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The Myth of the Great War: Hugo Pratt's World War I Graphic Novel and Stories

Quando ho voglia di rilassarmi leggo un saggio di Engels, se invece desidero impegnarmi leggo Corto Maltese [When I want to relax I read an essay by Engels; when I want something more serious I read Corto Maltese].
(Umberto Eco, quoted in Pratt 1994, 345; my translation)

Abstract: This article examines seven graphic narratives by the Italian graphic artist and writer Hugo Pratt. The article reads these narratives in connection with the myth of the Great War as it was defined by the Italian historian and literary critic Isnenghi in 1970 in his groundbreaking monograph *Il mito della grande guerra*. However, these graphic narratives present readers with a bewildering mix of historical/quasi-historical characters, real and imaginary places, often establishing surprising and complex intertextual short-circuits that connect Pratt's World War I narratives, history, and the historical imagination. This reading can help us to understand why a comparative approach is unavoidable when dealing with graphic narratives, especially those dealing with historical events – like World War I – which impacted several countries across more than one continent.

Keywords: Corto Maltese, Hugo Pratt, myth, post-memory, World War I

1 Introduction: Comics studies and war literature studies

Comics studies is not, or should not be, conceived as an island, entire of itself; it may benefit from other, older disciplines, and may in turn contribute to their development. This is what Kai Mikkonen maintains in his recent monograph *The Narratology of Comic Art*:

One key finding in this study is that narratological insights into the organisation, presentation, and mediation of stories cannot be transferred from one medium to another without due modification. Thus, it is hoped that this investigation can contribute to narratology in general, for instance, with regard to the emerging field of transmedial studies that looks at narratives in different forms of expression, communication, and art. (Mikkonen 2016, 2)

In other words, while narratology (born to analyse literary narrative texts with a hopefully scientific objectivity and reliability) may be useful for tackling comics, the comics scholar should never forget that narratological interpretive tools were not originally made for a hybrid form like comics. Therefore, the comics scholar should be ready to reshape these tools when needed in order to make them suitable for understanding comics and their workings; moreover, this process of reuse and readaptation may help us to enhance narratology, widening its scope and enabling it to deal with other forms of narration that are not purely verbal.

If this is true for narratology, it may well also be true for other strongly interdisciplinary research fields such as war literature studies, which straddles military history, trauma studies, traditional literary criticism, narratology, psychiatry, and politics (just to mention a few of the fields that impinge on the academic study of war narratives, regardless of their national or historical background). I have tried to map the complex theoretical territory of this field in *Il secolo di fuoco* (Rossi 2008, 16–45), but it is quite evidently an area of academic research that can only benefit from widening its scope by working on war films, television series, and the visual arts, including, of course, graphic narratives. This may lead to a reconsideration of the basic concepts and interpretive strategies of war literature studies based on how they can or cannot be applied to war comics, a rethinking that may improve those concepts and strategies.

2 Why Pratt?

The Italian graphic artist and writer Hugo Pratt is not just one of the greatest figures in the pantheon of the sequential art; he belongs to that group of comics artists whose *oeuvre* is staggering in terms of dimensions, complexity, and the richness of its intercultural connections and echoes. Moreover, he is one of those acknowledged masters of the art that have played an important role as a source of inspiration for younger practitioners, just like, say, Will Eisner or Hergé. No wonder that his most famous character, Corto Maltese, was quoted by Frank Miller in *The Dark Knight Returns*, where a rogue South American country bears his name. With his bewildering ability to conjugate adventurous stories with multilayered sophistication, to deftly mix historical characters with fictional ones and have them interact with one another, and to reconstruct in detail geographically and historically remote settings, Pratt is probably the greatest forerunner of Alan Moore; but, unlike Moore, his storytelling skills are coupled with an awesome drawing and painting style. His watercolour tables are impressive, and many of his frames can be easily appreciated as stand-alone paintings, some-

thing which allows us to compare him to another brilliant comics artist, Alberto Breccia.

Moreover, Hugo Pratt is an artist who often dealt with war and presented his readers with an accurate visual depiction of it. He set his stories during World War I (as we shall see) and World War II – one must mention his highly sophisticated series *Gli scorpioni del deserto* [The Desert Scorpions] (1969–1993), as well as his *Ernie Pike* series (1957–1958), not to mention the war comics he drew for the British publisher Fleetway from 1959 to 1963, based on stories written by unnamed writers. Pratt also depicted the Indian wars of the nineteenth century (*Sergeant Kirk* [1953–1959], written by Héctor Oesterheld) and the Seven Years War (*Ticonderoga* [1957–1958], also by Oesterheld). Such war narratives are almost always adventurous, yet absolutely not – as we shall see – escapist. They do not subscribe to any warlike and warmongering enthusiasm; they present readers with a series of complex moral and political dilemmas and a wide-ranging network of cultural references (Cristante 2016). All in all, any critical discourse about war and comics must necessarily deal with Pratt's *oeuvre*.

3 Why the Great War?

World War I narratives have been studied and analysed since the beginning of war literature studies, which we can place in the mid-1960s (despite its forerunners), when *Heroes' Twilight*, Bernard Bergonzi's groundbreaking 1965 monograph was published, soon followed by the now-canonical *Il mito della grande guerra* by Mario Isnenghi (2007 [1970]),¹ and *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) by Paul Fussell, to name some of the most prestigious. These seminal studies focused on World War I literature, so that the vast (and growing) corpus of Great War narratives may be considered as the birthplace of war literature studies and its testing ground.

If we want to apply the critical toolbox of war literature studies to such a classic of the sequential art as Pratt, the best opening move is to work on the seven graphic narratives Pratt set during the Great War; moreover, all those stories belong to the cycle of Corto Maltese, the most famous character created by this Italian comics artist. Interestingly, the stateless sailor and adventurer first appeared in Pratt's graphic novel *Una ballata del mare salato* [The Ballad of the Salt Sea], published in 1967 in the first issue of the *Sergente Kirk* magazine, the

¹ Preceded by his *I vinti di Caporetto nella letteratura di guerra* (1967), which was then enlarged and enhanced and became *Il mito della grande guerra*.

first of his narratives set during World War I. Six Corto Maltese stories were later published in the French magazine *Pif* (Editions Vaillant): *Le Songe d'un matin d'inver* [A Midwinter Morning's Dream] published in 1970; then *La Lagune des beaux songes* [The Lagoon of Beautiful Dreams], *L'Ange à la fenêtre d'orient* [The Angel at the Eastern Window], and *Sous le drapeau de l'argent* [Under the Flag of Money], all published in 1971; and lastly *Côtes de Nuits et roses de Picardie* [Côtes de Nuits and Picardy Roses] and *Burlesque entre Zuydcoot et Bray-Dune* [Burlesque between Zuydcoot and Bray-Dune], both published in 1972. Remarkably, all these works were published in the same years in which Bergonzi, Isnenghi, and Fussell were busy reinterpreting, deconstructing, and criticizing World War I narratives, at a time when – also due to the protests against the Vietnam War – anti-war and anti-military attitudes were widespread and increasingly radical.

The plots of these stories are quite different, set between 1914 and 1918 (with the possible exception of *The Lagoon of Beautiful Dreams*, which takes place in an undetermined time during or shortly after the end of the war), and feature Corto Maltese among their characters (though not necessarily as their protagonist). To read these graphic narratives, we will have to borrow a critical concept originally devised by Mario Isnenghi, that is, the myth of the Great War.

4 *Il mito della grande guerra*

Isnenghi's analysis of the myth of the Great War aims at understanding how a quite heterogeneous group of Italian writers who were directly or indirectly involved in the war (some of them – like Carlo Emilio Gadda or Curzio Malaparte – well known, others – like Attilio Frescura or Carlo Salsa – almost forgotten in 1970) collectively built a myth or mythology of the war, based on their personal experiences, their previous upbringing, their ideological positions, and their social class and educational background. Isnenghi's myth of the Great War is a sort of collective macrotext, reconstructed thanks to a brilliant use of comparative analysis even though it only deals with Italian writers (this, added to the sad fact that *Il mito della grande guerra* has never been translated into English, explains its lack of fame abroad).² Moreover, Isnenghi showed how each writer presented his readers with his own version of the myth, be it in favour of the war or against it, authoritarian or anti-authoritarian, militaristic or pacifist, even though common

² Only recently have non-Italian scholars started paying attention to the Italian Front, as witnessed by such monographs as Thompson (2009).

images, figures, themes, and motifs can be found throughout the corpus of texts discussed in his monograph.

Of course, the myth of the Great War changes over time, as Maheen Ahmed (2015) has noticed, and has very different connotations in different countries and cultures. For example, poppies have been charged with powerful historical and cultural significations in the UK. On the other hand, the word *Caporetto* is quite familiar to Italians as a term evoking catastrophe, but I doubt people from other countries can reconnect it to what happened in October 1917 around the town of Kobarid in what is now Slovenia. Moreover, our reading of this macrotext – or parts of it – has changed over time and will surely change in the future. However, having researched Great War literature in a comparative (i. e. transnational) perspective, I maintain that the myth of World War I has a truly worldwide dimension, and that a complex, multidimensional network of intertextual connexions ties together all the purely verbal texts that contributed to its making, regardless of their language, nationality, genre, or stylistic peculiarities.

Elements from this macrotext often surface in Pratt's Corto Maltese graphic narratives. These comics, as we shall see, present readers with a bewildering mix of historical and imaginary figures, mythical places, and quite a few characters who are at the same time historical and mythical.

5 Memory and post-memory

Memory is a key concept in the discussion of World War I literature, be it individual or collective. When it comes to Pratt's Great War narratives, though, personal memories are of course out of the question: this Italian comics artist was born in 1927. His graphic narratives would not have been taken into account by the first generation of war literature scholars, who were interested in literary works written by men who had fought; they were looking for witnesses, be they sincere or deceitful, interested or disinterested. But a new category, introduced by Marianne Hirsch (1992–1993) in her discussion of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, can help us to reconsider narratives by authors who cannot have directly experienced that war: the concept of postmemory. As Hirsch explains on her website *POSTMEMORY.net*,

"Postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (Hirsch n.d.)

Originally applied to the offspring of Nazi camp survivors, postmemory can also be a useful concept when dealing with the children of war victims, be they combatants or civilians. Besides, the Shoah was conceived by the Nazis as a form of racist warfare; hence, Holocaust narratives can be considered as part of war literature (Rossi 2008, 278–283). Postmemory calls for a radical widening of the field of war literature studies – one as important and necessary as the inclusion of female writers and non-combatants who, even though not manning the trenches or going over the top, were nonetheless involved in the Great War and often played a very important role in the construction of its myth. Moreover, even though Hirsch originally focused on Spiegelman's *Maus*, a graphic narrative made possible by the familial transmission of memory (a process depicted in its very frames, showing the author being told about the Shoah by his father, an inmate of Auschwitz), she also discussed W. G. Sebald, the author of *Austerlitz*. The novel is analysed by Hirsch as a remarkable case study of post-memory insofar as its protagonist, the orphan of Czech Jews who disappeared during World War II and were almost certainly murdered, slowly and painfully recovers fragmentary memories of his childhood (Hirsch 2012, 40–52). Sebald's own story is quite different from the one told in the novel, as the writer does not stem from a Jewish family and there are no familial connections to the tragic past depicted in *Austerlitz* (his father was actually a Wehrmacht officer). Hence, Hirsch also contemplates a transmission of memory, a post-memory that is not channelled through family ties. And this is what may have occurred to Pratt vis-à-vis the Great War.

6 Heroes and anti-heroes

The myth of the Great War is made up of places, dates, events, but also people – some of them of truly mythic, heroic status. One of them is unquestionably Manfred von Richthofen, aka the Red Baron (Pratt 2009a [1972], 8; see fig. 1).

This air ace, who died at twenty-six, credited with eighty victories, has a lot to do with comics, thanks to Snoopy and the Peanuts. Yet, while Charles Schultz managed to make von Richthofen famous all over the world without ever showing him and his fighter plane, Pratt drew a black-and-white portrait of the German fighter pilot that is a good likeness. These frames, taken from Pratt's 1972 story *Côtes de Nuits and Picardy Roses*, show the Red Baron at his most mythical and romantic, laying down a bunch of roses on the wreck of an enemy aircraft he has just shot down.

But, unlike the American EC comics studied by Jean-Mathieu Méon (2015) in his article "A War Like Any Other ... Or Nobler?" which contributed to create

Fig. 1: © CONG SA.

the myth of the chivalric, romantic air aces of the Great War in the 1950s, Pratt envisions the war in a much more complex fashion. The hero will be ultimately defeated, and slain, by an anti-hero. Pratt knew all too well that the Red Baron had been killed by a British .303 rifle bullet (curiously, a bullet that has a lot to do with war comics, thanks to Garth Ennis and Jacen Burrows), almost surely fired by a British infantryman whose name will forever remain unknown. He then conjures up Clem, an alcoholic New Zealand soldier, whose aim is unerring only when he is stone drunk (Pratt 2009a [1972], 29). The archetypal male hero, fully in control of his flying machine and unbeatable, is thus defeated by a comedic and emphatically modernist anti-hero.

7 Facts and fiction

Such a mix of carefully balanced facts and fiction, history and myth, real and only apparently real characters bespeaks the unmistakable postmodernist character of the Corto Maltese stories. And genre-bending, or genre hybridization, has a lot to do with postmodernist fiction (and comics). Another example will effectively illustrate the workings of Pratt's own variety of genre-bending. In this frame, taken from *The Angel at the Eastern Window* (Pratt 2013b [1971], 8; see fig. 2a), we have a fairly accurate drawing of a German fighter aircraft, which can be easily identified as an Albatros D.I by comparing it to photographs available on the Web ("Albatros D I" n.d.; see fig. 2b).

Fig. 2a: © CONG SA.

Fig. 2b: Albatros D.I

Pratt was so keen when it came to drawing aeroplanes, ships, machine-guns, and trains – what we might call the machinery of war – that he often relied on a trusted helper, the Italian comics artist and architect Guido Fuga (Marchese 2006, 83), who specialized in accurately reproducing aircraft (to an astonishing level of detail, as witnessed by the frames of *The Desert Scorpions*). But such faithfulness to history goes hand-in-hand with something quite different in the same story. At

the beginning of the story, the accurately drawn Austrian fighter flies dangerously low over a house (Pratt 2013b [1971], 8; see fig. 3).

Fig. 3: © CONG SA.

Isn't this old, dark building, with a single lighted Gothic window, something out of a horror story? Isn't this old house, standing in a lagoon, something that would not be out of place, say, in Moore's *Swamp Thing*? In fact, when Corto Maltese enters the house, there is a clearly horrific scene (Pratt 2013b [1971], 25; see fig. 4).

Fig. 4: © CONG SA.

“Ma è una diavoleria!” cries Corto. *Diavoleria* means both “devilry” and “monkey business” or “shrewd trick.” In fact the threatening, evil giant is nothing other than a giant puppet, aimed at scaring and shocking intruders, set up by a ring of Austrian spies.

8 Pratt's *trompe-l'œil*

There are other instances in Corto Maltese stories of such graphic and textual sleights of hand in which real and unreal are suddenly swapped: for example, *Burlesque between Zuydcoote and Bray-Dune* begins as a shadow theatre but then abruptly turns into a very concrete war story (Pratt 2013a [1972], 9; see fig. 5). The moment of transition is sudden.

Fig. 5: © CONG SA.

The story begins as a fable, but then we realize it is a show for the soldiers. Yet magic reappears in the story when the (probably Irish) singer and spy Melodie Gael tries to hypnotize Corto Maltese (Pratt 2013a [1972], 27; see fig. 6).

Fig. 6: © CONG SA.

Corto is able to resist as his mother, a Spanish Rom, was a witch, and his father, a Cornish sailor, was the grandson of a Manx witch. But there is also another sort of magic at work in the story, helping Captain Rothschild to resist Melodie's mesmeric powers: Rothschild is a French lawyer of Jewish descent who has studied penal law but has also been initiated into the secret readings of the *Zohar*, that is, the *Sefer ha-Zohar*, a thirteenth-century book which is considered the foundational work of Jewish mystical thought, Kabbalah (Pratt 2013a [1972], 28). This enables him to counter Melodie's mesmeric powers.

Another example of such a bewildering mix of historical and visual accuracy and pure fantasy can be found in *A Midwinter Morning's Dream*. The old man and the woman in the lower right frame of figure 7 are Merlin and Morgana (Pratt 2009b [1970], 25), who team up with Corto to thwart a German submarine raid. Here, Pratt is drawing on British legends that are much older than the Great War.

All this should make us aware that, when we are dealing with the historical events as mirrored in Pratt's comics, we always have refracted images where painstaking and meticulous visual reproduction goes hand-in-hand with fantastic invention, with magic, with a supernatural world beyond our own. But Pratt is certainly a complex man, a cosmopolitan artist in whose artistic practice (and life) different cultures from several countries mix or clash. Pratt was born in Italy but moved to Ethiopia (then an Italian colony) with his parents at ten; he worked in Italy, France, Argentina, and the United Kingdom; and, moreover, he was a tremendously voracious and eclectic reader.

Fig. 7: © CONG SA.

9 Pratt's post-memory

The contrast between the historical reality of the war and the fantastic elements of the plot in these Great War stories may also refer to a more intimate rift in Pratt's upbringing, one which we can understand in terms of Hirsch's post-memory in its familial version. Hugo Pratt's father, Rolando, whose family was of Anglo-Saxon descent, was a colonial police officer who died in a POW camp in Dire Dawa in 1942. One may well suspect that Hugo's lifelong interest in exotic places, war, soldiers, and armies has some relation to the figure of Rolando. On the other hand, the fantastic element seems to come from his mother, Evelina Genero, who stemmed from a family of converted Jews (Marranos) and was interested in esotericism. One might even venture into a psychological or psychoanalytical interpretation of his war stories, in which the horrors and inhumanity of war are some-

what counterbalanced by the powers of imagination. If rationality leads to war, death, destruction, then occultism might be a way out (and we know that Pratt did not simply use magic and esotericism as ingredients of his graphic narratives; he was also interested in these disciplines, and directly involved in them – one aspect of such involvement being his initiation into Freemasonry).

Pratt's complex background calls of course for a comparative approach because of the interaction of history and imagination, facts and fiction, rationality and irrationality in his graphic narratives. It is not just a matter of his narratives drawing on different genres such as adventures, spy stories, war literature, fantasy, and travelogues; there is also, as we have already said, his upbringing, which took place in a colonial context drawing on different cultures (Italian, Ethiopian, English, US). But then, Pratt was also a supreme practitioner of comics, mixing images and words, and drawing on literature, the visual arts, cinema, and drama; moreover, as a cartoonist, he was strongly influenced by Milton Caniff, an American comics artist who had in turn researched Chinese culture to create his celebrated series *Terry and the Pirates*.

10 Tapping the transnational myth of the Great War

It is especially the transnational aspect of Pratt's comics that must be underscored, since, as Giovanni Marchese has demonstrated in his 2006 monograph *Leggere Hugo Pratt*, the corpus of texts deliberately and overtly quoted by Pratt in his graphic narratives is absolutely and radically transnational. An interesting example is the imaginary writer Hernestway (Pratt 1999 [1971], 25; see fig. 8), one of the characters of *Under the Flag of Money*.³

Since Hernestway is an ambulance-driver and has written an unsuccessful novel whose title is *A Farewell to the Batallion*, he is an easily identifiable avatar of Ernest Hemingway, the author of *A Farewell to Arms*, one of the classics of World War I literature. This is Pratt's own way of making readers aware of the intertextual and hypertextual nature of his graphic stories and novels.

³ The Italian title is *Sotto la bandiera dell'oro* [Under the Flag of Gold], perhaps because its translator thought money was too vulgar. Unfortunately, the Italian edition of the six Corto Maltese World War I stories does not clearly say if the texts in the balloons were translated from the French by Pratt himself or somebody else. But this is also true for the Italian edition of the Fleetway World War II comics, published as *Eroica* and *Supereroica* by Edizioni Dardo. In a visual art such as comics, translators are often invisible.

Fig. 8: © CONG SA.

All in all, we can envision the myth of the Great War as a sort of narrative cloud made up of heterogeneous materials (fiction, memoirs, autobiographies, newspaper/magazine articles, history books, etc.) surrounding a disappeared event in the past: like the hydrogen nebulae created by a supernova, they are remains of a devastating conflagration. Pratt's graphic narratives feed on the materials of the narrative cloud; but they do it in many different – sometimes beguiling – ways.

Sometimes it is a matter of accuracy. Consider a page from *Under the Flag of Money* (Pratt 1999 [1971], 18; see fig. 9): the uniforms of the Austrian artillery observer on his balloon, the Scottish fusiliers, and the Austrian Uhlans are painstakingly reproduced, and this is something Pratt did not leave to his collaborators. It is, of course, a matter of verisimilitude, based on accurate research. The faithful reproduction of uniforms and equipment also has the function of stressing the point of the story, in which Corto Maltese masterminds the recovery of treasure in a war zone, carried out by soldiers belonging to different armies who are sick and tired of the war and agree to split part of the treasure after deserting. In a very anarchic and individualistic way, it is a rebellion against the great carnage of World War I.

Fig. 9: © CONG SA.

Sometimes quotation has quite different purposes, as in *The Lagoon of Beautiful Dreams*, a story whose protagonist is not Corto Maltese but the character on the right of the frame in figure 10, Lieutenant Stuart (Pratt 1998 [1971], 10).

Fig. 10: © CONG SA.

Stuart is a British army officer who has deserted from his regiment, has escaped to South America, and is stranded on the shore of a deadly tropical lagoon infested with malaria. The dreams are those brought about by malaria fever, of course; Stuart, when Corto meets him, is dying. A very interesting detail is the badge of Stuart's regiment, found by Corto after the Englishman has died (Pratt 1998 [1971], 37; fig. 11).

Fig. 11: © CONG SA.

It is a fairly well reproduced badge of the Artists Rifles, an old regiment of the Royal Army, still existing today as 21 Special Air Service Regiment. Is this just a matter of verisimilitude again, or was Pratt aware that one of the most famous British war poets, Wilfred Owen, had been trained as an infantry lieutenant in that regiment? Though Owen's rejection of the war and its horrors was confined to his expressionist poems, as he (unfortunately) never deserted the British Expeditionary Force in Flanders, the state of mind expressed in Owen's lines is remarkably in tune with Stuart's predicament.

11 The lagoon and its ghosts

Moreover, once we deal with the intertextual dimension, we may legitimately wonder whether Pratt was not inspired by a French short story, "Le Déserteur" [The Deserter] (1934), by Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, a dialogue between an anonymous narrator (possibly the writer) and a Frenchman who deserted during World War I and escaped to South America. Drieu La Rochelle is a controversial right-wing intellectual figure who, during the Nazi occupation of France, aired anti-Semitic ideas; yet his collection of short stories *La Comedie de Charleroi* [The Comedy of Charleroi], which includes "Le Déserteur," is considered a classic of Great War literature, expressing a sceptical and embittered attitude to the war and the mythology of patriotic heroism.

The structure of *The Lagoon of Beautiful Dreams* is quite interesting: Corto Maltese only appears at the beginning and end of the graphic story. Most of the plot consists of Stuart's visions, conjured up by malaria fever, which give the story an uncanny atmosphere, a sort of comics version of the modernist stream of consciousness. People from Stuart's past life appear, like Colonel Leighton, the commander of his regiment (Pratt 1998 [1971], 14; see fig. 12), or Archer, the jockey who rode Gladiator II, the horse on which Stuart bet all the money he had stolen from his regiment when he deserted.

Fig. 12: © CONG SA.

Stuart also meets his mother, the classic Victorian lady, having tea with her friend, Mrs Mallory (Pratt 1998 [1971], 17; see fig. 13).

Fig. 13: © CONG SA.

One has then to wonder if this might be a reference to the legendary British mountaineer George Mallory, who disappeared on Mount Everest in 1924 and whose corpse was only found well after Pratt's death in 1999. Mallory was quite famous as he was portrayed by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood as Michael Ransom in their 1936 play *The Ascent of F6* (a not unlikely source).

A door suddenly appears, then a German tank appears behind the door (Pratt 1998 [1971], 19; see fig. 14): this is a definitively oneiric moment that takes Stuart back to the trenches.

Fig. 14: © CONG SA.

What follows is a sequence of quite realistic World War I trench combat, one of the few in these graphic stories, where war rages in the background but the frames mostly focus on what happens behind the lines. Stuart heroically lobbs a hand grenade into the tank, killing most of its crew (Pratt 1998 [1971], 26). And yet this scene may never have taken place, for it is the product of malaria fever and – of course – Stuart's burning regrets. Pratt, however, cannot resist the temptation to insert a literary quotation even in this moment of pure action.

The name of the German tank commander is Rilke (Pratt 1998 [1971], 29; see fig. 15) – no wonder, then, that Stuart asks him whether he is a relative of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (whose lines appear in other comics by Pratt).

Fig. 15: © CONG SA.

The gentlemanly attitude of Rilke should be highlighted, as he congratulates Stuart even though he was completely burnt after the tank's ammunition blew up. The class difference between the two officers and the soldiers is also stressed in the conversation. Moreover, the destruction of the tank makes up for Stuart's desertion, bespeaking the officer's sense of guilt. Stuart's visions are eminently consolatory.

Last but not least, Stuart meets his intended, Evelyne, in a graveyard (Pratt 1998 [1971], 33; see fig. 16), possibly one of those war cemeteries that are scattered along the Western and the Italian Front. Here, memory and imagination are hard to tell apart: moreover, the oneiric world evoked by malaria fever is coming apart; Stuart is dying, so his intended is inviting him to reach her in a graveyard.

Fig. 16: © CONG SA.

All in all, these powerful pictures seem to me to echo Kurz's final delirium in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. According to Marchese, Joseph Conrad is one of the most powerful influences on Pratt's graphic narratives, and the *Lagoon* is one of Pratt's most Conradian stories. Besides, Umberto Eco said that Corto Maltese "is a Lord Jim with all the features, the regrets and the ambiguities, but without the defeat, in short a Lord Jim who won the gamble" (quoted in Marchese 2006, 19; my translation).

12 Hugo Pratt, postmodernist comics artist

All this takes us back to the idea of a myth of the Great War, to be understood in a wider meaning than the phrase had in Isnenghi's monograph, one that feeds Pratt's graphic stories. Pratt's use of accurate historical reconstruction and literary quotations and hints, of real and imaginary figures, suggests a very important idea, namely: to conjure up a past age, one needs to take into account the hard facts, but also the collective imagination of that age – what we call *l'immaginario* in Italian. Remarkably, this is exactly what one finds in the historical and counter-historical novels of one of the major postmodernist writers, Thomas Pynchon; it could already be found in the historical episodes of his debut novel, *V.*, published in 1963. I doubt Pratt had read it when he first drew Corto Maltese as a secondary character in his graphic novel *The Ballad of the Salt Sea* in 1967; I do believe, however, that the idea was in the air. On the other hand, Pratt's Corto Maltese stories seem to anticipate what another important comics writer, Alan Moore, was to do in his *League of the Extraordinary Gentlemen*, surely in a most systematic fashion, but also against a much less cosmopolitan and transnational horizon.

In any case, it is by reading these stories from the perspective of war literature studies that the peculiar blend of historical materials and fictional invention becomes evident, hence helping us to place Pratt and his *oeuvre* in a wider artistic and cultural context. One may then ask what added value this reading produces for war literature scholars. An answer may be found if we go back to the beginning. Although it is set in the Southern Pacific, that is, a place one does not immediately connect with the Great War, *The Ballad of the Salt Sea* ends with the execution of a German naval officer, Lieutenant Slütter, accused of sabotage and treason. The military court's ruling is actually highly questionable, as Slütter is a prisoner of war and has done what everybody else around him is doing, fighting for his own country; it is as questionable as other executions depicted in classics of the Great War, such as Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Emilio Lussu's *Sardinian Brigade*, or William March's *Company K*.

Fig. 17: © CONG SA.

I find it remarkable that Pratt chose not to show the moment when the firing squad shoots and the .303 bullets ravage Slütter's body (Pratt 2012 [1967], 189; see fig. 17); he focuses on Pandora Groovesnore instead. She is one of the protagonists of the graphic novel, much younger than Slütter and possibly in love with him. The young survive; mature men die. Perhaps Pratt is staging, in an anamorphic fashion, with a powerful series of temporal and spatial displacements, the death of his father Rolando in an Ethiopian concentration camp, a death which may well have haunted his whole life and his *oeuvre*. Remarkably, Slütter is – like Rolando Pratt – fighting on the losing side; and, having allied with the merciless pirate called The Monk, he is also fighting on the wrong side, like Pratt's father, who was an officer in the PAI, the Police of Italian Africa, an instrument of Fascist colonialism and imperialism.

All in all, Pratt was a victim of war when he was very young; and this is another reason why another war – not the one he actually witnessed – keeps surfacing in the frames of his graphic narratives. Once again, it is a matter of war, of memory, of trauma, of bereavement. Pratt's postmodernist World War I stories access the Great War not through personal, direct memory but by means of post-memory – surely through the experiences of the author's parents and relatives; but these stories unavoidably depict World War I by keeping World War II

as a sort of unsaid, invisible subtext – a very personal and intimate one – that we must nonetheless read and take into account.

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