kiss you slowly. Your Guerrino.

40 The main purpose of Guerrino's letters to his mother and sisters was to reassure them. Generally, Guerrino reassured them through Selma, but, when he was wounded, he sent them a postcard to inform them he was in good health – and spirits, judging from his words:

I am fine, and I am looking forward to seeing you again. In the meantime I will get a picture taken of me with [a] beard, I look like a savage! [...]⁶²

Conclusion

41 The multiple war compositions of Guerrino Botteri remind us that writing while at war could correspond to an extensive range of meta and mutual communication activities. In the case of Guerrino, these included writing daily memoirs and corresponding with his wife, his brother-in-law, his mother, and his sisters. Considering this, it has to be said that the habit of showing one's correspondence to someone else blurred the lines between the different single correspondences. This was true in the case of Selma, who would share some of Guerrino's letters with her brother and others with her mother-in-law. This notwithstanding, each correspondence served its own purposes. For Guerrino, writing to his wife Selma meant communicating his love, reinforcing his and his wife's faith, providing psychological support to



his wife and, last but not least, reassuring her that his life was not in danger. The main purpose of Guerrino's letters to his mother and sisters was to reassure them as well, while that of his letters to his brother-in-law Valerio was to share his war experience. Sharing his war experience was also one of the two main purposes of Guerrino's daily memoirs, along with explaining his war experience to himself.

42 This is a point that deserves to be stressed. Indeed, contrary to what is generally believed, the narratives produced by soldiers are as diverse as the recipients to whom they were addressed not because—or, at least, not primarily because—of self-censorship, but because of the different purposes associated with each interlocutor. This was certainly true of Guerrino's war writings. In addition to this, self-censorship could be partially neutralized by two facts, as suggested by the correspondence between Selma and Guerrino. The first is that the recipient knew that the author of the letter could lie in order to reassure them, and, consequently, they pushed their interlocutor to be honest. The second is that lying could be perceived as unacceptable, especially in a case such as a marriage built on truth and openness, according to the norms of Western romantic love.⁶³

43 Precisely as in the case of writing about love, writing about the war was as hard as it was vital. How did Guerrino Botteri manage to overcome the crisis of language engendered by the unprecedented character of the war? Essentially, in two ways. First, he adapted his ordinary language to the new necessities of the war. To this end, metaphor and simile turned out to be the most effective means to express the novel reality of the war in the terms of the old reality of pre-war life. Second, he relied on extraordinary language, expressed in literature, whose function was not to make his writing more poetic, but to help him understand and communicate his war experience.

Notes

1 John Horne, « Entre expérience et mémoire. Les soldats français de la Grande Guerre », in *Annales. Histoire, Sciences sociales*, t. 60, 2005, p. 903-919.

2 All of Guerrino Botteri's war writings are preserved in the Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino (Trento), *Archivio della scrittura popolare*. A special thank you goes to Quinto Antonelli, the managing archivist of the *Archivio*, for his generous help.

3 By the end of the war, they reached approximately 60.000 in number. See Quinto Antonelli, *I dimenticati della Grande Guerra. La memoria dei combattenti trentini (1914-1920)*, Trento, Il Margine, 2008; and Federico Mazzini, "Cose de laltro mondo," *Una cultura di guerra attraverso la scrittura popolare trentina, 1914-1918*, Pisa, ETS, 2013.

4 Cf. Jacques Revel, "Microanalisi e costruzione del sociale," trans. Marco Battistoni, in *Giochi di scala. La microstoria alla prova dell'esperienza*, Jacques Revel (ed.), Roma, Viella, 2006 [1996], p. 19-44. See also *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*, Revised and Augmented Edition, Hans Renders, Binne de Haan (eds.), With a Foreword by Nigel Hamilton Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2014.

5 Antonelli, *I dimenticati della Grande Guerra...*, p. 11-13; Mazzini, "Cose de laltro mondo"..., p. 21-24.

6 In 1914, the illiteracy rate in Italy was about 27%, according to official sources. These sources likely underestimate the real illiteracy rate, however, because they are based on the number of people who were not able to sign their certificate of marriage – a criterion that is clearly misleading, considering that the fact that being able to sign a document does not mean being able to effectively read and write. Cf. Mazzini, "VI. Rappresentazioni e realtà nell'esperienza dei soldati italiani", in *la Guerra italo-austriaca (1915-1918)*, Nicola Labanca, Oswald Überegger (eds.), Bologna, Il Mulino, 2015, p. 165-168.

7 The archives of the Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino (Trento) preserve more than 700 popular writings (diaries, correspondences, memoirs, autobiographies, but also song books, books of family affairs, and other kinds of writings), which have been gathered in the *Archivio della scrittura popolare*. Every year about 30 new popular writings are deposited in the *Archivio*, in original or in copy. The archives of the Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra (Rovereto) preserve about 160 popular writings.

8 Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto I, line 30, Mandelbaum translation.

9 The quotation is contained in Guerrino's war diary: cf. infra, footnote 26.

10 The drawing accompanying the diary entry of 2 October represents a small farm wagon; that of 3 October a wooden hut with a straw roof; those of 6 October a Galician Jew and a stone water well; that of the 16 October a wooden bell tower.

11 This is suggested by some changes in tense from present to past, and other textual evidence. Cf. also



Rosalba Dondeynaz, *Selma e Guerrino. Un epistolario amoroso*, Genova, Marietti, 1992, p. 149, footnote 1.

12 “Ho riletto il Tuo ‘notes’ ma mi fa male, male acuto [...]. Ora sta leggendolo Valerio e lo copia a macchina perché lo possa legger meglio tua mamma:” Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino (Trento), *Archivio della scrittura popolare, Botteri Guerrino e Selma* (1). Letter from Selma to Guerrino. The letter was sent from Spiazzo on 26 December 1914.

13 *Guerrino Botteri*, in *Scritture di guerra*, 8 (Museo storico in Trento and Museo storico italiano della guerra, Trento-Rovereto, 1998), p. 11-49. The volume also contains the war writings of four other authors: Vigilio Caola, Giovanni Lorenzetti, Valentino Maestranzi, Giuseppe Scarazzini.

14 On war enthusiasm in Europe, and its limits: see Jean-Jacques Becker, *1914: Comment les Français sont entrés dans la guerre*, Paris, Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1977; Eric John Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat & Identity in World War I*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2009 [1979]; Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000; Adrian Gregory, “British war enthusiasm in 1914: a reassessment,” in *Evidence, History and the Great War: Historians and the Impact of 1914-1918*, Gail Braybon (ed.), New York – Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2003, p. 67-85, and *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008; Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

15 “L’entusiasmo de’ più scalmanati è passato: sulle faccie di coloro che ci guardano si legge l’indolenza, quasi l’abbandono ad un fatalismo cieco: la forza per noi si deve cercarla dentro, non fuori di noi...”: *Guerrino Botteri*, in *Scritture di guerra*, 15. Diary entry of 2 October 1914.

16 Mazzini, “Cose de laltro mondo”..., p. 100-108.

17 “Guai se non ci fosse il pensiero e la fede in un Dio in giornate simili: il mondo è troppo nero! In Lui trovai ancora forza di sopportare tacendo. Grazie a Lui!”: *Guerrino Botteri*, in *Scritture di guerra*, 25. Diary entry of 9 October 1914.

18 *Ibid.*, 15. Diary entry of 2 October 1914: “Tre ore per rifare una strada già percorsa sulla ferrovia; mentre ci batte nel capo la domanda: Perché condurci sì avanti, per poi rifare a piedi la medesima via? Controsensi di cui alla bassa turba soldatesca sfugge il motivo che... deve certamente essere superiore!”.

19 Antonelli, *I dimenticati della Grande Guerra...*; Mazzini, “Cose de laltro mondo”...

20 *German Soldiers in the Great War: Letters and Eyewitness Accounts*, Bernd Ulrich, Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), trans. Christine Brocks, Barnsley, Pen and Sword, 2010.

21 “Soffia il vento freddo, diacciato, della mezzanotte sulle fronti madide di sudore freddo per la stanchezza e per la fame, e lassù, sulla cima, dove più crudele il vento cerca la carne e l’acqua sferza il viso, lassù ci si ferma un’ora per mettere le squadre in ordine. – Chi non è a posto è un ‘porco’ ‘un cane merdoso’ un ‘vigliacco’ un ‘dannato’; it[aliano] [...]” Diary entry of 8 October 1914.

22 “4. Ottobre. Tre ore di sonno: son le 5 – via! Sempre le stesse valli, esasperanti nella loro somiglianza quasi identica; sempre lo stesso fango: le stesse capanne, la stessa gente! Una cosa manca: il cibo. Si digiuna e si va! Si passa a guado un fiumicello, si distruggono le bacche del pruno selvatico; e si continua! Via per prati interminabili, per campi eterni, sul fango viscido, senza cibo, senza acqua.” Diary entry of 4 October 1914.

23 “Tutto fango, fango, fango! Fango nell’acqua, nell’aria, nelle vie, nei prati, nei campi, dappertutto. [new line] Sembra anche che la gente sia di fango [...]” Diary entry of 3 October 1914. British soldiers’ perception of the landscape of the Western Front was dominated by mud, as well: I. Bel-Et, *Conscripts. Forgotten Men of the Great War*, Stroud, Kindle Edition, 2009 [1999], especially Chapter 4, “Mud and War.”

24 “9. Ottobre. Giornata infame! Mai come in questo giorno sono stato sì presso a quello stato d’animo che si chiama disperazione: mai ho sentito compagni e commilitoni invocare, come oggi, la morte a liberarli da una tortura troppo atroce”. Diary entry of 9 October 1914.

25 “Noi siamo carne che deve rimpolpare le scheletrite vecchie compagnie attive, e si scindono gli amici, i colleghi per appiccicare carne dove manca. [...] Le privazioni, le offese, la rudezza della vita di campo rende meccanicamente apatici: la morte non fa paura, fa paura l’apparente dimenticanza nel darci del cibo!” Diary entry of 7 October 1914.

26 Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto I, line 30, Mandelbaum translation.

27 “È inutile lo scrivere! Chi non ha provato la disperazione muta di una massa di uomini affamati, condotti [...] per vie di fango dove il ‘piè fermo è sempre il più basso’ [...], non può immaginarla attraverso le parole scritte.” Diary entry of 4 October 1914.

28 Paolo Jedlowski, “Memoria, mutamento sociale, modernità”, in *La memoria contesa. Studi sulla comunicazione sociale del passato*, Anna Lisa Tota (ed.), Milan, Franco Angeli, 2001, 40-67. For a criticism of Jedlowski’s interpretation, see Mazzini, “Cose de laltro mondo”..., p. 57-62.



29 *The pre-1914 period: imagined wars, future wars*, Heather Jones, Arndt Weinrich (eds.), special issue of *Francia: Forschungen zur westeuropäischen Geschichte*, 40, p. 305-464.

30 On languages and the First World War, see *Languages and the First World War: Representation and*

Memory, Christophe Declercq, Julian Walker (eds.), Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016; *Languages and the First World War: Communicating in a Transnational War*, Christophe Declercq, Julian Walker (eds.), Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

31 “With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath those clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.” Quoted by Martin Jay, “Walter Benjamin, remembrance and the First World War,” in: Walter Benjamin, *Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, II, *Modernity*, Peter Osborne (ed.), London – New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 232.

32 “Dopo una notte, come la passata, la marcia del 10 ottobre mi richiama continuamente alla memoria la ‘marcia notturna’ così ben descritta dal De Amicis nella sua ‘Vita militare’. Si va avanti ed ad ogni halt, anche di mezzo minuto si sogna in piedi: si fa dello schioppo puntello allo zaino e ci si addormenta: adagio, senza saperlo, finché un brusco movimento, uno spalancar d’occhi; ed un annaspar di mani dicono che il sonno è nemico dell’equilibrio, e come l’uomo non ha la virtù del cavallo, quella virtù che gli permette di dormire in piedi.” Diary entry of 10 October 1914.

33 “La fossa finisce: allo scoperto! Il cuore tace, il sangue non si sconvolge, non sente la paura: mi frastorna la meraviglia: rido! Prendo il fucile e... via di corsa verso il paese: una corsa simile a quella che si fa da una all’altra gronda delle case, quando il temporale infuria.” Diary entry of 14 October 1914.

34 Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1968 [1925], p. 33. Quoted in Robert Rogers, *Metaphor: A Psychoanalytic View*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London, University of California Press, 1978, p. 6.

35 On the Great War as a “great tragic satire” see the classic book by Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, with a new introduction by Jay Winter, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013 [1975].

36 “Si prende fiato un paio di minuti e poi ci si comanda ‘eingraben’ ‘trincerarsi’. [new line] Detto fatto. Presso la chiesa in un bosco rado, che può occupare un ettaro al più, sul margine che guarda ad est, ci si getta a terra: sono le 4 del pomeriggio, e si scava. – [new line] La terra è leggera e la fossa cresce sotto gli occhi. Non troviamo un sasso! troviamo invece... macabra scoperta, crani, ossa di morti. Guardiamo meglio: siamo in un cimitero. Scavate allegramente, dico io, almeno se morremo qui, saremo sepolti in un luogo sacro!” Diary entry of 14 October 1914.

37 “Vado io. Orribile. Allo Springhetti manca tutta la testa sopra alla mascella inferiore: ha la divisa spruzzata di sangue e di cervella: per capo ha un piccolo calice formato dal cavo inferiore della bocca; pieno di sangue raggrumato: l’altro ha il ventre letteralmente squarciato: ambi sono morti senza un grido, senza un lamento.” Diary entry of 15 October 1914.

38 “Pregai, pregai a lungo; non per la mia vita; ormai ne avevo fatto il sacrificio: pregai si desse forza a me di sopportare con rassegnazione costante tutti gli orrori di quella vita; pregai ancora più vivamente, colle lagrime, che si desse a’ miei cari, la forza di adattarsi con vigore cristiano alla mia perdita! mi sembrava impossibile uscir vivo da quell’inferno.” Diary entry of 15 October 1914.

39 For a partial English translation of this excerpt, cf supra, footnote 24.

40 *Guerrino Botteri*, in *Scritture di guerra*, p. 47-49. The letter was sent from Innsbruck.

41 See also Guerrino’s diary entry of 15 October 1914, where he recalls the time when he had rejected his religious upbringing: “Vi fu un tempo che anch’io, alla pari di molti giovani e di molti uomini ‘emancipati’ non per corruzione di vizi, né per odio di casta o sete di libertinaggio, ma per un processo demolitore, egoisticamente accarezzato con una specie di acre superbia dentro di me, vi fu un tempo, ripeto, che anch’io, vidi nella religione una pazzia collettiva, quasi una superstizione indegna di uomini del XX secolo, un’esaltazione morbosa e nevristenica, madre di debolezza; di corruzione, morale e materiale. Vi fu in me una reazione salutare a tale processo di rovina, che aveva infranto tanti idoli dell’infanzia, che aveva seminato – come bufera – di rottami l’anima mia. E a questo periodo di reazione io devo la mia forte, incrollabile credenza in Dio.” Diary entry of 15 October 1914. For a global history of the First World War through the lens of religion: Xavier Boniface, *Histoire religieuse de la Grande Guerre*, Paris, Fayard, 2014. On Catholicism in Austria-Hungary (and Germany) during the Great War: Patrick Houlihan, *Catholicism and the Great War. Religion and Everyday Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1922*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

42 Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino (Trento), *Archivio della scrittura popolare, Botteri Guerrino e Selma* (1). The letter was sent from Innsbruck.

43 *Guerrino Botteri*, in *Scritture di guerra*, p. 47.

44 “Amore infinito, bianco, delicato, per te, che tante gioie m’hai procurato, amore profondo, arcano, immenso per Iddio che mai m’abbandonò”: Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino (Trento), *Archivio della scrittura popolare, Botteri Guerrino e Selma* (1).

45 “Chi l’ha provato può comprendere perché il dolore sia fonte purissima ed inesauribile di pazienza, di



rassegnazione, di bontà; può comprendere come il Cristo abbia anche umanamente accumulato tanta carità nel Suo Cuore, provato dalla tristezza e dalla morte [...].”, *ibid.*

46 “Sia ringraziato Dio però che il dolore non è eterno, che dopo la bufera si rompe il cielo procelloso e lascia una via al raggio più bello del sole: che ritempra gli animi a nuova forza per nuove battaglie”, *ibid.*

47 “Selma, fra alcuni giorni, forse oggi a otto potrò stringerti a me, susurrarti parole di forza e di riconoscenza, ascoltare da te l’espressione dell’amor tuo. Non è divinamente bello tutto ciò?”, *ibid.*

48 “Sarà però, per quanto si può prevedere una questione un po’ lunga: forse 3 o 4 mesi: è meglio prepararsi alla lunghezza del servizio che crearsi delle illusioni sulla sua brevità, e poi vedersi disillusi.”, *ibid.*, Letter from Guerrino to Selma. The letter was sent from Bolzano on 16 August 1914.

49 “Selma, ho scritto di tante questioni, che forse possono interessare, ed ho rubato lo spazio all’amore.”, *ibid.*

50 “Sono arrabbiato colle parole, col lapis, con l’alfabeto perché non mi vogliono dare parole più forti per dirti, per gridarti in faccia tutto l’amor mio.”, *ibid.*, Letter from Guerrino to Selma. The letter was sent from Vermiglio on 5 September 1914.

51 “È la prima volta che ti scrivo come moglie perché è il primo giorno che sono lontana da te”, *ibid.*, Letter from Selma to Guerrino. The letter was sent from Spiazzo on 7 July 1914.

52 “Io sento ch’oggi è giunto un altro momento solenne nella mia vita”: *ibid.*, Letter from Selma to Guerrino. The letter was sent from Strembo on 1 August 1914.

53 “Fiat Voluntas Tua! Ecco le parole, dal significato pieno e profondo, che mormoravamo con forza iersera, quando abbracciati in puro, intimo amore, noi venivamo verso il nido nostro”: *ibid.*

54 “Sai che se tu parti ancora io non mi sforzerò più a nulla? che non m’importerà di morire col mio bimbo? Sono forse esaltata stasera, ma sento che sarebbe così.”: *ibid.*, Letter from Guerrino to Selma. The letter was sent from Bolzano on 14 December 1914 (“sento” and “così” are underlined in the original text).

55 “Selma, Selma, perché scrivermi, perché pensare, sentire simili pensieri? Perché non cacciarli con più ferocia di un grave peccato?": *ibid.*

56 “Ciò che noi facciamo qui è segreto d’ufficio, non è un segreto però il dire che finché restiamo qui non c’è nemmeno il più lontano pericolo [...]”: *ibid.*, Letter from Guerrino to Selma. The letter was sent from Vermiglio on 28 August 1914.

57 “Scrivimi tutto, anche se soffri”: *ibid.*, Letter from Selma to Guerrino. The letter was sent from Strembo on 1 August 1914.

58 “Scrivimi sempre, Selma mia, come stai, scrivimi se hai dispiaceri, scrivi tutto anche se m’avessi da far male”: *ibid.*, Letter from Guerrino to Selma. The letter was sent from Vermiglio on 8 September 1914.

59 “Giungono gli echi della grande battaglia combattuta in Galizia, giungono notizie di feriti [...]”: *ibid.*

60 See also Guerrino’s dairy entry of 5 October 1914: “Sveglia alle 7: partenza alle 2. Viaggio breve: ci si dice andare per il passo di Dukla in Ungheria. Il cuore e la mente ricamano romanzeschi piani di guerra e di pace: di pericoli e di quiete. Dura poco l’illusione. Si passa un ponte e ci si dirige all’est. È Przemysl che ci aspetta”.

61 Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino (Trento), *Archivio della scrittura popolare, Botteri Guerrino e Selma* (1).

62 “Io sto bene, non vedo l’ora di rivedervi: prima mi farò fotografare colla barba che ho, che sembro un selvaggio”: *ibid.*, Letter from Guerrino to his mother and sisters. The letter was sent from Tarnovo on 25 October 1914.

63 This was the case of Selma and Guerrino. On Western romantic love, see R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1991; Victor Karandashev, *Romantic Love in Cultural Contexts*, Basel, Springer, 2016. On the connection between romantic love and nationalism: Alberto Mario Banti, *L’onore della nazione. Identità sessuali e violenza nel nazionalismo europeo dal XVIII secolo alla Grande Guerra*, Torino, Einaudi, 2005.

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