

“Between the Real and the Really Made Up”: Mimetic Strategies in Dan Billany’s Wartime Novel *The Trap*

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Dan Billany (1913-c.1943) was born into a working-class family in the English city of Hull. He left school early but eventually worked his way back into higher education, receiving an honors degree in English from Hull University in 1937 and a teaching certificate in 1938. Although a fairly prolific writer, he remained unpublished until 1940, when his crime novel *The Opera House Murders* was accepted by Faber (and was published the following year in the USA as *It Takes a Thief*). The novel enjoyed considerable critical and popular success, and was followed by *The Magic Door*, a children’s fantasy story based on his classroom techniques for teaching history, published by Nelson in 1943. Billany enlisted in the army, was sent to and captured in North Africa in 1942 and spent the next fifteen months as a prisoner-of-war in Italy. Released upon the collapse of the Italian war effort in September 1943, he disappeared under mysterious circumstances before he could make his way back to the Allied lines. Billany produced the manuscripts of two novels during his time in captivity; he left them with an Italian farmer who posted them to Billany’s parents after the war. The novels were eventually published as *The Cage*—published first but written second, with fellow POW David Dowie (who disappeared with Billany)—and *The Trap*.¹

When *The Trap* was published in 1950, a review in the *Times Literary Supplement* claimed that “As a social document, ...it is profoundly impressive,”² and the critical attention it has received since then has tended to follow this line. Thus the analyses of Ken Worpole, Holger Klein, and Alan Munton all concentrate on the novel’s markedly leftist sociopolitical ethos as a rare voice of dissent and scepticism in the face of official wartime conformism. Or, as in John Ellis’s study of combat conditions in World War Two, *The Sharp End of War*, passages from *The Trap* become source material for giving an “authentic picture” of “what the ordinary infantryman had to endure.”³ This discussion, however, seeks to accom-

plish two alternate goals: one, to reclaim *The Trap* as a work of fiction by reversing the tendency, pointed out by Paul Fussell, of readers of war memoirs to “confound them with ‘documentary’ or ‘history’” rather than attend “to their fictional character” (*Great War* 312); and two, to contribute to an understanding of the nexus between fiction and memoir, a problematic relation that Fussell ponders in similar works from the First World War. His observation, that the “passage of modern writing” from “the low mimetic of the plausible” to “the ironic of the outrageous” tends to place many a First-World-War memoir “on the knife-edge between these two modes” (*Great War* 312), applies equally well to Billany’s work in the Second World War. The protagonist of *The Trap*, Michael Carr, whose history can be identified with the author’s, nevertheless as a fictional figure represents an elaborately constructed device for “othering”; that is, a figure through which the author, consciously and unconsciously, assumes and enacts an identity more in keeping with the dominant discourses of the novel’s moment of production.

The 1990s saw two significant contributions towards the study of Billany’s life and work. One was the donation of the Billany/Dowie manuscripts and related materials to the Imperial War Museum archives;⁴ the other was the appearance of Valerie A. Reeves and Valerie Showan’s biography of Dan Billany based on his letters and other family documents. This biography provides a thorough and sympathetic account of his life and work, including his mysterious disappearance and apparent death following his release from captivity in late 1943. Consequently, the enigma posed by Klein regarding the hero of *The Trap*, “How closely the experiences of ‘Michael Carr’ parallel those of Billany we may never know” (221, n. 52), may now be resolved quite satisfactorily. This proliferation of biographical data reveals that the raw material of the story is Billany’s own life from just after his commission as an infantry officer in England, to his capture during the disastrous Gazala battles in North Africa and his early days as a POW in Italy—roughly mid-1941 to late 1942. But the novel is no straightforward retelling of the events from this period. Billany’s protagonist is a fictional persona, Michael Carr, rather as Siegfried Sassoon invented George Sherston for his trilogy of memoirs, and like Sherston, Carr tells his story in the first person. Munton suggests that the “I” of *The Trap* “undermines the conventional first-person narration by recording events at which he was not or could not have been present” (60), but this is because the interrelationship between Billany the author-source and Carr the narrator-hero is much closer yet even more complex than might once have been imagined. Rather, the novel’s characters and events operate within a quite intricate version of that

“silly if not desperate place between the real and the really made up” that Michael Taussig maintains is “where most of us spend most of our time as epistemically correct, socially created, and occasionally creative beings” (xvii).

Where Munton misses the point (through an obvious lack of data) is that Carr’s omniscience is a symptom of Billany’s superimposition of a fictional plot onto a real-life story. Thus, when Carr relates in close and compassionate detail the history of the Pascoes, the family of his fiancé, Elizabeth—their origins and early lives, their houses, their children living and dead, their pets and their interests—it comes as no great surprise to read in his biography that this is in fact an intimate portrait of his own family background. Elizabeth’s parents are his own mother and father, Elsie and Harry Billany; Bonzo the dog stars as himself; and perhaps most startling, considering the fact that Carr and she are lovers, Elizabeth is modelled on his sister Joan. Carr differs in subject position from Billany in that he is an outsider looking in; and the pivotal narrative device—in more ways than one, as will become obvious—is the relationship with Elizabeth.

If the depiction of the Pascoes straddles both the “real” and the “really made up” ends of the novel’s mimetic continuum, then poised uneasily between both is the character of Michael Carr. Billany, in accepting the King’s commission, had already placed himself between two worlds: one shaped by the socialism of his working-class origins and upbringing in Hull, the other informed by the residual aristocratic values of the British Army officer class. The copy of himself that is Carr is aware of how much he became the very model of a proper British officer: “There was time when I wore baratheas, brown shoes, a Sam Browne, peaked felt cap, and kid gloves, and carried a cane in the manner prescribed by my commanding officer” (*Trap* 15). Billany’s biographers note how seriously he seems to have taken on the role, “doing his best to look the part,” as they say of a portrait taken of him in July 1941, wearing exactly the uniform described by Carr (Reeves and Showan, photograph 8b). Despite this new-found class mobility, Billany had weathered what Stephen Spender famously called the “‘Pink Decade’ of the ‘thirties” with his political beliefs largely intact (qtd. in Hewison 71), and probably enlisted out of the same anti-Fascist fervor that drew many artists and intellectuals into the Spanish Civil War (Reeves and Showan 80). Billany had not experienced the disillusionment, arising out of that earlier conflict, that saw many literary figures withdraw from active left-wing political involvement into a life where “Culture became a more important commitment than politics” (Hewison 7).

The product, therefore, of a prewar brand of unreconstructed radicalism, *The Trap* effectively undermines both facets of the “grand narrative”—to use Lyotard’s

term⁵—that Angus Calder calls *The Myth of the Blitz*: “the sentimentalization of 1940 by Labor apologists” on the one hand, and the Tory “Churchillism” of the propagandists—both official and self-appointed—on the other (*Blitz* xiv). *The Trap* demonstrates that “Boredom, frustration, fear, anger, class class and class again were at least as often to the fore” as heroism and endurance (Calder, Foreword n. p.). Instead, implicit in the novel’s methods is a conviction that in “the little narrative [petit récit] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention” (Lyotard 60). Its method is to present a series of Lyotardian petits récits: small-scale narratives of those for whom the war, as Munton says, “continues by other means the economic and political policies of the 1920s and 1930s, the very policies which had initially defeated them, and multitudes like them” (65)—from ordinary soldiers at the front, to bombed-out civilians in England, to the Egyptian fellaheen scratching out an existence along the Nile. In a bitter and poignant depiction of the lot of these peasants Carr sees as he and his men move to the front, *The Trap* anticipates and augments Calder’s reminder that even “when Britain ‘stood alone’ in 1940, she stood on the shoulders of several hundred million Asians” (*People’s War* 19).

In his pre-emptive strike on the “Blitz” grand narrative—manifested in assertions such as poet Stephen Spender’s about the “kind of social equality” that “for the time being abolished most class frontiers...for people who participated in the war” (interview in *Fitzrovia*)—Billany makes full use of the mimetic function that since ancient times has been recognized as the province of “poets” in the cause of telling general Truths. This involves not only imitating nature, but actually making things up.⁶ The terrible sea trip to Italy undertaken by the British troops after their capture in North Africa is one such occasion. Although in a poor way themselves after months of captivity, the condition of Carr and the other thirty officers awaiting transportation on the Tripoli docks in no way compares to the five hundred “thin, ill and dirty” men who join them (374), many so racked with dysentery that “even on the quayside they had been unable to control their bowels,” and others with “extensive starvation sores on the legs” (375). The resulting voyage in the ship’s hold is ghastly in the extreme, but even here the officers are soon separated from the men: “Conditions in our hold were better” says Carr, “with two buckets for sanitary purposes during the night” and some boards to sleep on (376). In fact, as his biography reveals, for Billany personally there was no languishing for months in squalid North African camps and no horror in a ship’s hold; he was in Italy in reasonable health approximately a month after capture. Nevertheless, the account is not false; Billany had spoken to prisoners who underwent such treatment, and “His accuracy in reporting has been corroborated by

survivors” (Reeves and Showan 109). Indeed, he could have reported the experience as hearsay, but with Carr as both hero and narrator, the ordeal is conveyed more tellingly by having him experience it first-hand.

Another such instance is when, after the capture of his platoon, Carr observes from the German side a futile counterattack launched by his company commander, Captain Burgess, resulting in Burgess’s death almost in front of Carr. In reality, no such incident took place. In a letter to Billany’s sister, Joan, soon after *The Trap*’s publication, Alan Prough of Faber quotes from a letter he received from a Major Huddleston, Billany’s real-life company commander. After acknowledging that he is “Burgess” in the novel, and attesting to “the absolute truth and amazing accuracy of detail of that portion of the book dealing with the period from Billany joining the Battalion in the Desert until his capture,” Huddleston points out that the “only single embellishment of the facts” is the counterattack and its leader’s death, which he is “happy to say, is pure fiction!”⁷ Apart from its obvious value as a perverse and wasteful example of military honor, this fiction is itself a clever counterattack against what Fussell calls the “chickenshit”—the petty adherence to and often vindictive enforcement of form for form’s sake (*Wartime* 83)—of military life that even the mass citizen armies of the twentieth century had to endure.

When Billany was a prewar schoolteacher, he had often adopted unconventional, alternative practices within what he saw as an oppressive education system, including getting his students to call him “Dan” (Reeves and Showan 62). While this was generally tolerated, if not approved of, by his colleagues and superiors at school, it did not go down well when he joined the 4th East Yorks and asked the men of his platoon to do the same. Huddleston was “appalled”: “he reprimanded Dan and made it clear that this unorthodox behavior was not acceptable” (100). Later, on the day before his capture, Billany entered Huddleston’s dug-out “in great distress.” Thoroughly worn out with all the moving and digging, but more because of the responsibilities of leadership under very trying conditions, Billany begged Huddleston to be relieved of command: “I’ve had enough and I want to go home! Sorry, Sir, I’ve failed you and I’ve failed the men. I can’t go on.” Huddleston, recognizing “the symptoms of extreme exhaustion,” made the young man take a swig of gin and sent him back with the whole bottle to his unit and his duties. “It was the last time Major Huddleston saw him” (Reeves and Showan 105).⁸ In that place between the real and the really made up, Billany strikes back by giving Carr a ringside seat at Burgess’s (i.e. Huddleston’s) “death,” and the viewing is by no means as “dispassionate,” nor the attack itself as admirable, as Munton believes (62). For Carr soon notices that “the bullet had entered his face between the nose and the upper lip” (*Trap* 349), so

that in effect Burgess is shot right through the proverbial stiff upper lip! There could hardly be a more pointed rejection of the “old boy” attitude of the British officer class with its Blimpish, laconic stoicism that has implicated it in centuries of military blunders, of which Gazala in 1942 was yet another, at the expense of a great many ordinary soldiers’ lives.⁹

The continued strength of his 1930s-inspired socialist beliefs notwithstanding, for Billany the term “Pink Decade” had more profound, personal resonances: it was the time of acknowledging his homosexuality, and of finding ways to express it. Quite certainly the process was a painful one, forcing him to look deep within himself and leading to a particular kind of disillusion and isolation. Billany’s first attempt to write his life into fiction was the unpublished novel, “A Season Of Calm Weather” (Reeves and Showan 55).¹⁰ It is the story of a young teacher, Phillip, his political associations and his love for a twelve-year-old boy, “a hopeless infatuation, simply and objectively told without any judgement being made” (58). Billany was not so naïve as to be unaware of the extent to which Phillip’s passion (which remains unrequited) is a source of scandal and a danger to those involved, but perhaps he was ingenuous enough to believe that it could be treated with an openness that was ahead of its time and yet, in the context of his immediate literary milieu, already passé. Obviously, as his biographers point out, the “hot” issue of child sexual abuse makes it difficult to gloss over the novel’s central concern (58), but Billany could be forgiven for thinking that he had the support of a far more recent tradition than the classical Greek model. For the poems and memoir-novels of the First World War were replete with what Fussell calls “the theme of beautiful suffering lads, for which the war sanctioned an expression more overt than ever before” (*Great War* 282), and which he claims very much licensed the “British Homoerotic Tradition” (279). Thus Phillip’s first reaction in “A Season Of Calm Weather” to the boy, Dickie, of “a sort of catch of breath...in involuntary homage to the surprise of sudden beauty” (qtd. in Reeves and Showan 55), reads a lot like Sherston’s reaction to Dickie’s namesake Dick Tiltwood in Sassoon’s *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*: “He had the obvious good looks which go with fair hair and firm features, but it was the radiant integrity of his expression which astonished me” (241).¹¹

However, if being commissioned represented an unconscious desire to re-enact the sorts of “‘crushes’ which most of the officers [of the First War, such as Sassoon and Graves] had experienced at public school” (Fussell, *Great War* 272), Billany would find “the chance to dress up in neat officers’ uniforms with Sam Browne belts, the costume of the attractive young in the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald”

and other writers, a disappointment (Fussell, *Wartime* 129). Graves had already discovered that behind “Myself in faultless khaki with highly polished buttons and belt” lurked “an over-grown schoolboy” (150), but while he and his peers could carry over their “public-school/Oxbridge ‘crushes’” into army life (Ferguson 349), Billany would not find the same opportunities for a young working-class homosexual in the Second War. Puzzled by what he calls the “strenuously heteroerotic” nature of writings about love in the Second War (*Wartime* 109), Fussell posits a series of rhetorical questions:

Were the writers of the Second War sexually and socially more self-conscious than those of the First? Were they more sensitive to the risks of shame and ridicule? Had the presumed findings of Freud and Adler and Krafft-Ebing and Stekel so diffused themselves down into popular culture that in the atmosphere of strenuous “democratic” uniformity during the Second War, one was careful now not to appear “abnormal”? (*Great War* 280)

Neither has he any answers as to why “From the Second War there seem to be none of those poems fantasizing loving ‘lads’ that the lonely imagination threw off in Flanders and Picardy” (*Wartime* 109), offering instead the somewhat embarrassed dismissal of “that sort of thing” (i.e. homosexual love) as “so rare as to engender special notice and comment” (109).¹² By the outbreak of the Second War, Billany too had learnt that unabashed representations of “that sort of thing” could be problematical. Inwardly he might aspire to and identify with the anachronistic figure of the First War officer; outwardly he had to (re-)present himself via the “strenuously” heterosexual simulacrum of Michael Carr.

Taussig’s “place between the real and the really made up” is not the prerogative of fiction only, of course. It is the space in which all of humanity exercises what Walter Benjamin calls the “mimetic faculty”: “a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else” (qtd. in Taussig 19) that still exists as “alterity”: “the capacity to Other” (Taussig 19). Speculating on what “such a compulsion to become Other [might] imply for the sense of Self,” Taussig likens the thought-space where this takes place to the theatre, where “slipping into Otherness, trying it on for size” is “more performative and physical” than we often talk about “othering” today (33). The process of mimesis “registers both sameness and difference,” yet it is out of the “habitually

bracing activity” of maintaining “stability from this instability” that “all identity formation is engaged” (129).

Struggling with questions of his own identity, Billany takes his autobiography and turns it into a theatre à la Taussig, “a configuration of very object-prone exercises in differentiated space” (33). The whole novel is a restaging of that part of his life when Billany actually did try on the persona of Carr for size, and the setting for that “othering” is appropriately poised on the cusp of the real and really made up. During officer training in Wales, he began a relationship with Dorothy Warner, and became accepted into her family circle (as Carr is with the Pascoes in *The Trap*). Whether or not it developed into a fully consummated affair is unknown (Reeves and Showan 83), but it represented a considerable effort on Billany’s part to redefine his identity by shifting further along the line running between self and other and formed the basis for Carr’s relationship and eventual marriage to Elizabeth in the novel. Resisting the temptation to take Carr’s name as a kind of Freudian condensation for the self (Carr = car = auto; see Wright 19), it has to be said that the character fits the notion of an overdetermined signifier, “whereby several latent wishes converge on one manifest item” (Wright 19). Or, to give it a more post-structural edge, Carr can be regarded as a site for the complex interplay of the conscious and unconscious that supports the Derridean notion that “Writing at once represses and reveals desire” (Wright 120).

Early in the novel, the narrator, like some epic bard, offers up a prayer not so much for inspiration as “for steadiness” and deliverance “from literary falsenesses” in his quest to “draw Truth” (12). This secular prayer is “not addressed to God...nor to any other Powers of the Air” but “to my Unconscious” (13). According to Lacan’s view of the simultaneous formation and splitting of the self that marks subjection to the Symbolic Order, “Language places the subject in a chain of words which binds it to one gender or another, but the force of the unconscious can subvert that definition” (Wright 102). It is as though Billany-as-narrator is desperate for release from the “structures of language [that] are marked with societal imperatives—the Father’s rules, laws and definitions” (Wright 101) in order to assert some “truth” about himself. Almost immediately sensing the futility of such a quest, however, he recants: “the notion of a man saying a prayer to his Unconscious seems ridiculous to me” (13);¹³ he then proceeds to tell a story that, on the surface, involves complicity in the war’s grand narrative and conformity to its dominant discursive constructions of identity.

Carr’s integration into the Pascoe family and the army dramatizes the Lacanian notion of “a subject in position of predication” (Coward and Ellis 93): as

lover and husband, and as surrogate son, brother and father. But, according to Lacan, “the price for producing a subject in sociality” is “a disruptive relation with consciousness” (94); in other words, and as Billany was certainly aware, the unconscious needs no conscious evocation to come into play. Indeed, the greater the repression—and the “symbolic relations” between the signifier Carr and signified Billany involve considerable denial and therefore what Freud terms “unpleasurable tension” (102)—the greater the likelihood that unconscious desires will irrupt into the text. Around the time of composing *The Trap* at Rezzanello, Billany was reading about psychology and “pestering his father for more books on the subject” (Reeves and Showan 132). His narrator’s prayer shows an understanding that the idea of the unconscious being “mirrored in the latent structure of a work” is “a mimetic fallacy”; rather, the unconscious is “implicated in that very mimesis” that is the drama of representation (Wright 157), and which consists of Taussig’s “object-prone exercises in differentiated space.”

The differentiated space in *The Trap* initially takes the form of a Cornwall that is another world and yet the same.¹⁴ The same in that, for example, the town of Helston with its pubs like the Angel and “kennels” (water channels) on Coinagehall Street are still there to be seen, and the route march of Carr’s battalion can be charted accurately as it makes its way towards St Michael’s Mount. Other, because into that topographically real setting Billany pours all the past and recent history of his own family in Hull, including the bombing of his parents’ home on 25th April 1941, to make up the life story of the Pascoes. The town of Polpryn, where they live, is also fictional. Its name is obviously derived from that of Penryn, near Falmouth, yet its geographical position does not entirely match Penryn’s, being located closer to Helston (“more or less midway between Helston and Falmouth” [*Trap* 15]) and so more conveniently placed for Carr to visit while in camp. Cornwall is thus turned into one of Lyotard’s “disreal spaces” where “representations are tried out and the question arises of what is ‘real’ outside representation” (Wright 157).

The most fruitful site for analysis, however, is the character of Carr himself, as may be gauged by applying, as a case in point, a key aspect of Melanie Klein’s object-relations psychology, where the processes of “projection” and “introjection” are meant to explain “the patterns of a self’s dealings with the world, including other people” (Wright 72). Moreover, these processes represent what Adrian Stokes terms “a very strong identification with the object...whereby a barrier between self and not-self is undone” (qtd. in Wright 81). As autobiographical yet fantasy “subject,” Carr is at once Billany’s self and other, a means by which objects—the aims of our

“drives”—“deemed capable of closing the sense of loss” (Coward and Ellis 102) are introjected or “absorbed and unconsciously regarded as belonging to the self” (Wright 72), and those aims “which produce an excess of tension” (Coward and Ellis 102) are projected or “expelled from the self” (Wright 72).

The principal distinguishing feature of Carr’s identity is his heterosexuality, and this is both physically consummated and socially sanctioned, in that he marries Elizabeth before he is sent overseas. While Billany and Dorothy Warner obviously never married, the extent to which their relationship served as a model for Carr’s and Elizabeth’s main sexual encounter in the novel is not known. What can be ascertained is Billany’s efforts to get the incident “just right,” because it is the only passage that was redrafted in the surviving manuscript. A comparison of the two versions reveals not so much a difference in detail as a rearrangement, except that early in the description of love-making the lines “and my hips and thighs stirred, moving of themselves almost, while my soul dissolved in ecstasy, in bliss, in Paradise” (MS 162) are cut, while “in Paradise” is shifted to the end of the encounter (*Trap* 112). Thus what might be construed as uncontrolled passion (and even premature ejaculation) has been subtly revised to restore a measure of control to Carr, while sounding slightly less ecstatic and “adolescent” overall.¹⁵

In fact, control is central to *The Trap*’s portrayal of sexuality throughout. Thus the narrative traces a pattern of opportunity and abnegation where the “occasions of sin,” as it were, for Carr to re-enact the loves and infatuations of his First War counterparts are systematically presented and then removed in order to keep him on a “straight” and narrow path. While Carr’s heterosexual orientation is stamped clearly from the beginning in his first childhood love for “a little brown-haired girl in a blue dress” (*Trap* 18), leaving him with “a laboring sense that a mighty satisfaction lay somewhere hid there” (19), what follows reads more like the conventional stuff of First War memoir: “I next fell in love when I was thirteen, with the boy who shared my desk at school. His name was Joey” (19). Although Carr’s description of “the leaping of my heart” when Joey “put his arm around my shoulders” (19) evokes Phillip’s reactions to Dickie in “A Season of Calm Weather” or Sassoon’s to Dick Tiltwood, *The Trap* follows the path of denial laid out by Graves in *Good-bye to All That* and Aldington in *Death of a Hero* instead. Graves attributes such “romance” to the “pseudo” homosexuality “necessarily” promulgated in “English preparatory and public schools” (23). Aldington likewise protests too much “by stating emphatically once and for all that there was nothing sodomitical” in the “real and beautiful and unique relationship” between soldiers during the war (26). His novel underlines the point by having his hero George

Winterbourne, rather cynically, “saved...from the latent homosexuality that lurks in so many Englishmen and makes them for ever dissatisfied with their women” through some immature gropings with the country girl Priscilla (95).¹⁶ While Carr says that something of Joey “lives with me, and always will, arbitrating all I know of love and beauty and kindness” (*Trap* 20), such feelings are consigned to a purely Platonic realm, for when Joey himself is conveniently disposed of, dying of tuberculosis “when he was twenty,” Carr, who hasn’t seen him since they were fourteen anyway, hears the news “without grief” (20).

This pattern of opportunity and abnegation is repeated at least twice more in the novel. Twelve-year-old David Pascoe is Elizabeth’s brother, and the relationship that develops between him and Carr is portrayed as very brotherly. As if to prevent it becoming anything further, however, David is killed in the bombing of the Pascoes’ house. The incident has obvious value in a narrative that seeks to expose the sufferings of the innocent in war, but in terms of Billany’s own history it has no correlative. David is the one identifiably “made-up” character in the whole novel. Billany had no brother, and no one in his parents’ house was killed (although four neighbors were) when it was destroyed by a German parachute mine (Reeves and Showan 85). David is not intended to reprise Dickie’s role in “A Season of Calm Weather”; nevertheless he represents quite a complex kind of Freudian condensation, in that he is at once a memory of Billany’s student-friend Jack Crossley, a fantasized version of fellow prisoner and soon-to-be co-author David Dowie, and even an allegory for Billany himself.

Jack Crossley was a student of Billany’s with whom he remained in contact and who was both a character in and the dedicatee of his children’s novel *The Magic Door* (published in 1943). The connection with Dowie (an actual “David”) begins to make sense with the realization that Billany had become smitten with Dowie probably by the time the POWs had moved from Capua to Rezzanello and the writing of *The Trap* was in full swing. As the second half of their novel *The Cage* reveals, there was a good deal of anxiety on both sides at Billany’s revelation of his feelings for the heterosexual Dowie (Reeves and Showan 126-28). Representing him as a child is one means of reasserting control over the situation and over the object of love. Killing him off fictively therefore achieves a double purpose, for by removing David Pascoe from Carr’s life, David Dowie is mimetically cast out of Billany’s as well. If all this seems peevishly childish, Billany would probably have been the last to deny it. As Graves admitted to being “an overgrown schoolboy,” so even when a teacher Billany felt that “half of me, at least, is still sitting with the kids” (qtd. in Reeves and Showan 70). David Pascoe, the

“kid” who manages like his creator to be “Top in English” (*Trap* 149), is thus Billany too, whose first novels were genuine “juvenilia” in their naïve depiction of a love that is socially taboo. Written after Billany’s debut into a wider and more disillusioning world, *The Trap* is shot through with feelings of guilt that his homosexuality was not just a passing childhood phase. As a product of state education, he cannot even use Graves’s public schoolboy defence. The desire to remain a child is therefore a desire to retain an identity that the adult world will not tolerate; killing off the child becomes a projection of that part of the self that must be repressed in the process of socialization.

Another drastic example of this kind of projection lies in the character of Shaw, a young soldier in Carr’s platoon. Shaw is a classic “rebel without a cause” whose troublemaking ways are eventually tamed by Carr’s patience and humane treatment of him. While there are opportunities aplenty for the relationship to develop into something approaching a First War soldier’s crush on his officer or vice versa, nothing of the kind is allowed to eventuate. Everything remains on a professional level, for, as Carr maintains, “a platoon commander, like a teacher, is *in loco parentis*” (*Trap* 254).¹⁷ In rather a moving scene, Carr explains the planets and stars to a rapt Shaw as they sit together under a desert night sky. But that is about as intimate as the relationship gets, because Shaw is ruthlessly shot by a German immediately following the surrender for reasons never made clear in the story, except perhaps that he had forgotten to take off his bayonet.

At one level, then, the novel seems to be a series of near introjections followed by ultimate projections, and not just of those aspects of his subjectivity about which the author feels most guilty. The love-making scene between Carr and Elizabeth, as idyllic as it appears, might equally be regarded as Billany sloughing off a past phase of his life. Through Carr, his alter ego, he has proven himself mimetically capable of the act of physical heterosexual love, and can now move on. Nevertheless, there is a facet to the relationship between Carr and Elizabeth that is worth mentioning, if only for coming to terms with the knowledge that Elizabeth Pascoe is modelled on his sister, Joan. One of the fantasies that Billany built up during his early days of a POW was a kind of transference or sublimation of his feelings for Dowie into a desire that Dowie should marry Joan. He wrote as much to her in January 1943, half-humorously urging her not to succumb to any fantasies of her own about glamorous movie stars or dashing RAF types: “Do not therefore, (unless you must!) marry Gaumont-British, or any local Flying Officers. David is, on my recommendation, the right and only husband for you” (qtd. in Reeves and Showan 126).

It is clear that the fictive copy of himself that is Michael Carr is no simple projection of Billany's homosexuality; nor is Carr just an introjection of his wish-fulfillment fantasies. The complexity of the mimetic process and the forces of desire and repression that inform it are well summarized by Taussig:

Sliding between photographic fidelity and fantasy, between iconicity and arbitrariness, wholeness and fragmentation, we thus begin to sense how weird and complex the notion of the copy becomes...—a will to power in the face of attack by (illusory and fragmented) copies of reality. (17)

These copies of reality are discursive constructs like “officer” and “lover” that Billany tries to deal with in the character of Carr. However, the price of exerting his will to some form of power within the war's dominant discursive construction of masculinity is a denial of his sexual identity, which in its repressed state finds its own expression through the condensation and displacement that mark the eruptions of the unconscious into consciousness. Sadly, Billany's sacrifice carried with it none of the immediate rewards available within more socially condoned forms of fantasizing, as when a “real” actor, Noël Coward (of British Lion rather than Gaumont-British in this case), “othered” heterosexuality to play the ideal officer-gentleman-husband in the film *In Which We Serve* in 1942. Instead, that same year saw Billany's battalion left unsupported in the middle of the Libyan Desert and soon in Rommel's “bag” with thousands of other soldiers, some of whom no doubt felt as Marlowe, one of Carr's men, does in *The Trap*, after their capture:

Have you ever heard of Class Distinction, sir?...it means Vickers-Armstrong booking a profit to look like a loss, and Churchill lighting a new cigar, and the “Times” reporting on Liberty and Democracy, and me sitting on my arse in Libya splashing a fainting man with water out of my steel helmet... because one class gets the sugar and the other class gets the shit. (354)

As has been shown, *The Trap* counters the stiff-upper-lip attitude of contemporary wartime works, such as the Coward film, which are complicit in unitary and totalizing grand narratives about the war, with small narratives that restore to history the “materiality” that such discourses drain from it (Selden and Widdowson

182).¹⁸ In the “figural world and its associated nexus of desire” that “Discursive consciousness” submerges under “the totalizing claims of reason” (Selden and Widdowson 182-83), can be glimpsed Taussig’s place between the real and the really made up—the realm of the mimetic faculty. And implicit in that faculty of copying or imitating is a getting hold of that which is copied: “a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived” (Taussig 21). In terms of the relationship of author to autobiographical subject that connection cannot be over-emphasized, but it also means more generally that in mimesis lies the capacity for Lyotard’s restorative project. When applied to Marx’s considerations of the way the discourse of the market objectifies “the social character of men’s labor” by turning it into “commodity fetishism” (Taussig 22), mimesis can restore the “erased sense” of “interpersonal labor-contact and sensuous interaction with the object-world” that animates the fetish (22-23).

While Taussig refers specifically to Benjamin’s “analysis of modern mimetic machines” as “opening up new possibilities for exploring reality and providing means for changing culture and society along with those possibilities” (23), such possibilities may be seen as immanent in all the mimetic practices of politically committed artists such as Billany. Munton points to a passage in *The Cage* where Alan, one of Billany’s two alter egos in that curious novel, echoes Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach when he muses about the need for personal change: “Philosophers interpret the world, but it is also necessary to change it” (*Cage* 181, qtd. in Munton 59). Here, its authors “were trying to relate their concern with subjectivity to Marx’s similar concern: the Theses argue the primacy of ‘sensuous human activity’ and the social construction of the subject” (Munton 59).

The same concerns inform *The Trap* and are a particular strength of the novel. Thus, for example, in his politicized yet very material assessment of his plight after capture, Carr’s man Marlowe is able to position himself as the subject of a socialist ideological discourse on one hand while the object of a capitalist one on the other. His diatribe reminds the reader that soldiering—the most fetishized role in the mythology of war—has become just another commodity, to be bought (recruited and paid) and sold (sacrificed or pensioned off) by one’s country. Carr’s story also details the material processes of command that make him and his fellow officers a special kind of commodity, with its own brand of packaging and code of conduct that operate as a form of quality control. Carr is aware also that his identity is a function of the “letter”—and not only of military law, as he is often reminded by his superiors. The tension that exists between the material and the discursive factors determining subjectivity are best exemplified in the device that

activates the novel's narrative, which is a letter from Elizabeth that at last arrives in the POW camp at Capua: "The postmark was 'Helston, Cornwall: 11.30 a.m.' God, the barbed wire itself seemed to melt away from around me as that hand stretched in for me" (380). The story begins and ends with Carr clutching the letter, which catalyzes his memories of the past, affirms his present identity (and in particular his sexual identity), and offers him at least the promise of a future.

According to Munton, the historical perspective constituted by Carr's life assures *The Trap's* success as a war novel (67). Read against Billany's biography, however, it is the chronicle of someone trapped (and whoever thought of the title made an inspired choice) in an unstable fetishized construction of officerhood that oscillates between the First War "attractive young man" in baratheia, and Second War "strenuously heterosexual" action man. Its narrator's prayer to his unconscious represents an attempt to bypass literary discourse and get at "the truth" about himself, but he reckons without the power of "the great master-narratives" to continue their work at that same level of the unconscious (Jameson xii). So, while there are various attempts to break out of "the trap," mainly through subverting the war's grand narrative with other smaller, dissenting versions like Marlowe's, the antithesis isn't developed to its next logical stage. Billany's subjection to the plot of the war through the persona of Carr (who simultaneously feeds off and into Billany's life) represents the cost involved in the "dissolution of the self into a host of networks and relations" that Habermas "valorizes" as consensus (Jameson xviii). Therefore, in order to "undermine" his position as "imperialist subject" (Selden and Widdowson 189), Billany should have done what Linda Hutcheon recommends for those operating within postcolonialist and feminist discourses, which is "first to assert and affirm a denied or alienated subjectivity" (qtd. in Selden and Widdowson 189).

Paradoxically—and reinforcing the old belief that in the symptoms of the malady (typically called "melancholy") lie its cure—the assertion of subjectivity involves reaffirming both the instability of identity and the power of the narrative. So, instead of the consensus that empties him of his sexual identity, Billany would have to valorize dissent in a more personal form. This is achieved not by analogy with Carr, but through what Lyotard calls "paralogy" (60), a process of playing on instabilities in order to establish a non-consensual (and reminiscent of Taussig's "silly if not desperate" [xviii]) place in which to express "fresh desires within the structural limits of the capitalist mode" (Jameson xviii) and "to make ourselves at home in our alienated being" (Marx, qtd. in Jameson xix). The result is a revitalized aesthetic: a narrative of difference in which the mimetic faculty is channelled

towards “an imaginary resolution of real contradictions” (Levi-Strauss, qtd. in Jameson xix). Nevertheless, Jameson warns that such “aesthetics sometimes functions as an unpleasant mirror” (xix). Even Sassoon’s George Sherston recognized that “The intimate mental history of any man who went to the War would make unheroic reading” (239). In *The Trap* Billany finds the mirror too unpleasant to look at for more than a glance at a time, preferring instead to hide his own intimate history behind the mask of a fictive identity; so the imaginary resolution is deferred, to await the even more confrontational mimetic space of his next novel, *The Cage*.

Notes

¹ See Reeves and Showan (1999) for a thorough and sympathetic account of Billany’s life and work, including various efforts to reconstruct Billany’s and Dowie’s final months between their release and disappearance (142-66).

² The *TLS* comment appears on the back cover of the 1986 edition of *The Trap*.

³ The quoted passages are from the dustjacket blurb of the 1980 edition of Ellis’s work. Ellis quotes *The Trap* on pp. 38-39 and 320.

⁴ The documents were donated by Billany’s sister, Joan Brake, and are held as IWM file 96/14/1.

⁵ Lyotard speaks of the “postmodern condition” primarily in terms of how “the older master narratives of legitimation no longer function in the service of scientific research,” but Frederic Jameson, in his Foreword to Lyotard’s treatise, says that “by implication” this “crisis in the narrative function in general” applies “anywhere else” (xi-xii).

⁶ See, for example, Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*: “Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word *Mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth” in order “to teach and delight” (9).

⁷ The letter, dated 30th August 1950, forms part of the material in IWM file 96/14/1.

⁸ Huddleston was interviewed by Reeves and Showan during the research for their biography.

⁹ There is also an implied swipe against “Churchillism” here. In one of his “blitz” speeches, Churchill sought to inculcate this quality in the populace generally: “This supreme battle depends upon / the courage of the ordinary man and woman. / Whatever happens, keep a stiff upper lip!” (qtd. in Calder, *People’s War* 92 [original punctuation]).

¹⁰ There were two other works, neither of which was published: “Paul,” a series of essays subtitled “Aspects of the Struggle between Children and Grown-ups” (Reeves and Showan 13), written sometime before the war and drawing extensively on his own childhood and experiences as a student teacher; and the provocatively titled “Living Amongst Boys” (1939), which follows up Paul’s career as a teacher.

¹¹ In examining Robert Graves’ infatuation with a younger boy at Charterhouse School, whom he chooses to call “Dick” in *Goodbye to All That*, Fussell notes with characteristic unease, “The name Dick was becoming conventional for that sort of thing” (*Great War* 208). Calling the object of Phillip’s desire by the same name may signify Billany’s own entry into this established gay discourse. (See also note 12 for Fussell’s attempt to dismiss homosexuality in the Second World War in the same terms.)

¹² Indeed, Fussell’s very analysis arises out of the same exclusivist World War II discourse, most notably when he claims that “Such ‘minority’ sexual compensations... seem largely limited to the POW camps, with their extreme circumstances of deprivation” (*Wartime* 109). *The Cage*, which deals in part with Billany’s feelings for Dowie, via the fictional persona of Alan Matsen, interrogates the view that homosexual love was “compensatory,” and does not portray the camps as places of opportunity. As Eric Newby, who was at the Fontanellato POW camp at the same time as Billany and Dowie, and who singles out *The Cage* as “a remarkable book on this subject” (37), observes: “Even more difficult for the residents in the *orfanotrofio* [i.e. orphanage, Fontanellato’s original function] was any kind of homosexual act. Whatever loves there were between prisoners... had to remain locked away within the hearts and minds of the lovers until they could be free or were moved to some more private place” (36-37).

¹³ Billany actually seems to have had second thoughts about retaining this whole metafictional interlude (*Trap* 11-15), for it was crossed out in the manuscript, although included for publication in the first and subsequent editions. There are a number of other excisions in the manuscript, apparently made by Billany himself, which his editors chose not to include for publication, as well as other minor amendments. This, plus the fact that Billany spent a good deal of time redrafting the text (see Reeves and Showan 123 and 125), make a mockery of the statement “This story has never been revised,” which his publishers inserted following “A Note on the Author” (*The Trap* n. p.).

¹⁴ “Another world and yet the same” is a translation of the title of Joseph Hall’s c.1605 dystopian tale *Mundus alter et idem*, which satirises his own society by

depicting a world where familiar customs and attitudes are either reversed or represented in such a way as to create critical distance.

¹⁵ This revision also further undermines the claim made by the publishers in note 13, above.

¹⁶ *Death of a Hero*'s pungently polemical narration, its creation of a broader social context for its "hero's" involvement in the war, and its concern with sexual relationships, make it seem a natural precursor to Billany's novel.

¹⁷ It should not be inferred from the present discussion that Dan Billany was some kind of sexual predator, by the way. The available evidence suggests that he was a moral man, very concerned with his professional position, who erred on the side of caution in his personal relationships.

¹⁸ Lyotard, whose ideas this is based on, "has in his sights...totalizing metanarratives, great codes which in their abstraction necessarily deny the specificity of the local and traduce it in the interests of a global homogeneity, a universal history" (Docherty 11).

¹⁹ As far as can be ascertained, no title was ever given to the work that became *The Trap*; certainly none appears on the manuscript in the IWM, and Billany does not seem to have mentioned it by name in his letters home.

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