



Speaking the Unspeakable:
War Trauma in Six Contemporary Novels

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Abstract

Much recent work in the fields of cultural history and trauma studies has emphasised the need to consider both the nature and the significance of war trauma, a spectre which haunts discourses of masculinity and nation. This upsurge of interest in the psychic ramifications of war raises the question of how such trauma might be represented in narrative form. This thesis presents readings of six novels which depict something of the nature of war trauma. Collectively, the novels suggest that the attempt to narrativise war trauma is inherently problematic, and this study traces the disjunctions between narrative and war trauma which ensure that war trauma remains an elusive and private phenomenon; the gulf between private experience and public discourse haunts each of the novels. A central theme of this thesis is that the very act of engaging with war trauma narratives forces us to confront "events in excess of our frames of reference" (Shoshana Felman "Education" 16). This confrontation implicates us in a set of incommensurable histories which confound notions of chronological progression and historical reference. I argue that although the elusive nature of war trauma complicates notions of history, reading and representation, this epistemological disruption is a necessary condition for meaningful dialogues between readers and writers of war trauma narratives.

In order to explore the problematic relationships between history, memory, and narrative which structure stories about war trauma, this thesis is divided into two sections, "Other People's Trauma" and "Trauma Literature." I contend that the concerns and narrative structure of Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy are markedly different to those of the novels examined in Section Two, which are all informed by first-hand experience of

war trauma: James Jones's *The Thin Red Line*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. Ultimately, though, I identify several themes and concerns common to all six novels, and maintain that each of the texts supports my central thesis: that war trauma resists articulation and confounds notions of truth and history.