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Classics Revisited:

A.J. Liebling's *World War II Writings*

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by

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The following essay is the second installment in the Review's "Classics Revisited" series. (For the inaugural essay, see 2008.07.02.) Its author, John Whittier-Ferguson, is professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan. His teaching and research interests include European and American modernisms, writing and war in the twentieth century, modernism and memory, and pedagogy. He is the author of Framing Pieces: Designs of the Gloss in Joyce, Woolf, and Pound (Oxford: OUP, 1996) and many articles in scholarly journals, including "The Liberation of Gertrude Stein: War and Writing," Modernism/Modernity 8 (2001) 405–28. He is also the editor of James Joyce, Poems and Shorter Writings (London: Faber & Faber, 1991; rpt. 2001) and is currently working on a book about late Modernism and World War II. —Ed.

This extraordinary collection, the first of two Library of America volumes devoted to the work of the great American journalist, A.J. Liebling (1904–63), contains all of his reporting from the Second World War. Liebling himself assembled three books from his dispatches, a great many of which were first published in *The New Yorker*, for which he starting writing in 1935: *The Road Back to Paris*; *Normandy Revisited*; and *Mollie and Other War Pieces* (published posthumously).¹ In addition to these works, this volume, ably edited by Peter Hamill (who adds notes, a fairly extensive chronology of Liebling's life, maps of the theaters of war from which he reported, and a useful index), also contains Liebling's introduction and epilogue to a volume of writings by members of the French Resistance.² There is some overlap, in pieces covering the Tunisian campaign, between *Road Back to Paris* and *Mollie*. In addition, there are twenty-six pieces of "Uncollected War Journalism," most sent from France and published in *The New Yorker*. As he self-deprecatingly tells the story in the opening to *The Road Back to Paris*, Liebling became *The New Yorker's* European correspondent, when Janet Flanner, who had the job when war was declared, had to return to the States to take care of her aging mother. Since the magazine—a less substantial, less sociopolitically engaged publication in the late 1930s than it would later become (in no small part because of Liebling's own powerful reporting of the war)—"thought that the Paris-London aspect [of the war] ought to be covered as thoroughly as a Schiaparelli opening" (20), and since Liebling had "spent several man-hours of barroom time impressing St. Claire McKelway, then managing editor, with my profound knowledge of France" (20), he got the job, promising Harold Ross "to keep my end of the war reasonably clean and high-class" (21).³

¹ Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1944; NY: Simon & Schuster, 1958; and NY: Ballantine, 1964, respectively.

² *The Republic of Silence* (NY: Harcourt, 1947).

³ Liebling covers the fall of France, starting in Paris and then following the fleeing French government (and much of its populace) south, leaving for the States at the end of June 1940, after France signs its armistice with Germany. He goes next to Britain, in July of 1941, where he writes about the R.A.F. and London at war and does some profiles of pilots and support teams in the U.S. 8th Army Air Force. He is back in New York for the second half of 1941, but returns to write more pieces from England in 1942. He joins the campaigns in North Africa in the first half of 1943 (concluding with the Axis surrender in May). And he crosses the channel in a 140-person LCIL on D-Day, participating in one troop-ferrying run

It is in this essentially ironic vein, smiling at the ostensibly poor fit between his journal and his subject, dismissive of his qualifications, that Liebling approaches his assignment. Considering his training for the job of war reporter, he admits “I had occasionally risked the contempt of my fellow liberals by reading a book about a soldier” (28) and adds that, “Like Edward Gibbon, a military buff although he had never licked anybody himself, I liked to hear talk about fighting” (29). In Paris during the winter of 1939–40, the period of the so-called “phony war,” he has to assure us: “I do not want to give the impression that I covered Paris for the *New Yorker* entirely from cafes and brothels” (41). The humor here (note the comic precision of “entirely”), as always with Liebling, accomplishes a great deal. Using Ross and “fellow liberals” as stalking horses, he anticipates criticism of *The New Yorker* as a magazine at once too precious and too parochial for the rigors of reporting a war. He claims some credibility as a knockabout American, streetwise and irreverent, closer in his sensibilities and inclinations to “prize-fighters’ seconds, ... press agents for wrestlers, horse clockers, [and] newspaper reporters” than to Eustace Tilley (13). (Of course, in putting himself, even facetiously, beside Gibbon, he suggests larger claims for his work.) He also shows how the realities of war force themselves slowly on Americans’ attentions. Even after the fall of France, when he is stateside again in October of 1940, he feels out of place because his countrymen “hardly seemed to know that anything was wrong” (115). He captures the awful novelty of fascism for anyone who has had the luxury of not following contemporary European politics too closely during the 1930s, playing the part of an innocent American who stumbles upon political perversion. Shortly after arriving in France at the start of the war, he meets “a pathological little Frenchman” who supports Germany: “He was the first overt European-type fascist I had ever seen in the flesh, and he had a horrid fascination for me, like the first man a kid sees wearing lipstick and long black stockings” (42). He can turn the power of a simile against himself, too, as he draws a contrast between his relative comfort in the “ghastly spring” of 1940, when it was possible to move through Europe and think that war might not fully materialize after all (109). Enjoying the perfect weather in Irun, Spain, on his way to Portugal, Liebling “became conscious of this and felt guilty as you do when you walk out of a hospital where your wife is and in a couple of blocks catch yourself whistling” (109). To measure the force of this figure, we should keep in mind that Liebling’s wife, Ann, had been hospitalized with schizophrenia in 1937.

But as the war assumes its global dimensions and Liebling moves to its centers of action, his writing undergoes a profound change: one of the advantages of reading all of his wartime writing sequentially in this collection is watching how the author retreats from center stage to the wings as his increasingly consequential subject appropriately commands his and our full attention. It is a complex change, both stylistic and philosophical. We are always aware that everything we experience in these reports comes from a single and singular point of view. As Liebling himself makes clear, this is reporting rather than history; he observes in a “state of ignorance” and receptivity (955), not of knowledge. Descriptive details and the voices of his subjects are what we follow most in the writing from late 1940 to 1945. Liebling pares his style close to the bone as he files stories from active theaters of war and actual combat: there are fewer elaborate similes and witticisms, less Liebling and more of the world—its victims, its combatants, its particular scenes, its telling details. The prose is less delightfully self-expressive, or self-indulgent (from our twenty-first-century points of view, we may even find we want the author to interrupt his reporting more frequently with asides and diversions, preferring the deliberately rambling, retrospective *Normandy Revisited* to the austerities of much of *The Road Back to Paris* and *Mollie*). When he’s approaching the beachhead in Normandy on 6 June, for example, he scrupulously insists that his readers know nothing more than he knew at the moment: “We had been in sight of the shore for a long while, and now I could recognize our strip of beach from our intelligence photographs” (473). This is not “Omaha,” not a named point on a strategically lucid map, but simply “our strip of beach.” There is an ethics to this style, which regularly refuses the comforts of re-

into shore on the morning of 6 June 1944. He goes ashore at Omaha Beach on 9 June. After a brief return to England, he rejoins the American army in France, following it from the end of June until 25 August, when the troops enter Paris as liberators. After spending a few weeks in Paris, Liebling travels to the south of France to research an inexplicable German killing of civilians and burning of homes in the village of Comblanchien in November 1944; this work yields the piece, “Massacre,” that provides a dark conclusion to *Mollie*.

trospetive clarity and understanding and which points, with the humility appropriate to a man who is writing about those who are generally taking greater risks than he, to Others.

To my mind, the most powerful instance and illustration of Liebling's choices as witness and writer comes just minutes after he has recognized "his" beach on D-Day (it also reminds us, as Liebling himself almost never does explicitly, of the very real risks that he himself took in covering the war). His LCIL (Landing Craft, Infantry, Large) (457) has just put its 140 men ashore (only a little over an hour after the very first wave of boats has hit the beaches), coming under fire from shells and bullets. A shell hits the bow, leaving one man dead and two seriously wounded. The deck where Liebling stands to survey the damage is "sticky with a mixture of blood and condensed milk," since "a fragment of the shell that hit the boys had torn into a carton of cans of milk" (476). Moving back out to sea, to a staging area where one of the transports has hospital facilities, they take on a fourth casualty from another LCIL. Only one of the four casualties is capable of being hoisted up to the hospital ship in a breeches buoy; the other three—two of whom are dead—have to be lifted up in wire baskets. During this grim traverse, "A Coastguardsman reached up for the bottom of one basket so that he could steady it on its way up. At least a quart of blood ran down on him, covering his tin hat, his upturned face, and his blue overalls. He stood motionless for an instant, as if he didn't know what had happened, seeing the world through a film of red, because he wore eyeglasses and blood had covered the lenses" (477). Liebling glosses this event in 1963, as he prepares the essay from the summer of 1944 for publication in *Mollie*: "This was me. It seemed more reserved at the time to do it this way—a news story in which the writer said *he* was bathed in blood would have made me distrust it, if I had been a reader" (477). The skepticism, the self-abnegation, the ability to write while never forgetting his audience's more removed perspective, the rigor that compels him to take himself out of the narrative when he feels he can thereby keep us more wholly bound to his story—these qualities make his reporting both trustworthy and, paradoxically, deeply moving.

The events of 6 June have only begun (it is 7:35 a.m. when his LCIL goes ashore), but Liebling's craft is removed from action because, as he learns the next day, "the German resistance was so strong that now the troops were being taken in only on smaller craft, which offered smaller targets" (481). And instead of providing us with a narrative of the Omaha landings and the fighting that establishes a beachhead, Liebling leaves us stuck with him in his boat—watching, listening and, occasionally and hesitantly, thinking a little. He sees the "reserve first-aid man" (473), a mate named Kallam, "sneak to the far rail and be sicker than I have ever seen a man at sea" (478). They had spent "exactly four minutes" ashore, he hears later ("[m]ost of us on deck would have put it at half an hour" [482]), but now they have time to spare, and Liebling suggests the quality of that time with measured, simple clauses, exhausted diction, a prose devoid of affect: "We passed close by the command ship and signalled that we had completed our mission. We received a signal, "Wait for orders," and for the rest of the day we loafed, while we tried to reconstruct what had happened to us. Almost everybody on the ship had a headache" (478). This is understatement worthy of Hemingway at his very best.

Liebling would probably object to labeling his bloody accident traumatic—more severe trauma is taking place all around him; it has left its effects in the dripping basket over his head—but he recalls his experience a number of times, exploring the moment as if it were a wound that was slow to heal. On 7 June, we return in his memory briefly to the afternoon of the 6th, to witness an aftershock of the morning's losses: "I remember, on the afternoon of D Day, sitting on a ration case on the pitching deck and being tempted by the rosy picture on the label of a roast-beef can. I opened it, but I could only pick at the jellied juice, which reminded me too much of the blood I had seen that morning, and I threw the tin over the rail" (482).

Surreal, grotesque, and completely ordinary. Two sentences later, and he's already focusing our attention on someone else—a man named "Barrett, a seaman from North Carolina" (482). But this particular bout of nausea is at once more startling and somehow more intimately disturbing as it comes over a man who eats everything and who takes a gourmand's delight in describing his food (losing his appetite was "a most unusual difficulty for me," Liebling points out in his afterward to this chapter [495]). It stays with him for almost twenty years. He writes in 1963 that it is "the incident of that day that recurs to me most often" (495).

Also in this afterward, he retells the morning's occurrence—the source, after all, of the afternoon revulsion for the canned meat—now adding the dead man's name and a few other recollected details of casualties that had been “barred by the censor” in 1944 (495). But he remains careful to keep his historical understanding distinct from his wartime experience, leaving this partial account of D-Day as it stood for him when he wrote it, “because it is on the whole more accurate than I could make it today. A situation later assumes meanings that it did not have at the time, and you write them into it in retrospect and fool yourself” (495).

When he again tells the story of his being “soaked in blood” on D-Day morning (839) in *Normandy Revisited* (he alludes to it, too, in the foreword to this book [821]), it comes to stand for the enormous distances between present and past—the distances that history generally aims to collapse by means of narrative but that experience insists upon. He has returned, in 1955, to the pier at Weymouth from which he embarked for the assault on Normandy and finds there a new pier and a “tomato boat from Guernsey” unloading its cargo. The different cargo of dead and wounded in that basket returns to his memory, as do the circumstances of their deaths, in details almost identical to those he first recounted in 1944. Then he and his guide walk “down to the tomato boat . . . , and I said it looked the place all right, but of course it didn't” (839). This is the slightly melancholy register in which much of *Normandy Revisited* is cast, a record of losses and change more than recoveries (which makes his return, on the last page of this memory book, to the Hôtel Louvois on the Square Louvois, where he finds everything precisely the same, “as if I had just stepped out for a walk around the fountain” [992], a triumphant, deeply reassuring instance of preservation).

Acknowledging temporal distances becomes, for Liebling, a historiographical principle: “history written a hundred years after the event is more accurate than the kind written ten years after it” (739), he asserts in his introduction to *The Republic of Silence*. And as he writes from France a decade after the war, considering the violently contesting narratives maintained by each of the different groups trying to shape, to tell, and to suppress the nation's wartime history, he explains why, for many years to come, the single perspective may be all we can expect: “In Paris now there is more agreement about what went on under the Merovingians than what happened in the years between 1940 and 1944” (972).

Spatial distance is enormously consequential, too, for analogous reasons: lived history changes dramatically depending on where its witness stands. A notable strength of Liebling's war writings is that he keeps us mindful of the limitations of his point of view. Before looking at an illustration of a different though related strength—the structural ingenuity and integrity of his compositions—I turn to another episode where his position is crucial to his story—a narrative of battle in which, instead of coming under fire and experiencing the effects of battle up close, Liebling gives us an observer's much more distant war. The shells and blood and bodies are all so far away as to be barely visible. As a consequence, we are compelled to recognize how war looks to its planners at the Command Post and, in fact, how war looks to most people most of the time—including, of course (leaping to the most extreme distance of all), to the readers of *The New Yorker*, who found this essay in their magazines on 1 May 1943. Liebling's account of a tank battle in Tunisia, in the spring of 1943, on a range of hills to the south of Gafsa called Djebel Berda, is a salutary inquiry into what W. H. Auden calls the “human position” of suffering in his roughly contemporaneous meditation, “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1938): “how it takes place/ While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along” (ll. 3–4). We must not confuse distance with insignificance: the battle is of demonstrable importance. When it is over, the German Tenth Panzer Division has lost some “forty or fifty tanks” and a great many men. It stands as the conclusion to *The Road Back to Paris*, its successful outcome reassuring Liebling that the German army can be “licked” and that “the road back to Paris was clear” (307–8). Given the freight this encounter carries, we could reasonably expect it to be something grander in the telling, something burnished with a good deal more martial polish.

But Liebling, in the company of “a young liaison officer named Troup Howard Matthews . . . who had nothing to do for hours at a stretch,” watches the battle while sitting “on a mud wall” several miles from the action (305). While they sit, waiting for something to begin, they try “to enumerate the bars in Rockefeller Center” (305). After the firing has commenced, after a sentence devoted to the limitations of “the American 105 and 155 howitzers” which have successfully turned back a first foray of German tanks, Liebling ties off

his paragraph neatly with a short sentence that deliberately takes us from artillery to less exciting fare: “Matthews and I went to breakfast” (306). When we meet the commander of the tank-destroyer battalion, “Old Baker,” later in this long day, we find that he “looks like Father Christmas minus the whiskers,” and that he is like any soldier in any army anywhere: he “had somehow captured a German who had a lot of pornographic postcards in his wallet. Baker was happy as a lark” (307). The fearsome tanks themselves, from this far-removed perch at the C.P., undergo a series of figurative transformations, growing larger, by way of similes, as they approach, but never amounting to machines that inspire awe. They start as “a couple of small dots creeping hesitantly toward us like lice across a panhandler’s shirt front” (306) (at this point, Matthews has to assure Liebling that these dots are indeed tanks). Two miles out, “they had outgrown the bedbug stage. They were now about as big as caramels” (306). After Matthews and Liebling break for breakfast, the sport (part of Liebling’s figuration is that he is watching a game) reveals more observable conflict but retains its half-comic air: “All day long, that day of the stadium battle, the German tanks toddled about the field and in the first rows of our hill grandstand while the artillery potted at them and the tank destroyers, waddling into action like bull pups, drew their fire and returned it” (306).

There is the slightest chance that the “grandstand” may be violated by the diminished tanks, but the all-American dogs (the most famous bull pup in American culture of the 1920s and 1930s, of course, was “Pete” of the “Buster Brown” and “Our Gang” comedies) worry the toddlers into retreat. Readers need be no more alarmed than Liebling by the Afrikakorps, so competently are the Germans held in check. Liebling has a quiet, unheroic epiphany in the late afternoon, as he stands “with some other idlers” waiting for the last “big attack” of the day (307). He quotes to himself the last line of A.E. Housman’s “The Oracles” (1922)—a description of the Spartans just before their doomed defense of Greece at Thermopylae: “‘The Spartans on the sea-wet rock, sat down and combed their hair,’ ... understanding for the first time that they had sat down not because they were heroes but because there was nothing else to do” (307). Intended by Housman to capture an instance of insouciant bravery, the line shows us, as Liebling reconsiders it against his own experience, how much of war is waiting and how much of bellicose poetry is fabrication.

One of the paradoxes of this sophisticated, often ironic narrative is that its very offhandedness becomes a sign of its confident patriotism. So unshaken is Liebling’s faith in the Allied cause and in American might that he can afford to dismiss the German tanks as bugs or caramels. Without resorting to conventional nationalism and the clichés of war boosterism, he nevertheless assures us that nothing can stand between our army and its ultimate victory. There is plenty of time for breakfast, and room to think about Father Christmas, dirty postcards, bull pups, sports, and poetry, because our side has the situation well under control. If we want an instructive contrast and an illustration of a powerful but more ordinary, more widely circulated, more easily beloved form of war reporting, we might put this tank battle beside a similar one waged a month earlier in Tunisia and covered by Ernie Pyle. Even when he, like Liebling, is looking at distant events through binoculars, his prose registers what he already knows about the power of tanks more than what he actually sees through the glass: “we watched the fantastic surge of caterpillar metal move forward amidst its own dust”; “the entire desert was surging in one gigantic movement”; “our tanks were across the vast plain”; “We looked, and could see through our glasses the enemy advancing. They were far away, perhaps 10 miles—narrow little streaks of dust, like plumes, speeding down the low sloping plain.” The miles between Pyle and the tanks have little effect on the speed and size of the combatants’ “almost mythical” vehicles; the sublimity of battle dominates this description even before Pyle drives down in a jeep to within a mile of the actual shooting.⁴

This essentially simple, heroic register is still (or “again,” depending on how one assesses reporting during the Vietnam war era) the dominant rhetorical mode in which most of America reads and hears and thinks about its soldiers: our media’s representations of war lean more toward Pyle than Liebling, a fact about American culture that Liebling himself analyzes in a tonally complex essay on Pyle in 1950. Pyle “was the only American war correspondent who made a large personal impress on the nation in the Second

⁴ *Reporting World War II, Part One: American Journalism 1938–1944* (NY: Library of America, 1995) 545–47.

World War” (752). Liebling does not unequivocally celebrate this achievement, given his own inclinations to let his subjects have most of the space on his pages. What Pyle’s readers desire, and what he unfailingly gives them, is “an emotional bridge” between the war and the readers back home (752). Unlike Liebling’s, Pyle’s prose is “folksy” (753), though not accidentally or naturally so: “Ernie had spent six years before the war building up a reputation as an Average American. During that time, he produced a column that dealt mostly with subjects like the beauty of the Grand Canyon and the human qualities of human beings in all parts of Nebraska” (754). Given the awfulness of war, its privations and accumulated losses, readers understandably gravitate toward cliché and emotionally accessible work, even when they suspect there is more to be said: “the portrait [of “G.I. Joe”] was sentimentalized, but the soldier was pleased to recognize himself in it, and millions of newspaper readers recognized their sons and lovers in Pyle’s soldiers” (752). As Liebling’s essay reveals its analytical edge, we realize that it is not only about Pyle but, more generally, about the problem of all war journalism—“the repetitiveness of situations” (754).

Published a little more than three months after the start of the Korean war, this essay, occasioned by Lee Miller’s biography of Pyle,⁵ is crucial to an understanding of Liebling’s own work as a war correspondent. Even its title—“Pyle Set the Style”—alters its meaning as the piece unfolds, with the emphasis shifting from the proper noun to the verb. “Set” perfectly characterizes the ways that generic expectations constrain writers, particularly when the genre responds to fundamentally repetitive events that yet carry enormous emotional significance: everything matters terribly in wartime, but so much also looks more or less the same. It’s not long, if we’re reading regularly about a war in progress, before we come to feel that we can sort its stories by type, and that we have read samples of each type several times: “The last war ended only five years ago, and we are all in danger of becoming callous” (755)—inured to an endless stream of war stories from a century that had come to seem almost endlessly at war. Using as his illustration several worthy reporters covering the Korean War, including Frank Conniff of the *Journal-American*, Liebling wryly notes that almost every reporter eventually arrives “in the classic Pyle situation—‘Conniff in a Fox Hole’” (755), which Conniff himself is forced to acknowledge in one of his own bulletins as “just another shelling story ... a story of something that happened again and again during the last war” (755). Liebling confronts and escapes this condition of cliché regularly in his war writing, and I would like to conclude this survey of the qualities of his journalism by briefly studying his portrait of an unlikely, thoroughly American, utterly modern war hero: “Mollie”—the dead private whose nickname gives Liebling’s last book its title.

First published in two issues of the *The New Yorker* in the summer of 1945, “Mollie” perfectly illustrates my earlier assertion that Liebling’s honoring of temporal and spatial distances in his work is related to the ingenuity with which he builds his pieces. This portrait is every bit as much about the challenges of portraiture as it is about the mysterious man at its center, and its looping, digressive, temporally and geographically extensive form structurally captures the challenges to twin acts of making: that of an American fighter and of the essay we’re reading. Pyle tends to familiarize G.I.s and give the comforting illusion that we are there with our subject, hardly needing the mediating presence of the writer (who, in any case, seems to be very much like us). Liebling leads us instead along a more idiosyncratic, fundamentally mysterious trail toward what is finally a compendium of fascinating snippets. One way he avoids cliché in this essay is by giving us so few and such unusual pieces to grasp. Even material suited to a much more conventional narrative of a war hero (and there is a Sergeant York story at the center of “Mollie”) gets reframed and, to an important extent, made fresh and puzzling by Liebling’s arrangement—the way he overlays the accounts of his assembly of this story and the soldier’s own brief life. The actual title for the essay is not, in fact, its subject’s name, but a phrase lifted from the Army’s official report of Mollie’s greatest exploit—the capturing of six hundred Italian soldiers during “The Battle of Sened, 23 March, ’43”: “Confusion is Normal in Combat” (335). Liebling archly notes that the phrase, one of the “combat lessons” the Army takes from this unlikely triumph, “would make a fine title for a book on war” (335). It works well for this narrative in particular (subtitled “Quest for Mollie”), since “confusion” is the operative description for the state in which a reader

⁵ *The Story of Ernie Pyle* (NY: Viking, 1950).

works through this essay and the way Liebling characterizes his attempts to give us what we have here.

We catch only the merest glimpse of Mollie—his name—at the story’s outset (it will be more than ten pages before he makes a somewhat more proper entrance). Liebling maintains we must understand the landscape and the people of “the northern coast of western Tunisia,” where “the most important part of the history of Mollie” takes place (315). He gives us pages about the condition of “La Piste Forestière”—literally, “The Foresters’ Track,” a strategically important dirt road along which Liebling, the American Army, and the Corps Franc d’Afrique travel, going between the town of Sedjenane and Cap Serrat, on the coast. “Bits of the war,” he explains, “were threaded along the Foresters’ Track like beads on a string, and the opportunity to become familiar with them was forced upon you” (316). The road-as-necklace figure tells us to expect a miscellany, a picaresque composition. Before we come to Mollie, “the gaudiest bead” (316), we observe, strung along the road, a polyglot crew of various components of the Allied war effort: the French and French-speaking Africans, Jews, “anti-Nazis from concentration camps” (318), Spanish Republicans, Moroccans, de Gaullists, Mohammedans, the wounded and their medics, artillery, animals, traffic of all sorts, civilians, and prisoners. This loosely affiliated collection of Allies and their captives sometimes comes under fire from German artillery, but what Liebling mostly discovers, as he travels back and forth along the road in the spring of 1943, is evidence of war taking place somewhere nearby—the wounded, the supply vehicles, those moving up to or back from combat. There is, we imagine, a plan for what goes back and forth on this road, but we’re not privy to it. The preamble to Mollie’s story requires us to lose ourselves in details and forces on us a wholly local point of view analogous to that of the soldiers themselves. We find the focus for this piece by accident, in fact, and in the most puzzling condition possible. Liebling and an A.P. correspondent named Hal Boyle stop their jeep to interview four badly wounded soldiers who had been shot by Germans feigning surrender. Boyle works on the story at hand, while Liebling’s attention wanders to something even less intelligible than the deceptive Germans and their victims: “While Boyle was getting the names and addresses of the men, I saw another American soldier by the side of the road. This one was dead. A soldier nearby said that the dead man had been a private known as Mollie. A blanket covered his face, so I surmised that it had been shattered, but there was no blood on the ground, so I judged that he had been killed in the brush” (327). Liebling spends the rest of the essay asking about this partly obscured body, figuratively trying to remove the blanket from the dead man’s face, to get a good look at a soldier who is both famous and largely unknown. His first query about the dead man, posed to a sergeant nearby, elicits scorn that anyone could be unfamiliar with this casualty and then, as Liebling presses a little further, produces more questions:

“That’s Mollie. Comrade Molotov. The Mayor of Broadway. Didn’t you ever hear of him? Jeez, Mac, he once captured six hundred Eytalians by himself.... Sniper got him, I guess. I don’t know, because he went out with the French, and he was found dead up there in the hills. He always liked to do crazy things.”

“Was his name really Molotov?” I asked.

“No,” said the sergeant, “he just called himself that. The boys mostly shortened it to Mollie. I don’t even know what his real name was” (327).

“Obviously,” Liebling tells us, already beginning to commit himself to his silent subject, “there was a good story in Mollie, but he was not available for an interview” (328).

“Mollie” is, besides much else, an inquiry into the alchemy of writing—whereby curiosity leads to narrative, experience becomes history, facts become story and legend. The structure of the remainder of this essay might be diagrammed as an “X”—one axis belonging to Mollie, the other to Liebling. Mollie’s biographical axis traces the gradual and quintessentially American act of self-creation undertaken by a young Russian immigrant named Karl Petuskia, who works first as a watchman on construction sites, and becomes Karl C. Warner and then Carl Warren, busboy at Jimmy Kelly’s club on Sullivan Street in Manhattan, at which point he is also known as “the Mayor of Broadway.” At the time of his death, he is the soldier Molotov, “Mollie,” private in G company, 2nd battalion, 60th infantry regiment, 9th division of the U.S. Army: a decorated war hero who was also “the greatest natural-born foul-up in the Army” (330). The other axis, Liebling’s narrative line, leads us forward in time but backwards into history, starting with Mollie’s

achieved, last identity as a soldier and unmaking the dead and already partly legendary man, piece by piece, until we discover Karl, the boy with his first job in his adopted country. Mollie, “always in trouble” (327), responds to the challenges of life by “always collecting things” (327) that might help him negotiate new situations. Liebling, too, is a collector in this essay, gathering up stories about Mollie, starting shortly after Easter in 1943 (328) and ending sometime “long after” the end of the war (343), though Liebling’s assembly is ironically also a process of disrobing his subject.

Mollie, obsessed with appearances, always slipping into ever more ostentatious versions of his own idea of a suitable uniform—not so much a uniform as a paradigm for all grand uniforms—would not wholly have welcomed the journalist’s attentions. A wounded veteran describes for Liebling the gaudy figure Mollie cut among his peers: “He looked like a soldier out of some other army, always wearing them twenty-dollar green tailor-made officers’ shirts and sometimes riding boots, with a French berrit with a long rooster feather that he got off an Italian prisoner’s hat, and a long black-and-red cape that he got off another prisoner for a can of C ration” (330). Paradigm and parody are intimately related here; it is impossible to tell how much of Mollie’s attire and his performance is a send-up of or an homage to the Army. This is, after all, the war hero who “was court-martialled twenty or thirty times, but the Major always got him out of it” (330). “He wasn’t afraid of nothing” (331), but he cannot follow an order. He has what Liebling celebrates as American virtues—habitual disobedience and the conviction that he deserves more, and better than he has: “‘Vot a schvindler!’ That was his favorite saying” (333). His sense of entitlement transforms his regulation Army-issue shelter into a kitschy display of American style made manifest as he moves through Africa—taking whatever comes to hand, throwing it all together, and making it feel like some garish kind of home: “He had the biggest blanket roll in the Ninth Division, with a wall tent inside it and some Arabian carpets and bronze lamps and a folding washstand and about five changes of uniform.... When he pitched his tent, it looked like a concession at Coney Island” (331). As this inventory of a myth makes clear, Mollie not only brings courage and captured Italians to his fellow soldiers; he also provides a perfect occasion for their own myth-making: these stories, told with such evident delight to Liebling, stand as their own small acts of defiance—of the rigors and deprivations of the Army, of the enemy, of regulation-bound officers, of all systems of order and discipline generally.

Some twenty pages into the profile of private Molotov, and a year after the now-famous prisoner-taking episode in Tunisia, we come upon the official account of “what Mollie had done in the fight against the six hundred Italians” (334). By this point, Liebling knows his subject is seeming increasingly improbable, more a folk hero than an actual person (“He never shot crap for less than fifty dollars a roll ... and he never slept with any woman under an actress” [333]). The descriptive pamphlet has maps and facts aplenty. It bears out what a wounded comrade of Mollie’s notes in his own earlier version of the story: “A disciplined soldier would never have did what Mollie done. He was a very unusual guy” (332). In an unexpectedly fierce battle with Italian soldiers in the hills above the village of Sened, Mollie, with another soldier, approached hundreds of Italian soldiers and arranged “a surrender conference” (336) on the afternoon of 22 March 1943. One hundred forty-seven Italians surrendered. The next morning, as the battle resumed, he returned alone to the enemy position where he “assist[ed] ... in artillery direction by shouting” (336). More Italians surrendered (537 by the official count) and brought vehicles, weapons, and ammunition with them (337). His commanding officer’s three-sentence summary of the official actions taken after this victory ends with the most glorious non sequitur of the entire, illogical essay: “We put him in for a D.S.C. for what he did, but it was turned down. Then we put in for a Silver Star, and that was granted, but he was killed before he ever heard about it. He was a terrible soldier” (337).

In keeping with the expressive structural complexity of this essay, the last pages of “Mollie” might be considered a meditation on ways of ending, and of keeping open-ended, this tragicomical tribute to a fallen soldier. At the Waiters and Waitresses Union headquarters, where Mollie had been a vociferous participant at meetings in 1940 and 1941, before the U.S. entered the war, a young woman provides for a fellow worker a movingly simple summary of “Karl Warner’s” transformation: “He has been killed in Africa. He was a hero” (342). It takes little imagination to realize how many of this essay’s first readers in the early summer of 1945

might have found this powerful formulation comforting as they thought of other war dead. Suspending, for a moment, all that Liebling has told us of this convoluted story, we find in these two short sentences, in an important sense, all that needs to be said. Death for an ideal, as Yeats declares in "Easter, 1916," can bring an unworldly clarity of focus to even the most disorderly life:

He, too, has resigned his part
 In the casual comedy;
 He, too, has been changed in his turn,
 Transformed utterly:
 A terrible beauty is born. (ll. 36-40)

One strand of this essay's ending honors Mollie with a kind of patriotism common in Pyle's work, though delivered there with less artistry and therefore more open to skepticism. Paradoxically, the whimsy, the ironies, the incongruities that mark Liebling's profile of Mollie allow him to express sentiments that might seem unearned in a more purely celebratory obituary. Thinking of the man he now claims as a "post-humous pal," Liebling starts to imagine other Mollies everywhere on the transformed, post-war streets of his city. With an admonition perhaps relevant to some of the urbane readers of *The New Yorker*, he cautions us not to dismiss his hopeful vision of the American public: "It cheers me to think there may be more like him all around me—a notion I would have dismissed as sheer romanticism before World War II. Cynicism is often the shamefaced product of inexperience" (342). But Mollie is no straightforward hero; he is the profane version of Sergeant York—at least as much Falstaff as Henry V, who emphatically chooses life and pleasure even in a time of war: "The action that earned him his Silver Star cost no lives. It saved them" (342). And like Falstaff at Shrewsbury (*I Henry IV* 5.5.110-27), rising from what merely looked like his death on the battlefield, Mollie teases Liebling into a potentially endless string of further stories by seeming, ultimately, too vital to die: "I lived with him so long that I once half-convinced myself that he was not dead. This was when I began to write a play about him" (342). The delightful beginnings of the further adventures of Mollie—filling out the last paragraphs of this essay that only seems as though it's ending—have him as a Moroccan in disguise, now fighting in "a less restricted kind of war, accumulating swag as he [goes]" (343). Perhaps he's living in Morocco, "with a harem" and fabulous oil wealth. Maybe he's serving as a delegate from the newly formed "Touareg state" to the newly formed United Nations, wearing "a veil covering his face below the eyes, to conceal his grin" (343). Or he "switched uniforms with a dead German" and worked then "as a secret agent" and "confounded all the Wehrmacht's plans" (343).

Liebling drops his ideas for a play but his penultimate paragraph bears witness to the continuing pull Mollie exerts on his chronicler. "Long after I had abandoned thought of writing about Mollie again," Liebling begins, "I had a letter from a lady ... that cleared up the question of how Mollie transmuted his last name" (343). We return to one of the story's first mysteries—where did Mollie get his name?—and there is a structural symmetry, too, in that this last piece of information arrives in a letter from the sister of the man, a construction boss, whom we might call the "original" Karl Warner. In this essay that depends upon the transmission of documents and accounts, stories circulate even after Liebling decides he has finished writing. He is somewhat chagrined to confess, in his closing sentence, that this latest detail seems like the purest fabrication—a sentimental cliché—the poor but worthy immigrant making up his first Americanized name in a gesture of homage to his earliest benefactor: "I am sure she is right, but it sounds like the detail out of an old-fashioned boy's book" (344). It's not quite "Conniff in a Fox Hole," because it takes place in a past so far removed from the ambitions of novelty that characterize news reports, and also because it is not something Liebling himself has conceived or written.

Over and over in his war reporting, Liebling artfully steps aside, giving his readers a better view of his subject, letting us hear others' voices, observing a rhetorical principle in which he effaces himself in direct proportion to the intensity, magnitude, and gravity of the situation he describes. Of course, this vanishing act paradoxically becomes a stylistic trademark, and I hope that my brief survey has suggested how carefully Liebling constructs these graceful compositions.

Like any great writer, Liebling always has designs upon us. At the end of "Mollie," for instance, he has

both his boy's-book conclusion (written by someone else) and his grown-up's smile at that ending. He has his city full of unsung heroes moving through the streets around him and his studied response to anyone who would mock that romance-in-the-making. He has written a comic eulogy that surprises us with its emotional power, a war piece about a recipient of the Silver Star who appears to have killed none of his enemies. "Mollie"—the essay—describes and celebrates and, in its formal complexities, exemplifies what Mollie represents: a grand, seedy, boastful, contradictory, self-aware, self-created, self-sacrificing, and indomitable America.