



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implicates us in a set of incommensurable histories which confound notions of chronological progression and historical reference.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.

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent for a copy of my thesis to be deposited in the University Library and to be made available for loan and photocopying.

 Jeremy E. Mackinnon
18th December 2000

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Introduction

Speaking the Unspeakable: War Trauma Stories

[Y]ou cannot ask a soldier to forget his battlefields.

Primo Levi¹

From a certain perspective one might even hazard to say that the great trouble with the world was that that which survived was held in hard evidence as to past events. A false authority clung to what persisted, as if those artifacts of the past which had endured had done so by some act of their own will. Yet the witness could not survive the witnessing. In the world that came to be that which prevailed could never speak for that which perished but could only parade its own arrogance. It pretended symbol and summation of the vanished world but was neither.

*The Crossing*²

As we grapple with the legacy of a century blighted by two World Wars and innumerable smaller conflicts, there has been a proliferation of works exploring the impact of war on cultural practices and societal norms. Whereas the study of history has long been concerned with war's role in the shaping of nations and empires, much of this recent writing has taken the form of cultural history: rather than concentrating on military campaigns or strategies, it examines the cultural conditions in which war is conducted, and the residual traces of war which permeate and structure post-war society and subjectivity.³ One specific area to which much recent attention has been devoted is a phenomenon whose many names attest to its problematic, contested status: war neurosis, battle fatigue, shell-

¹ Primo Levi, *The Mirror Maker*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1993) 193.

² Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing* (London: Picador, 1994) 410-11.

³ Eric Leed, for example, notes that his own text is "not a military history" (ix), and argues that "the cessation of hostilities did not mean the end of the war experience" (xi).

shock, war trauma, soldier's heart, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder are but some of the terms that have been employed to refer to the common incidence of mental breakdown and psychic trauma among soldiers and veterans of the twentieth century's many wars. Lingering long after the last shots of any given war have been fired, this psychic malaise may be characterised as a spectre, a rupture in the social fabric which haunts discourses of history, masculinity and nation. As cultural historians evaluate the impact of war on society, they frequently encounter the spectre of men whose sanity must be reckoned among the vast number of casualties which litter the violent history of the twentieth century.⁴

Interest in the phenomenon of war trauma has not been confined to the realm of cultural history, though, and is evident in several other fields, among them literary theory, psychoanalytic theory, and gender studies. It also figures prominently in the emerging field of trauma studies, which draws on each of these disciplines.⁵ Given this recent surge of interest in war trauma, it is perhaps surprising that more work on the subject has not been undertaken in the field of textual analysis, especially considering the importance accorded to the literary realm by many of those working in trauma studies; literature is often posited as a source for the production of knowledge about trauma.⁶ This theoretical emphasis has not yet been matched by a corresponding increase in close readings of texts which depict either psychic breakdown in war, or the impact of war trauma on veterans attempting to re-integrate into civilian society. In several cases, such texts have been employed as evidence for broader arguments about trauma, gender or history: Kaja Silverman's *Male Subjectivity*

⁴ Leed claims that "war neurosis [...] must engage the attention of social and cultural historians at a number of levels" (164).

⁵ Geoffrey Hartman's article "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies" contains a good review of works in this area. Hartman speaks of both "trauma theory" (537) and "trauma studies" (552); I have elected to employ the latter term.

⁶ Hartman, for example, argues that "[trauma] theory [...] is strongly affected by literary practice" (537).

at the Margins and Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* ("intended as a contribution toward the feminist revolution in psychiatric history," 20) are examples of this kind of approach. There are relatively few recent studies, though, which treat literary texts about war trauma as the primary object of inquiry.⁷

Taking the recent upsurge of interest in war trauma as a point of departure, this thesis presents close readings of six novels written in the second half of the twentieth century in which war trauma features prominently. It examines the novels' varying depictions of society, subjectivity and masculinity, but is also concerned with issues of representation. It explores the problematic relationships between experience, memory and narrative which structure the texts, and which constitute one of their primary common themes; the significance of the latter point cannot be overstated. The central questions which recur throughout this work address the gulf between experiences of war trauma and narrative depictions of such experience. Is there something about the nature of war trauma which inhibits its representation, thereby silencing those who desperately need to tell their story? Does the very language of psychiatric and historical discourse form a barrier to the articulation of individual, personal experiences of trauma? Might expectations regarding the kinds of discourse and experience which may contribute to historical knowledge serve to marginalise veterans whose traumatic histories effectively silence them? Lastly, what narrative strategies are employed in order to depict the dissolution of subjectivity and chronological memory?

In short, this thesis examines aspects of discourse, memory and narrative which together ensure that the articulation of war trauma remains an extremely difficult task. It focuses on literary depictions of war trauma, and explores the idea that the literary realm

⁷ Notable exceptions include Karen DeMeester's article on *Mrs. Dalloway*, Misha Kavka's study of *Return of the Soldier*, and Anne Whitehead's article on *Regeneration*.

provides a site through which problematic aspects of war trauma—which resist representation in other forms of discourse—may be conveyed. Ultimately, though, it considers the possibility that the story of war trauma may never be told fully; Kali Tal asserts that “the task of the trauma author is an impossible one,”⁸ and Misha Kavka claims that “trauma is precisely that which resists articulation” (167).

“Speak[ing] *for* others and *to* others”: The Public and the Private

Collectively, the novels examined in this thesis suggest that the attempt to depict war trauma in narrative form is inherently problematic. The elusiveness of war trauma, its refusal to be easily located or mapped, suggests that ultimately it must constitute a supremely private phenomenon, a defining experience in the history of the survivor which also ensures his isolation and his alienation from wider social histories and cultural memories.⁹ As I argue in Chapter Four, even *The Thin Red Line*—the oldest, longest and most conventional of the six narratives—ultimately foregrounds its own failings, implicitly criticising the notions of narrative truth and collective memory. “One day one of their number would write a book about all this, but [...] none of them would remember it that way,” concludes *The Thin Red Line*’s omniscient narrator (529), as if warning us to respect the privacy of the text, to avoid reading it either as a treatise on the general nature of trauma, or as a definitive account of a specific historical moment. Martin Jay claims that “the dialectic of exterior, public commemoration of the past and its interior, private traces refuses easy reconciliation” (221), and Alistair Thomson notes the “pain and difficulty of forging the gap between personal experiences and public legend” (172). *The Thin Red*

⁸ Kali Tal, “Speaking the Language of Pain” 231. All citations to follow are from this article.

⁹ This thesis focuses on male experiences of war trauma. I have therefore elected to employ the possessive pronoun ‘his’ when making general statements about subjectivity.

Line's final sentence exemplifies the manner in which the gulf between private experience and public discourse haunts narratives of war trauma.

However, if *The Thin Red Line* concludes by alluding to the irrevocably individual and private nature of war trauma, this should not distract us from the fact that the declaration itself takes place in the public realm, for the acts of writing and reading novels are surely social in nature. Shoshana Felman argues that

to bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely of that solitude. And yet, the *appointment* to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak *for* others and *to* others. ("Education" 15, emphasis in original)

Enacting dialogues between readers and authors, the novels studied in the body of this thesis constitute shared social spaces, sites at which the histories of survivor and reader must converge at least momentarily in a process of attempted reenactment. Felman contends that "a 'life-testimony' is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can *penetrate us like an actual life*" ("Education" 14, emphasis in original). I want to suggest that in engaging with the testimonies of others, we ourselves become imbricated with the fractured histories which permeate them, which dictate both the content and the structure of the narratives. I will argue, in other words, that to engage with narratives of war trauma is to witness history in "its repetition" (Ramadanovic 58).

In seeking to glean something of the truth of war trauma through the act of reading, we may perhaps be frustrated by the manner in which truth seems to arise only distantly and ephemerally, often in the form of paradox. Nevertheless, if we as readers are drawn

into a sphere in which temporal and epistemological distinctions blur and dissolve, and if we are thereby forced to interrogate our own notions of history and truth, it is perhaps only through such dislocation that any collective knowledge of trauma may arise, no matter how partial or provisional. If narratives of war trauma may at times seem fantastic or irrational, we must engage with precisely those elements of the stories in order to experience anything of the nature of traumatic histories. Geoffrey Hartman observes that “the post-traumatic story often needs a ‘suspension of disbelief’” (541), and asserts that “traumatic knowledge [...] would seem to be a contradiction in terms. It is as close to nescience as to knowledge” (537). I shall consider the notion that the tentative understanding—or, more precisely, the lack of understanding—arising through the shared participation of writer and reader in the process of reenactment may ultimately constitute the best available form of “knowledge” about war trauma, and the most appropriate testimony to it.

The Stories of War Trauma

I have noted that much work has been produced in recent times which addresses the phenomenon of war trauma. In the area of cultural history, Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* and Eric Leed’s *No Man’s Land*—both published in the 1970s—served to focus attention on the widespread incidence of war trauma in the First World War, a condition identified by contemporary psychiatrists as “shell-shock.” Showalter’s *The Female Malady* also examines the episode of shell-shock; curiously, Showalter analyses it as part of her project to “allow *women* to speak for themselves” (20, emphasis added). These three texts have been influential in setting the tone for many discussions of shell-shock. Some other works which cover this territory include Anthony Babington’s *Shell-Shock*, David Armstrong’s “Madness and Coping,” Sandra Gilbert’s “Soldier’s Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War,” Samuel Hynes’s *A War*

Imagined, Paul Lerner's *Hysterical Men*, Ruth Leys's "Traumatic Cures: Shell Shock, Janet, and the Question of Memory," and Martin Stone's "Shellshock and the Psychologists." Central to all of these discussions is the attempt to situate shell-shock with respect to contemporary discourses of gender and mental health which dictated its treatment and cultural impact.

While war trauma has figured prominently in the field of cultural history, it also features in countless works which may be characterised as having a psychiatric or psychoanalytic focus. It is not surprising that one of the earliest of these works was by Freud, who addressed the subject in his introduction to *Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses*, published in 1921. Another early work on the topic, *Instinct and the Unconscious: A Contribution to a Biological Theory of the Psycho-Neuroses*, was written by the army psychiatrist W.H.R. Rivers; in his capacity as a character in Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, Rivers features prominently in this thesis. Stone's "Shellshock and the Psychologists" and John Talbott's "Soldiers, Psychiatrists, and Combat Trauma" both contain good reviews of the early psychiatric writing on war trauma. As the century progressed, psychiatric interpretations of war trauma evolved; the concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is but the latest in a series of attempts to map out the territory. Talbott argues in this respect that psychic "casualties [of war] are probably as old as the siege of Troy, but the names for them are the invention of modern mental medicine" (438). This study does not attempt to trace comprehensively the numerous approaches to war trauma produced in the medical and psychiatric fields throughout the twentieth century, a task which would require a thesis in itself. I do wish to stress, though, that war trauma has often been the object of the psychiatric gaze. Undoubtedly, this institutional concern is a function of the fact that changing psychiatric definitions of war trauma have been influential in dictating the treatment of traumatised soldiers. Some relatively recent works which examine war trauma through a psychiatric or psychoanalytic theoretical framework are

invoked or critiqued throughout this study, among them Silverman's *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (the most explicit attempt to account for war trauma through a theory of gender), Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam*, and Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*.

Elements of cultural history, gender studies and psychoanalytic theory are all employed in the emerging discipline of trauma studies, whose proponents attempt to trace the impact of trauma on memory, subjectivity, history, and even epistemology. Writers in this field who specifically address the subject of war trauma include Robert Jay Lifton, Lawrence Langer, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dominick LaCapra, and Judith Lewis Herman; the work of each is considered in the body of this thesis. Two recent collections, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (ed. Cathy Caruth) and *Trauma and Self* (ed. Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn), attest to a growing interest in the subject, and demonstrate that the field is an interdisciplinary one, informed and influenced by competing strains of theory and varying interests. For example, Laura Brown's feminist critique of definitions of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Bessel Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart's analysis of biological aspects of trauma are structured by very different concerns. What all of these writers share, though, is an interest in the often subtle and pernicious ways trauma is manifested at the levels of the individual subject and the cultural sphere. The field of trauma studies is also distinguished by its emphasis on the relationship between trauma and memory, a concern central to this thesis.

Throughout the twentieth century, then, many vastly different stories about the phenomenon of war trauma have been told, and many competing and incompatible discourses produced. Of course, amongst these stories must be counted those told by soldiers themselves. As Talbott notes, "accounts of [traumatic] reenactment [...] are to be found in the letters, diaries, memoirs, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction of many combat soldiers of many wars" (437). In addition to stories based on first-hand experience, several

novels about war trauma have been written by non-combatants: Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*, George Johnston's *My Brother Jack*, David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter*, Sebastian Faulk's *Birdsong* and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* all depict aspects of war trauma. Perhaps the most explicit and influential examination of war trauma in novel form produced by a writer with no direct experience of war is Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, comprised of *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, and *The Ghost Road*. *The Ghost Road* was the 1995 Booker Prize winner, and the trilogy is frequently cited in discussions of war trauma. In addition to the readings of *Regeneration* by Anne Whitehead, Anne Wyatt-Brown, Greg Harris, and Katherine Nickerson and Steven Shea, the novel is also considered by Talbott, Showalter, Hynes, Ruth Leys, Karen DeMeester, and Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (curiously, *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road* rarely rate a mention). Arguably, *Regeneration* has come to be accepted as a definitive account of shell-shock, and attained a quasi-historical status; this tendency to read the novel as a form of historical document is problematic and shall be examined below.

“War-in-its-details”: The Specificity of War Trauma

I have noted that several writers invoke textual depictions of war trauma to support broader pronouncements about history or gender. In seeking to establish general principles, such arguments may effectively obscure the specificity and uniqueness of experiences of war trauma, a quality which Hynes calls the “war-in-its-details” (“Personal Narratives” 220). In his review of soldiers’ narratives, Hynes alludes to a disjunction between the stories told by soldiers and those found in historical texts:

The men who were there tell a different story [to history], one that is quite often ahistorical, even anti-historical. [...] But that seems right for the soldiers’ tale they tell; exact dates and precise geography

would turn personal experiences into battles, into the accounts that appear in newspapers and history books; unlocated narrative keeps it in the individual's realm. (*Soldiers'* 11)

In accentuating the different emphases which characterise the "personal," "individual" stories of soldiers and those of historians, Hynes implies their incommensurability. He even goes so far as to claim that soldiers' stories serve to undermine the status of wider cultural histories; "by existing, [personal narratives] refute and subvert the collective story of war that is military history," he claims ("Personal Narratives" 220). A similar disjunction is traced by Talbott, whose article "Soldiers, Psychiatrists and Combat Trauma" contains separate sections on "The Soldier's Story" (438) and "The Psychiatrist's Story" (443). Talbott argues that over the course of the twentieth century "the soldier's story (or the soldier's brain story) [...] changed far less than what psychiatrists say about it" (453). This succinct formulation alludes to both the "different ways of telling stories about combat trauma" (445), and the common "themes" (441) that Talbott identifies in many stories of reenactment.

Hynes's and Talbott's observations suggest the existence of a gulf between the stories of soldiers, and psychiatric and historical discourses around war trauma. This raises another set of questions concerning textual depictions of war trauma: Might writers wishing to represent their own experiences of trauma be hindered by the cultural prominence of competing discourses, and by representational and narrative conventions? In attempting to situate their own histories with respect to these models, might they be forced to manipulate their stories, to adopt pervasive concepts and terminology? Indeed, might such manipulation ultimately ensure that narrative depictions of war trauma must fail to reflect the very qualities which characterise the phenomenon, such as atemporality and irrationality? A recurrent theme in this thesis is the concept that the articulation of traumatic experience is problematised by discourses of gender, trauma, and subjectivity which do not

reflect the individual experiences of soldiers at war, experiences such as fear, traumatic recollection, and estrangement from both society and history. Further, I explore the notion that traumatic recollection is radically irreconcilable with the demands of conventional narrative, such as structure and linearity. Some textual strategies which have been employed in attempts to bridge this divide are therefore examined.

This thesis presents close readings of six novels from among the many twentieth-century texts which address war trauma. I do not expect that such a sample group will support universal declarations regarding the nature of all depictions of war trauma, and this work is not intended as a comprehensive survey of the field. Rather, the decision to grant entire chapters to single novels is informed by the desire to examine the specific qualities of the texts, to respect those particularities which may be lost or obscured in broader discussions of trauma. This thesis seeks to identify common themes, concerns, and narrative strategies in some novels about war trauma, while seeking to respect and emphasise the individuality and specificity of the texts.

My reading practices are also dictated by the desire to engage with the stories themselves, rather than analysing them with reference to existing theoretical principles or metanarratives. In this respect this work attempts to conform wherever possible to one of the “two (ideal types of) disciplinary formations of the text-commentary relation” identified by Bob Hodge and Alec McHoul, namely that of “liberty,” in which “the commentary allows the object text the position of dominance—to ‘speak for itself’” (189). As Hodge and McHoul imply, this “ideal” characterisation of the critical process is, precisely, an unattainable ideal; any reading of a given text will involve at least some degree of manipulation and distortion, which is to say interpretation. I am concerned with issues of representation and memory, and this concern certainly dictates the nature and the focus of my readings. Nevertheless, this thesis attributes much significance to the details and

specific characteristics of the texts examined, in the hope that the distinctive qualities of the novels may not be obscured or lost through their reduction to a general theoretical principle or set of characteristics. Emphasising the need to acknowledge and respect the specificity of particular instances of traumatic loss, Dominick LaCapra endorses “forms of nontotalizing narrative” (“Trauma” 713), and argues that “it is important not to hypostatize particular historical losses or lacks and present them as mere instantiations of some inevitable absence or constitutive feature of existence” (“Trauma” 712).¹⁰ Similarly, Caruth explores Claude Lanzmann’s “suggest[ion] that historical truth may be transmitted in some cases through the refusal of a certain framework of understanding, a refusal that is also a creative act of listening” (“Recapturing” 154). While Talbot seeks (and claims to find) common themes in narratives of traumatic reenactment, he too recognises the need to respect the specificity of individual stories: “what [the stories] have in common does not make the trenches of the Western Front interchangeable with the coral beaches of the Central Pacific or the jungles of Vietnam” (439).

“Other People’s Trauma,” “Trauma Literature” and Trauma Theory

Some further observations about the selection of texts are required. The *Regeneration* trilogy is set during the First World War, James Jones’s *The Thin Red Line* and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* centre on the Second World War, while the Vietnam War features at the heart of Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*. These novels depict events which traverse a wide temporal and geographical stretch, but this is not my primary consideration; this study does not aspire to the status of a historical survey. I have

¹⁰ By characterising war trauma in Lacanian terms as an encounter with the “void at the center of subjectivity” (5), Silverman risks negating its specificity and particularity.

selected texts written in the second half of the twentieth century, in a period spanning thirty-two years, or less than two generations. I contend that they may all be considered contemporary works: they have all been produced relatively recently, and they all still boast a certain degree of cultural currency. Examining the relationship between text and history, Petar Ramadanovic asserts the ability of literature to inform historical understanding:

Writing is a historical act not because it belongs to the time when the text was written, nor because it lends itself to an immediate referential meaning, but because of the openness of its address and because of the opening that its address provides us as readers. (64)

Ramadanovic suggests here that the “historical” value of literature need not be understood purely in terms of its ability to provide facts or points of reference. Similarly, while I certainly do not expect this study to enhance historical knowledge directly, I do hope that it may serve as a contribution to the ongoing debate surrounding conceptions of war trauma, history and memory.

One of the criteria for my choice of texts, then, is that they be recent works; another is the relationship between the authors and the experiences they choose to depict. In this respect, Tal argues that an important distinction must be drawn between texts produced by victims of trauma, and texts informed by empathetic imagination, written by authors who may only guess at the impact of particular forms of trauma they have not themselves experienced. Coining the term “Other People’s Trauma” (246), Tal claims that “[l]iterature written about the trauma of others is qualitatively different from literature by trauma survivors” (217):

It should [...] be obvious that an author's status as trauma survivor has a profound effect on both the motivation to write and the actual story told. The differences in intent and in content of *trauma literature* and literature of *Other People's Trauma* should be quite clear. (246-47, emphasis added)

For Tal, this distinction is crucial, because she contends that interpretative approaches to "trauma literature" should differ from those brought to bear on works written about "the trauma of others." She suggests that approaches to "trauma literature" should embrace insights gleaned from other disciplines regarding the nature of trauma: "Crucial," she argues, "is the ability to consider the author as survivor, to bring to bear [...] an understanding of *trauma* [...] to the task of reading the literature of survivors" (247, emphasis in original).

Arguably, by implying that any text written by a survivor of trauma must be examined with reference to some originary moment in the author's past, Tal places an inordinate emphasis on the significance of the author. I do not attempt to trace the texts examined in this thesis directly back to events in the lives of their authors. Nevertheless, Tal's suggestion that the insights of trauma studies may be applied usefully to literary depictions of trauma accords with my own use of work from that field. Tal's endorsement of "an understanding of *trauma*" (247, emphasis in original) also points to a sense in which the interests of literature and those of trauma studies coincide. Hartman claims that trauma theory provides "a clearer view of the relation of literature to mental functioning in several key areas, including reference, subjectivity, and narration" (547), and goes on to explore the shared interests of trauma studies and literature:

trauma studies [has] a concern for the absences or intermittences in speech (or of conscious knowledge in speech); [...] for the 'ghosting' of the subject; for the connection of voice with identity; [...] and for literature as a testimonial act that transmits knowledge in a form that is not scientific and does not

coincide with either a totally realistic (as if that were possible) or analytic form of representation. (552).

Like Hartman, Caruth argues that literature and trauma studies have common concerns. Identifying this nexus in one of the earliest discussions of the impact of trauma on the psyche, she observes that Freud employs literary examples in his speculative work on trauma:

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. (*Unclaimed* 3)

For Caruth, trauma theory and literature are both distinguished by the fact that their object of inquiry is the realm of the uncertain, the unconscious, and even the unknowable.

In relation to the use of trauma theory in this thesis, one final point must be made. Although I invoke theoretical models of trauma which are intended to apply to various forms of traumatic experience, I wish to avoid generalising about the nature of trauma. Tal claims that “recent work in psychiatry suggests that we can make a connection between the trauma of soldiers and the trauma of other persons subjected to severe stress” (229), but does not provide any citations to support her claim. A similar proposition informs the work of Judith Lewis Herman, who argues in *Trauma and Recovery* that “the hysteria of women and the combat neurosis of men are one” (32).¹¹ Such sweeping statements are problematic. Hartman argues in this respect that *Trauma and Recovery*’s “generalizations require cautious scrutiny” (557). Recall, too, LaCapra’s warning that we must not

¹¹ Herman’s claim betrays the influence of Showalter’s formulation of shell-shock as a form of male hysteria.

“hypostatize particular historical losses or lacks and present them as mere instantiations of some inevitable absence” (“Trauma” 712). I would certainly not wish to suggest that this study, which is limited to some representations of male war trauma, will produce insights concerning domestic violence or childhood abuse (to use two arbitrary examples). Rather, trauma theory is invoked in order to facilitate my exploration of the problematic relationship between male experiences of war trauma, and representations of such trauma.

“Other People’s Trauma”: The *Regeneration* Trilogy

Following Tal, I have divided this study into two sections: the first explores Barker’s vision of “Other People’s Trauma,” and the second examines some works of “trauma literature” written by veterans of combat. In Section One, I engage with Barker’s account of the structures of gender, society, and subjectivity which informed the trauma of First World War soldiers. I have noted that the *Regeneration* trilogy figures in many recent discussions of shell-shock and the First World War, and this cultural prominence motivates my own extended examination of it. However, while Barker’s account of the war and the men who fought it is certainly compelling, a crucial point which is overlooked in many discussions of her work is the fact that she has no first-hand experience of combat. Rather, in response to a question from Donna Perry concerning the “relationship between [her] own life and [her] works” (45), Barker reveals that “for *Regeneration* [she] had stories from [her] grandmother’s second husband [...] about the First World War” (47). In addition to this oral source, Barker’s novels are “meticulously researched” (Whitehead 689). Author’s notes are included at the end of each novel which both acknowledge some of the sources consulted and clarify the extent to which the stories accord with known historical facts. Significantly, two works of cultural history, Leed’s *No Man’s Land* and Showalter’s *The Female Malady*, are cited as “interesting discussions” in the notes to

Regeneration (251-52). *Regeneration*, then, is informed not by direct experience of combat or war trauma, but rather by oral history and academic discourses around the First World War.

It is crucial to consider Barker's status as a late-twentieth century female writer of historical fiction when considering the *Regeneration* trilogy. It is crucial, too, to remember that she has no first-hand experience of war; as Tal notes, "nonveteran literature is, in short, the product of a literary decision" (226). Nevertheless, while *Regeneration* combines historical events and figures with imagined events and purely fictional characters, it has itself come to be read as a form of historical document; Anne Whitehead argues that "already the power of Barker's narrative has reshaped the reading of the past" (690). In an article titled "Traumatic Cures: Shell Shock, Janet, and the Question of Memory," Ruth Leys cites the novel as "a discussion of the treatment of the poet Siegfried Sassoon" (628, n7). Perhaps even more significantly, most of the existing critical approaches to *Regeneration*, including the articles by Anne Wyatt-Brown, Greg Harris, and Katherine Nickerson and Steven Shea, are concerned purely with discussing the significance of the historical events depicted, and fail to acknowledge or address the problematic status of the text. Although Talbott is sensitive to the status of the texts he examines, he overlooks the extent to which *Regeneration* constitutes an act of imaginative reconstruction. He claims that his

study blurs the line between personal narrative and fiction, between accounts of what happened and imaginative accounts of what happened. This ambiguity can be countenanced on the ground that all of the writers in question drew from their own experiences in combat. (453-54)

Given that Talbott discusses *Regeneration*, he is wrong to claim that "all of the writers" he cites have had experience of war. Talbott's mistake attests to the confusion surrounding the

novel's status, and constitutes another instance of the tendency in *Regeneration* criticism to disregard or ignore the increasingly blurred "line[s] between personal narrative and fiction," history and criticism. Whitehead, who explores "the power of the fictional narrative to transform and reconfigure the past" (691), is an exception to this rule; she argues that "Barker's text leaves us finally in an uneasy 'no-man's-land' between past and present" (692).

In writing about the novels, I have tried wherever possible to accentuate and explore the narrative concerns of the texts themselves. Thus, while the *Regeneration* trilogy occupies a problematic position with respect to questions of historical knowledge and representation, I have not examined such issues at length in the chapters on *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, and *The Ghost Road*. Rather, I have concentrated on their depictions of systems of gender, subjectivity, and society. Barker has declared an interest in "what society does to men" (Perry 51). This interest certainly informs the *Regeneration* trilogy, which repeatedly juxtaposes disciplinary discourses and mechanisms which structure male subjectivity, such as the military, psychiatry, and colonialism; Harris argues that "Barker examines how patriarchal constructions of masculinity colonize men's subjectivity in ways that, especially in wartime, prove oppressive, repressive, and wholly brutal in their effects on the male psyche" (303).

If issues of representation and epistemology are not manifested at the level of narrative strategy in the *Regeneration* trilogy, how are they explored? In Chapter One, I argue that *Regeneration's* primary concern is the notion of silencing, and explore the gulf posited in the novel between private experiences and cultural discourses of masculinity. Examining the inscrutable vocabulary of "shell-shock" which marked the bodies of First World War soldiers, *Regeneration* suggests the impossibility for men of articulating histories from which they themselves are alienated. It suggests, in other words, that

although war trauma is invariably manifested, it may take the form of symptoms and remembrances which resist comprehension or rational explanation. I argue that Rivers's encounter with "Other People's Trauma" precipitates his own transformation, and his own silencing. In Chapter Two, I trace *The Eye in the Door's* account of the dissociation which may arise from the gulf between the home and war fronts, and from men's imbrication with disciplinary mechanisms of surveillance and self-regulation. I argue that this traumatic splitting is irreconcilable with culturally enforced models of unitary masculinity, and that this tension undermines men's ability to understand or articulate their trauma. Significantly, the men of *The Eye in the Door* see themselves reflected in works of fantasy and accounts of the extraordinary; Prior, the novel's protagonist, cannot articulate his pain through the rigidly policed discourse of a military society, but he identifies with a literary model of split subjectivity. *The Eye in the Door* suggests therefore that panoptic technologies and unitary models of masculinity may constitute impediments to the articulation of war trauma. *The Ghost Road*, which I read in Chapter Three, is concerned with liminality, marginality, and the instability of binary categories. I argue that by interrogating the distinctions between savagery and civilisation, sanity and madness, life and death, and past and present, *The Ghost Road* implies the impossibility of representing war trauma in terms of binary models and categories. In *The Ghost Road*, Rivers is transformed once again by his encounter with war trauma; ultimately, this encounter undermines both his allegiance to rationality, and his efforts to differentiate between death and life, past and present.

In reading the *Regeneration* trilogy, I have not attempted to analyse directly the gulf between war trauma and narrative, but I have traced Barker's depiction of the various social, discursive, and psychic structures which impede acts of testimony. Its linear narrative approach and omniscient narrator notwithstanding, the *Regeneration* trilogy addresses the relationship between trauma and testimony, and suggests that witnesses to traumatic testimony are transformed by their encounter with "Other People's Trauma."

Anne Whitehead argues in this respect that *Regeneration* “raises the question of the historical status of the traumatic event” (689) and “radically questions the very possibility of the ‘regeneration’ of the past” (690).

“Trauma Literature”: *The Thin Red Line, Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Things They Carried*

The three novels I examine in the second section of this thesis were written by male veterans of combat. Their status as “trauma literature” raises some further questions: Might narratives about war trauma produced by veterans exhibit different concerns to those written by even the most sympathetic and well-informed non-combatants? How might the temporal proximity of these writers to the events they describe structure their narratives? In short, how might an author’s history of war trauma itself mark a text? These questions both inform my choice of texts, and dictate my approach to the novels.

One difference between the Barker novels and those of Jones, Vonnegut, and O’Brien is immediately apparent at the level of narrative strategy. The novels that comprise the *Regeneration* trilogy are written in realist mode and related by an omniscient narrative voice. Although Whitehead argues that “Barker’s primary interest appears to be in the power of fictional narrative to reshape the historical event” (690), this interest is not manifested at the level of style; no explicit examinations of the nature of writing interrupt the smooth narrative approach. Conversely, *The Thin Red Line, Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *The Things They Carried* all display metafictional tendencies. The novels all interrogate the acts of writing, remembering and surviving, thereby foregrounding their status as fiction. These divergent narrative strategies encourage different reading practices. Indeed, it may be that the *Regeneration* trilogy’s lack of explicit artifice is precisely what encourages critics to

overlook its fictional aspects and regard it as a source of historical knowledge. It is somewhat paradoxical that texts informed by first-hand experience of war trauma such as *The Thin Red Line*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *The Things They Carried* exhibit greater doubt concerning their validity as historical documents, frequently alluding to their own insufficiencies and failings. Nevertheless, such self-doubt invites epistemological questions concerning representation and history. The chapters which comprise Section Two are therefore concerned primarily with issues surrounding the nature of memory, war trauma, and writing itself.

A notable feature of the works of “trauma literature” examined in Section Two, then, is the representational anxiety which marks each of the texts, a metafictional reflexivity centred on the “transitions” (Langer 15) and distortions involved in the process of narrativising war trauma. *The Thin Red Line*’s compelling narrative evinces verisimilitude, but in Chapter Four I argue that this apparent mimetic success is qualified by the text’s allusions to its own fictional nature. The novel contains several explicit examinations of the gulf between experiences of war and representations of such experience, so by foregrounding its own textuality *The Thin Red Line* acknowledges its unsuitability as a substitute for the actual experience of war trauma; as a story, it suggests, it cannot hope to stand in for history. In Chapter Five, I observe that *Slaughterhouse-Five* also scrutinises the disparity between war trauma and narrative. Focusing on issues of time and history, Vonnegut’s text attempts to give narrative shape to precisely those aspects of traumatic experience which resist articulation most stubbornly, namely its atemporality, the sense of forced, involuntary transcendence, and the incomprehensibility of surviving beyond the encounter with death. *Slaughterhouse-Five* certainly implies that trauma ensures the subject’s alienation from history, but unlike *The Thin Red Line*, it also suggests that narrative may facilitate a degree of engagement with a previously inscrutable past. Like *Regeneration*, *The Things They Carried* suggests that traumatic histories may be manifested

in forms which do not correspond to either memory or knowledge, and which therefore elude the bearers of such trauma. I suggest in Chapter Six that by reading *The Things They Carried*, we take part in a dialogic process whose structure resembles something of the play of difference characteristic of trauma. Provisional, tentative and contradictory, *The Things They Carried* is a text predicated on the notion that knowledge of trauma may arise only ephemerally, and only then in the context of a shared act of testimony.

Themes and Common Concerns

Although it is not my primary intention to identify features which are characteristic of stories about war trauma, certain themes and tendencies do emerge in this study. Of course, I have already examined one primary theme which structures each of the novels, namely the difficulty of articulating or narrating traumatic war experience. Another theme is that of alienation. A concept which appears in much writing about the psychic consequences of war is that soldiers returning to the civilian sphere often feel estranged from their own societies. Tina Chen notes that “much critical attention has been directed to the idea of the Vietnam veteran who feels exiled from America” (80), and Herman argues that “traumatic events [...] shatter the sense of connection between individual and community, creating a crisis of faith” (*Trauma and Recovery* 55). Indeed, Shay suggests that “a full analysis of how war can destroy the social contract binding soldiers to each other, to their commanders, and to the society that raised them as an army deserves a whole book in itself” (17). While this thesis does not constitute Shay’s proposed “book,” it does repeatedly examine notions of estrangement and alienation, which figure in each of the six novels discussed.

Not surprisingly, the concept of death permeates this study. While it may seem a somewhat banal statement to claim that death features prominently in six novels about war trauma, the regularity and force with which the notion of death marks the narratives is worthy of attention. Hynes argues that in considering the experiences of men at war, we must acknowledge the significance of the encounter with death. He claims that in war, “death is the whole point, the truest truth, the realest [sic] reality” (*Soldiers*’ 19). “It’s a simple but true proposition,” he continues: “in war, death is grotesque and astonishing” (20). The novels examined in this study accord with Hynes’s position, insofar as encounters with death—and attempts to process the psychic disorientation occasioned by such encounters—constitute central episodes in each of them. This fact presents various theoretical difficulties, for, as Lifton notes, “death gets taken out of most psychological thought very readily” (Caruth “Interview” 129), and “there has been relatively little in the way of development of theory that includes death importantly” (143). Lifton ascribes this theoretical lacuna partly to Freud’s inability to address the subject. He describes a “problem Freud’s followers faced after World War 1. What do you do with the death imagery in relation to our theory?” (144). Lifton’s observations hint at the manner in which the violence and trauma of war force us to grapple with the concept of death; writing during World War 1, Freud himself wrote that “war is bound to sweep away [the] conventional treatment of death” (“Thoughts” 291). The novels examined in this thesis repeatedly address what Laub calls “the ultimate difference—the otherness of death” (73), and this alterity resists theoretical reduction or explanation. I therefore trace various psychic and textual strategies employed in the attempt to process and represent encounters with death.

Another concept which informs each of the novels is the power of the various discourses and disciplinary mechanisms which structure the subjectivity of male soldiers. Of course, the psychic toll of war is certainly not the sole province of men. Women, too, have fought in many of the twentieth century’s wars, and women also bear the cost of

men's traumatic war experiences. Jane Marcus's afterword to Helen Zenna Smith's *Not So Quiet ...: Stepdaughters of War* is one interesting examination of some female experiences of war, and many of the contributors to *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century* (ed. Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (ed. Margaret Randolph Higgonet et al) and *Gendering War Talk* (ed. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott) trace the ways in which war has influenced constructions of femininity. Nevertheless, war has been carried out largely by men. Arguably, it may be characterised as a defining episode in the history of twentieth-century masculinity, an event of crucial importance in the formation of normative models of masculine behaviour and identity; Silverman emphasises "the centrality of the discourse of war to the construction of conventional masculinity" (62). Although masculinity is not the primary object of inquiry of this thesis, the decision to limit my focus to male experiences of war trauma is dictated both by limitations of space, and by the desire to examine a site at which notions of masculinity are placed under extreme pressure. In tracing men's inability to measure up to impossible standards of gendered behaviour, I do seek to explore some of the machinations of masculinity. However, I do not seek to produce generalizations or grand narratives regarding the universal nature of masculinity or all male subjects.

While Sections One and Two examine different aspects of the relationship between trauma and narrative, ultimately they address the same central concept: that war trauma resists articulation. All six novels share a concern with the societal and discursive mechanisms which both structure masculine identity and serve as "cultural silencers" (Culbertson 170), and they all explore the alienation and estrangement associated with the inability to communicate or share traumatic experience. They traverse, in other words, the gulf between the public realm of history and narrative, and the private, disruptive and unspeakable experience of war trauma. In each of the texts, the strangeness and

inexplicability of the encounter with death plays a central role, and each explores the difficulties inherent in the very act of surviving beyond that encounter.

Incommensurable Histories

This thesis invokes and critiques various theoretical models, and over the course of the following six chapters it explores issues of trauma, representation, and gender. Its primary focus, though, is a group of novels which attempt to depict something of the nature of war trauma in narrative form. It is to be hoped that the process of reading these texts and exploring their various concerns, themes, and narrative strategies may serve to cast some light on issues of epistemology, history, and representation. After a violent century whose legacies include the countless untold stories of victims of war, such issues are of crucial importance. As we attempt to adapt our conceptions of history and truth to accommodate voices which have not corresponded with official histories, it is imperative that we examine the structures of gender, society, and trauma which impede acts of testimony and ensure the continued silence of many.

One final theme that emerges in this thesis, then, is the concept that the very act of engaging with war trauma narratives forces us to confront “events in excess of our frames of reference” (Felman “Education” 16). This confrontation implicates us in a set of incommensurable histories which confound notions of chronological progression and historical reference; Whitehead argues in this respect that “the traumatic event problematizes our notion of what history is and how we relate to the past” (690). This notion permeates the body of the thesis, but is explored explicitly in the Conclusion through a reading of Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “The Other Death.” Initially, “The Other Death” appears to be a story about one soldier’s traumatic reenactment, but ultimately it traces an

epistemological rift, a rupture in history which resists the transformation into narrative; this rupture constitutes the story's true object of inquiry. The narrator of "The Other Death" is disturbed, perplexed and transformed by his encounter with "Other People's Trauma," and I will suggest that as readers of war trauma narratives, we invariably undergo a similar transformation.

Ultimately, in attempting to engage with the novels, to bear witness itself to traumatic testimonies, this thesis explores the very possibility of the communication and representation of war trauma. In their introduction to *Gendering War Talk*, Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott identify a question faced by those seeking to trace the marginal histories of war: "In what ways do memory, with its inadvertent or deliberate retrospective distortion, and myth interact to present the *unpresentable*?" (xi, emphasis added). Cooke and Woollacott implicitly endorse the notion that trauma may be successfully depicted. Conversely, Margot Norris argues that "twentieth-century writing—for all of its subtlety and sophistication in straining against its constraints—cannot overcome its ethical incommensurability to the burdens of its bloody history," and describes "modern literature's sometimes heroic, often doomed, and always troubled attempts to speak the *unspeakabilities* of its age." (509, emphasis added). Tal, too, argues that "trauma literature demonstrates the *unbridgeable* gap between writer and reader and thus defines itself by the impossibility of its task—the communication of the traumatic experience" (218, emphasis added). Clearly, the very idea that war trauma may be articulated is problematic and open to interrogation. I shall therefore proceed to explore questions which must surely have a bearing on conceptions of history, epistemology and critical practice: May the truth of war trauma ever be spoken? If so, how might we ensure that we are willing and able to listen to such a tale?

Section One

“Other People’s Trauma”

Chapter One

Silencing in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*

The question here is not so much what [...] language “expresses” or “signifies” as how it functions, its role in the man’s relationship to external reality, and its bodily location. The relationship of human bodies to the larger world of objective reality grows out of one’s relationship to one’s own body and to other human bodies. The relationship to the larger world in turn determines the way in which these bodies speak of themselves, of objects, and of relationships to objects.

Klaus Theweleit¹

[T]he fact that it was everybody’s business to be prepared to die for his country did not alter the inward and entirely personal grievance one had against being obliged to do it.

Siegfried Sassoon²

May the truth of war trauma ever be spoken? *Regeneration*, the first volume of Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy, appears to suggest initially that it may. The novel’s first page is taken up largely by a reproduction of Siegfried Sassoon’s “A Soldier’s Declaration,” a historical document which clearly expresses Sassoon’s traumatic disillusionment with—and estrangement from—the society for which he is fighting. However, while the novel begins by depicting an act of expression, it proceeds immediately to trace the damaging consequences of this expressive act, and as Barker herself has noted, “the book actually ends, in a sense, with [a] silencing” (Perry 55). Indeed, the novel is concerned with exploring the potent combination of social structures

¹ Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, trans. Stephen Conway, et. al., Vol. 1. (Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1987) 24.

² Siegfried Sassoon, *Sherston’s Progress* (1936; New York: Collier, 1969) 48.

and psychic mechanisms which ensured that the articulation of war trauma proved extremely problematic for soldiers of the First World War. Sassoon's "Declaration" is not the only explicit expression of war trauma in *Regeneration*; the text also reproduces fragments of the poems of Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, both of whom feature as characters in the novel. Nevertheless, these successful acts of expression are far outnumbered in the text by the numerous cases in which men are either unwilling or unable to speak the truth of their traumatic experiences and reminiscences.

In exploring the manner in which soldiers' experiences of fear, trauma, and inadequacy resisted expression, *Regeneration* traverses the many spheres in which male subjectivity is enacted. In this respect, the novel's concern with both the practice of psychiatry and concepts derived from psychoanalysis (such as repression) is instructive. Scrutinising a theoretical system which locates subjectivity at the nexus of individual drives and societal demands, the text demands readings which can account for the intermingling of these forces, and demonstrates the need to conceptualise the subject as existing within several spheres simultaneously. Gender intervenes in language, social relations and the body, and the novel explores the way in which the traumatised male subject inhabits these realms, often in contradictory and damaging ways. This chapter examines *Regeneration's* depiction of the disparity for male soldiers between the demands of the social sphere and their own individual experiences of fear, bodily dismemberment, and encounters with death. I argue that for the male characters in *Regeneration*, this disparity is often addressed unconsciously through self-destructive behaviours which, rather than resolving the conflict, serve to further problematise their engagement with discursive and institutional structures.

In its emphasis on both the corporeity of its characters and the concept of silencing (Barker agrees with the proposition that "silencing is central in the book" Perry 55),

Regeneration problematises any reading which would seek to locate masculinity within the operations of discourse alone.³ Without doubt the novel emphasises the extent to which men are shaped by discourses of appropriate masculine behaviour. Crucially, though, it questions what becomes of men who are incapable of orienting themselves psychically with respect to social vocabularies which must fail to reflect their own experiences. *Regeneration* explores how the conflicting demands made of the male soldier in the First World War produced psychic trauma and eventual breakdown, and depicts characters whose ambivalent relationships to dominant discursive structures assert themselves in debilitating fashion. Significantly, for many men in the novel this ambivalence is manifested in the form of mutism, an inability (or unwillingness) to manipulate language explicitly, to engage actively with discourse. These are characters who have been silenced, whose power of expression has been undermined by forces which tear them in contradictory directions.

Expression and its Consequences

In a scene which usefully introduces some of the themes this chapter will explore, the psychiatrist Rivers sits on a medical board evaluating the physical and mental capacity of a soldier named Billy Prior. Rivers “realize[s] the extent of the internal conflict going on” (206): “Prior had said he wanted nothing more than to [...] get away from ‘the shame’ of home service, and Rivers had no doubt that was true. But it was not the whole truth. He also wanted to save his life.” Rivers perceives Prior’s untenable position: “Small wonder, then, that Prior answered questions in monosyllables and finally, when asked whether he felt physically fit for service, said nothing at all.” By inferring a direct correlation between Prior’s “internal conflict” and his inability to articulate his dilemma, the text encourages us

³ Jane Flax “locat[es] self and its experiences in concrete social relations, not only in fictive or purely textual conventions” (232).

to consider the male subject's ambivalent relationship to language and discourse, the way in which he may, whether consciously or otherwise, withdraw from active participation in a discursive system in which he can find no stable or safe location. The scene exemplifies *Regeneration's* preoccupation with the ways in which the embodied male subject negotiates a frequently inimical relationship with dominant ideologies, and with language itself.

Another salient feature of the episode is the fact that Prior is identified and read in the linguistic realm by the institutional mechanism; if his words are deemed to be indicative of his sanity, he will be declared fit to fight and must return to the front. In its depiction of several of these medical boards, the text alludes to the role of the utterance in determining the male subject's place within the disciplinary regime of the military institution; the boards which scrutinise Sassoon's mental status constitute crucial textual events, and their appearance at the beginning and end of the novel provides narrative symmetry, a framing device of sorts. In *Regeneration*, linguistic acts of expression have concrete, material consequences, and for many of its male characters an awareness of these potential ramifications precludes the possibility of complete disclosure. The concept of silencing is linked in the text to men's understanding of the fact that their verbal and written expressions may be equated with their identity by the psychiatric-militaristic regime, and therefore viewed as reliable indicators of their mental status and ideological stance. A corollary of this identification of subject and utterance is that silence is pathologised, viewed in an institutional setting as indicative of psychological deficiency; paradoxically, a man's silence may be read as a "declaration" of inadequacy.

Regeneration examines the limited social and psychic space available to those male subjects that renounce, or are cut off from, active participation in the field of language. However, through its exploration of the psychiatric process, the novel also examines the way in which some men are encouraged to bring into consciousness and express

previously repressed emotions and experiences. It traces the paradoxical manner in which male subjectivity is simultaneously produced and contained in an institutional environment which combines what Flax (following Foucault) calls “two sorts of practices: disciplinary and confessional” (206). Indeed, much of the novel’s power derives from its examination of male subjects who are encouraged to ‘confess’ sentiments and emotions which may expose them to further disciplinary measures and feelings of inadequacy. Accordingly, although the novel is concerned with silence, it also contains a wide range of written and spoken forms of expression. I have noted that it commences with a text within the text proper—Sassoon’s “Declaration”—and that the plot is largely concerned with tracing the reception and containment of this threatening document. In addition to Sassoon and Owen’s poetry, *Regeneration* also contains an excerpt from a hymn, a report from *The Times*, official psychiatric reports, biblical quotations, excerpts from private letters, quotations from a lecture, dialogues between characters, and interior monologues. These documents and forms of discourse constitute a textual tapestry which could conceivably form the sole object of study of a reading informed by the premise that subjectivity takes place within the realm of language, of discourse. Indeed, my dictionary defines “discourse” through a list: “talk, conversation, dissertation, treatise, sermon. Each of these categories is represented in *Regeneration*.”

“Somatic Expression”

These are not the only forms of expression that may be identified in the text, however. Through its depiction of hysterical soldiers, the novel examines the way in which psychic trauma may be manifested somatically. Lyndal Roper argues that

body images, bodily malfunction or even what the psychoanalyst Joyce McDougall calls *somatic expression*, can be a kind of mute communication, a pre-linguistic resource to which we resort when language dries up in inexpressible psychic pain. (69, emphasis added)

Characters in *Regeneration* suffer from twitches, spasms, tics, and stutters, and these afflictions can be read as examples of “somatic expression.” Indeed, towards the end of the novel Rivers muses that “the stammerings, the nightmares, the tremors, the memory lapses, of officers were just as much *unwitting protest* as the grosser maladies of the men” (238, emphasis added). Although this litany of tremors and stammerings is described by Rivers in terms of an unconscious, “unwitting” lack of bodily control, it is significant that they are nevertheless interpreted as a form of “protest.” This term implies that the symptoms are expressions of an *active* resistance to the “intolerable stress under which [soldiers] fought” (Winter and Baggett, 212), even though such symptoms are self-destructive. The concept of the self-destructive protest is a major theme in the novel, and will be explored throughout this chapter.

Many other instances of somatic expression can be identified in *Regeneration*. Upon recovering previously repressed memories, Prior “seize[s] Rivers by the arms, and beg[ins] butting him in the chest, hard enough to hurt” (104). Rivers attempts to interpret the gesture: “This was not an attack, Rivers realized, though it felt like one. It was the closest Prior could come to asking for physical contact.” The incident takes place after Prior has regained the power of speech. It is therefore implied that he resorts to bodily expression not because he is completely incapable of speaking, but rather because he cannot articulate his need for physical intimacy through the discourse available to him. The butting episode directly follows a description of “the play of emotions on Prior’s face” and the statement that “he began to cry,” and these observations, too, are indicative of the expressive capacities of the body. This is but one of the many examples in the text of the

way in which the body is both used as a medium of expression and treated as a site of potential interpretation, a legible surface.

These observations do not in themselves refute the view that subjectivity consists of nothing more than discursive orientation; it is possible to read the physical symptoms associated with war trauma as evidence of the body's colonisation by discursive systems of power. Joseph Pugliese appears to take such a position in claiming that "precisely what [he] examine[s] is the intextuation of the male body of politico-semiotic regimes" (163). Pugliese also notes, however, that the physical symptoms of the hysterical soldier occur within a "double scene [...] in which the indissociable operations of mind and body disrupt the dogma of Cartesian dichotomy" (171). Pugliese's position is contradictory: in speaking of the "intextuation" of the body he implies a split between a pre-existing body, and the text or discourse which is inscribed upon it. It is problematic to insist on the disruption of "the dogma of Cartesian dichotomy" while simultaneously wishing to invoke a distinction between the body and discursive forces acting upon it, a move which implies the possible existence of semiotic systems independent of embodied subjects. A concentration on "the corporeal effects produced by [a] semiotic system" (Pugliese 163) can tend to obscure the fact that bodies themselves act upon and influence discursive formations. Bob Connell notes that "theories of discourse have not overcome [the Cartesian] split: they have made bodies the objects of symbolic practice and power but not participants" (*Masculinities* 60). In approaching the issues of somatic expression and mutism, a concentration on discourse may therefore be limiting.

Regeneration, then, depicts situations which suggest the imbrication of mental and physical factors in the structuring of male subjectivity. The novel also calls our attention to the fact that subjectivity may be affected by somatic experience in ways that may not easily be characterised in terms of discourse or textuality. It contains, for example, a description

of the methods of treatment practised by the historical figure Dr. Lewis Yealland. In a harrowing passage, Yealland inflicts physical pain upon a mute soldier in order to force him to speak, to re-enter the realm of language. It is difficult to envisage how this scenario might be accounted for purely in terms of discourse. Without recourse to some notion of the causal capacities of bodies and corporeal phenomena, how could we explain the way that institutional discipline here comes to be inscribed in the subject? How could we account for the way in which somatic experience leads directly to a shift in the subject's relationship with language? Connell argues that "bodies cannot be understood as a neutral medium of social practice. Their materiality matters" (*Masculinities* 58), and the Yealland episode suggests that the body participates actively in the realm of social relations. To conceive of the body as a vessel, a *tabula rasa* upon which discourse is written, is to overlook the role it plays in the interplay of self and society.

"A Soldier's Declaration": Alienation and Social Space

I have noted that the themes of protest and silencing which are central to *Regeneration* are introduced on the first page through Sassoon's "Declaration." The "Declaration" serves as a useful guide to mapping out the social space in which Sassoon orients himself; it is a textual testament to alienation. In tracing this alienation I will begin to explore the question of how it is that the men in the novel are silenced. How might their inability to reconcile their own experiences with available discourses ensure that they occupy marginal positions, and how might this marginalisation serve to compromise their expressive capability? Although Sassoon is able to articulate his alienation, others in the novel cannot, due to their justified fear of ostracism and disciplinary retribution. The "Declaration" is therefore a unique and valuable guide.

The form that Sassoon's disillusionment takes is informative. Although he begins by claiming that he is defying "military authority" (3), it soon becomes apparent that it is not merely the institution of the army that he is challenging. He presents himself as a man on the fringes of the political machine, his faith in its workings no longer intact: he refers to "political errors and insincerities" and the "deception which is being practised" on the men at the front. However, although he sets himself up in opposition to certain institutions, it is clear that he is not entirely divorced from a sense of community and social connection, as he claims to be "convinced that [he is] acting on behalf of soldiers" and making his protest "on behalf of those who are suffering now" (3). However, a further element emerges in the final paragraph of the "Declaration." In addition to disillusionment with political and military institutions, the document reveals an uneasy relationship between the soldier and the citizens for whom he is supposedly fighting:

[A]lso I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize. (3)

This further element of cynicism and detachment from society reveals the extent to which Sassoon's experience of war has eroded any comfort he may have gained from the thought of the home front, of a morally upright and caring world which may have served to counterbalance his own exposure in the trenches to barbaric acts, fear and violence. In *Achilles in Vietnam*, Jonathan Shay argues that a common factor in the aetiology of war trauma is precisely this kind of disillusionment (Shay's arguments will be further explored in Chapter Two). The "Declaration" finishes on a bitter note, then, and serves as a reminder of the gulf which the experience of war opens between those who are able to regard society as benevolent and those who cannot.

It immediately becomes apparent that this subversive expressive act is already being processed by the very institutional framework that it seeks to oppose: the document is being read by a psychiatrist working within the framework of the military, namely Rivers. Rivers's colleague Bryce states that it will "be read out in the House of Commons next week" and observes that this will lead to media attention (4). In articulating his disenchantment, Sassoon exposes his text (and, by extension, himself) to the gaze of both the military regime and the wider public. The discussion also reveals another immediate consequence of Sassoon's declaration: he is being sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital. A medical board has declared that he is "shell-shocked," and his linguistic act leads directly to his physical incarceration.

Rivers notes that this kind of classification has other effects: "It just occurs to me that a diagnosis of neurasthenia might not be inconvenient confronted with this" (4). Rivers alludes here to the fact that due to the identification of text and subject, the classification of Sassoon as mentally unsound serves to undermine the validity of any text produced by him. In a circular case of damnation by association, the text is read as evidence of his mental instability, while his mental instability is read as evidence of the text's unreliability. Winter and Baggett note that "if a military board passed [Sassoon] fit for service, Rivers reasoned, it would tacitly accept the sanity of the man who had made the embarrassing protest published in the times" (224). The classification of Sassoon as neurasthenic enables his protest to be read as emanating from beyond the boundaries of the acceptable sphere of rational, masculine discourse, and therefore not worthy of consideration within that realm. Bryce notes that "the minister will say that no disciplinary action has been taken, because Mr. Sassoon is suffering from a severe mental breakdown, and therefore not responsible for his actions" (4). The "Declaration" is read as signifying nothing but its author's psychological status, and Sassoon is effectively silenced.

Repression and Protest

As a form of protest the “Declaration” is emblematic of the way in which individual rebellion against socially entrenched institutions may serve paradoxically both to alleviate the strain of a male subject’s untenable position and to intensify it. I have traced some of the negative consequences that spring from Sassoon’s protest, such as his incarceration and his classification as mentally unsound. The text suggests, though, that this act of expression is also beneficial to him. I examine the therapeutic aspects of protest that are suggested by *Regeneration* below; in order to do so I will begin to explore the notions of repression and traumatic recollection, concepts which figure prominently in the novel. The notion of repression in particular will be scrutinised throughout this chapter, as it is central to the novel’s examination of self-destructive behaviours, and to its interrogation of notions of masculine autonomy and rationality.

Rivers is depicted as placing little emphasis on the role played by sexuality in the aetiology of psychic disorders. However, he certainly embraces other aspects of the Freudian model, “a treatment that he knew to be still largely experimental” (47). One Freudian notion that Rivers employs is the concept of the talking cure (a technique which is contrasted in the text with Yealland’s corporeal approach). Another is the concept of repression, described by Freud as lying “at the basis of every neurosis” (“Introduction” 210). Repression figures prominently in Rivers’s account of the symptoms of war trauma:

The typical patient [...] had usually been devoting considerable energy to the task of forgetting whatever traumatic events had precipitated his neurosis. [...] The horrors he’d experienced, only partially repressed even by day, returned with redoubled force to haunt the nights, giving rise to that most characteristic symptom of war neurosis: the battle nightmare. (25-26)

Accordingly, Rivers's method of treatment "sometimes consisted simply of encouraging the patient to abandon his hopeless attempts to forget, and advising him instead to spend some part of every day remembering" (26). Repression, then, is effectively equated by Rivers with "attempt[ing] to forget," and characterised as a damaging tendency. Implicit in Rivers's technique is the assumption that if the terror and self-loathing instilled in soldiers by their traumatic experiences can be brought into consciousness, they may be nullified and robbed of their destabilising power.

Another way of conceptualising Rivers's approach is in terms of expression: if traumatic feelings can be expressed at a conscious level, they may cease to function as traumatic sources of signification. In other words, repression can be viewed as a failure of expression. In this context, Sassoon's protest may be understood as a significant step in his recovery. Indeed, Rivers does so:

Sassoon's determination to remember might well account for his early and rapid recovery [...]. Writing the poems had obviously been therapeutic, but then Rivers suspected that writing the Declaration might well have been therapeutic too. He thought that Sassoon's poetry and his protest sprang from a single source, and each could be linked to his recovery from that terrible period of nightmares and hallucinations. (26)

By drawing a comparison between Sassoon's poetry and his "Declaration," Rivers implies that the therapeutic power of the protest stems from its expressive nature. It is helpful, that is, insofar as it is a vehicle for articulating beliefs which may have been the source of psychic turmoil had they been repressed. Given that Rivers diagnoses Sassoon as having "a very powerful anti-war neurosis" (15), it is in keeping with his clinical approach that he views Sassoon's conscious, active expression of opposition to the war as psychologically

beneficial. It is debatable whether the "Declaration" constitutes an instance of abreaction, the articulation of a previously repressed emotion, but nevertheless Rivers appears to view it as an example of the way in which the articulation of a problematic mental state can lead to psychic relief.

The Literary Space

Literature functions in *Regeneration* as a privileged expressive space. Despite the fact that they express essentially the same sentiments of disaffection and outrage in the same tone of righteous demand, the "Declaration" is shown to have adverse consequences for Sassoon (such as his consignment to what he calls "a loony-bin," 122), whereas his poem "To the Warmongers" is benignly received. In other words, while Rivers differentiates between Sassoon's "poetry and his protest" (26), the juxtaposition of the two texts encourages us to read them both as examples of protest. What is the basis, then, of their vastly different receptions? Given that the novel is concerned with the experiences of men in the First World War, it is not surprising that the war poets Sassoon and Wilfred Owen figure prominently in the text. Literary merit aside, their poems are valuable insofar as they constitute a record of sorts of the subjectivities of traumatised male subjects during the First World War. As such, they are a valuable resource for those attempting to reconstruct the experiences of such men. The very fact that this record exists is testimony to the expressive space provided by the realm of literary expression, a space which is not subject to the same degree of institutional scrutiny accorded to other forms of linguistic practice.

Upon initially confronting Sassoon's poetry (and significantly this occurs only after Sassoon volunteers it to him), Rivers is unsure of how to process it:

Rivers knew so little about poetry that he was almost embarrassed at the thought of having to comment on these. But then he reminded himself they'd been given to him as a therapist, not as a literary critic, and from that point of view they were interesting, particularly the last. (25)

Rivers's embarrassment reveals the way in which literary expression resists analysis and containment by institutions which otherwise serve to prescribe and limit the forms of expression available to the subject. Of course, Rivers is ultimately able to incorporate the poems into his therapeutic framework, to approach them from a specific "point of view." However, in admitting his lack of literary expertise he highlights a sense in which the poems exceed the clinical gaze. It is suggested that although Rivers is able to draw some information from the poems, he feels incapable of completely grasping their meaning. Presented with another poem later in the novel, Rivers admits that he "just feel[s] inadequate" (189). The inscrutability of the poems therefore functions as a barrier to their incorporation within the disciplinary framework.

In *Regeneration*, the literary realm provides a space in which the subject may articulate potentially incriminating thoughts and beliefs with a degree of impunity ordinarily unavailable to those who are the target of the clinical gaze. Several passages in the novel suggest the significance of this expressive space for disempowered, traumatised soldiers. Commenting on a line in a draft of "Anthem for Doomed Youth," Sassoon declares "Owen, for God's sake, this is War Office propaganda" (141). Owen replies firstly that "it's not," and then that "it certainly isn't meant to be." The poets' condemnation of the extent to which the line coincides with officially propagated ideology is indicative of the fact that they view the realm of poetry as a forum for constructing narratives about their experience which do not correspond to such ideology. Poetry is presented here as a vehicle for the

expression of experiences which exceed the boundaries of acceptable discourses about the war; it is the site of a new discourse, one controlled and dispersed by the men themselves.

Later in the novel, the two poets discuss the concept of artistic influence, and the need for Owen to establish his own poetic voice. Later still, Owen presents Sassoon with the final draft of his poem: "Sassoon, watching, thought, he's getting better. No stammer. Quick decisive movements. The self-confidence to contradict his hero. And the poem had been a revelation" (157). Owen's confidence in his artistic voice is shown to coincide with his improved physical and linguistic competence. This correspondence suggests a relationship between the ability to articulate traumatic experience confidently and safely, and the recovery of psychological well-being. Of course, Owen's ability to forge a poetic voice may not be responsible for his improvement; the causation may conceivably run in the other direction. Nevertheless the passage implies that the ability to situate traumatic experience within a linguistic framework is therapeutic; recall that Rivers "thought that Sassoon's poetry and his protest [...] could be linked to his recovery" (26).

It is possible to view the relationship between Owen's expressive ability and his recuperation merely as an instance of simultaneity, to deny the existence of a causal link. An earlier passage, though, undermines the distinction between subject and utterance which such an interpretation would require, and suggests that a more active role should be assigned to Owen's act of writing. In deciding to make his traumatic experience of war the subject of his poetry, Owen provides an insight into his investment in the creative act:

'I s-suppose I've always thought of p-poetry as the opposite of all that. The ugliness.' Owen was struggling to articulate a point of view he was abandoning even as he spoke. 'S-Something to take refuge in.' (84)

Initially Owen conceives of literature as a realm of idealised representations, incompatible with his own experience of “ugliness,” and therefore of no use to him in actively confronting the world. Later, he claims that “it’s mad not to write about the war” (123). In writing about the “ugliness” of war and his reaction to it, Owen employs expression as a means of defining his place in the world. Whereas his poetry has previously been used to escape the horror of his experience of war and, by extension, to escape himself, it becomes a means of articulating that experience and defining a space in which to inhabit more comfortably the realm of language and discourse. His problematic negotiation with discursive structures (such as “War Office propaganda”) which are incompatible with his own experience is facilitated by his ability to engage with them linguistically, to imagine and write an acceptable way of being.

“Tilting at Windmills”: The Self-Destructive Protest

Notwithstanding Owen’s and Sassoon’s literary achievements, the articulation of experiences which exceed or challenge existing accounts of masculinity and war is highly problematic for every male character in *Regeneration*. Indeed, the text examines the various ways in which such protests are almost invariably damaging to the subject. The novel depicts men who, without necessarily being consciously aware of it, defend themselves through illegible attacks on their own corporeal and psychic structures. In exploring the paradoxical and seemingly nonsensical notion that attacking oneself may constitute a form of defence, I will trace the manner in which the phenomenon of repression confounds concepts of masculine autonomy and agency. I will argue, too, that the self-destructive nature of men’s protests in *Regeneration* stems from what Freud called the “failure of translation” (qtd. in Felman, *Writing* 19) that constitutes repression.

Although Sassoon's expression of protest is apparently directed outwards, targeting external forces, in effect it serves to exacerbate his own psychic turmoil, to further problematise his relationship with ideological structures with which he is inextricably imbricated. In his discussion of counter-cultural approaches to reforming masculinity, Connell identifies a mis-match between the social character of gender issues, and the individualized practices which are proposed as means of reform (*Masculinities* 139-40). Connell argues that in attempting to transform aspects of subjectivity which have arisen through participation in, and exposure to, social practices which exceed them, men may effectively cause damage to themselves, while failing to effect change in the discursive structures with which they continue to be engaged. Sassoon's protest can be characterised as an example of precisely this kind of ineffective, self-destructive attempt at transformation. Indeed, Rivers confronts him about his ineffective political approach: "you spend far too much time tilting at windmills, Siegfried. In ways which do *you* a great deal of damage—which I happen to care about—and don't do anybody else any good at all" (205).

In defying military authority and ideology, Sassoon effectively confronts aspects of his own subjectivity. In a discussion of the Gulf War, Judith Butler notes that "Foucault linked the displacement of the intentional subject with modern power relations that he himself associated with war" (10). Butler argues that the subject's genealogy within social systems needs to be conceptualised as a crucial aspect of subjectivity, one that is routinely disavowed in support of a mythical autonomy:

What [Foucault] meant, I think, is that subjects who institute actions are themselves the instituted effects of prior actions, and that the horizon in which we act is there as a constitutive possibility of our very capacity to act, not merely or exclusively as an exterior field or theater of operations. (10)

Another way of conceptualising Butler's point is to note that the concept of dependency is implicit in the very word 'subject.' In other words, some form of social context is a necessary condition of agency. Butler's insight suggests that in challenging the ideological framework of a military institution in which he has been disciplined, shaped and produced, Sassoon denounces his own history, and in doing so overlooks the extent to which his agency is implicated in that genealogy. "I think the army's probably the only place I've ever really belonged" (36), he declares, a telling indication of the extent of his imbrication with the very discursive and ideological structures he attempts to reject. Eugene Goodheart claims that "the paradox of the perverse rebel is that he is the most complete victim of the order against which he is revolting, that his revolt is itself a mark of his enslavement, and that, knowing this, he has no choice but to continue to revolt" (*The Cult of the Ego* 7). Goodheart's and Butler's observations explain why Sassoon describes his protest as "the hardest thing [he's] ever done" (6); in attacking the military, he effectively threatens the foundations of his own psyche.

Mutism and Agency

Earlier, I claimed that *Regeneration* explores the ways in which male subjects may turn upon themselves in the absence of any other expressive space. The phenomenon of mutism is significant in this regard, as it constitutes an absence of expression, a failure to signify by ordinary means. Rivers's account of mutism suggests that if men cannot find a discursive space in which to situate their experience, they may attempt to withdraw from the realm of signification altogether:

I imagine ... Mutism seems to spring from a conflict between *wanting* to say something, and knowing that if you *do* say it the consequences will be disastrous. So you resolve it by making it physically impossible for yourself to speak. (96)

Rivers's explanation accords a degree of agency and rational choice to the soldier's withdrawal from speech. For Rivers, mutism is the soldier's means of resolving a conflict, an active decision rather than an imposition from without. However, Rivers does not specify the psychic source of this decision: is it conscious or unconscious, agentic or otherwise? The nature of the "conflict" itself is also unclear. Is it a form of discursive dissonance, an inability to reconcile competing discursive needs, or does it consist instead of tension between the conscious mind and the unconscious, or even between the psyche and the body? How might a problematic relationship to linguistic structures come to be manifested in the physical realm? I re-examine Rivers's account of mutism in my discussion below of traumatic bodily experience.

Clearly, the novel's depiction of mutism and stammering gives rise to many questions concerning the relationships between consciousness, the unconscious, language, the body, and social structures. It also problematises any attempt to locate a subject's agency within a particular realm, such as that of the conscious mind. In a formulation which echoes that of Rivers, Pugliese asserts that:

[T]he dysfunctional serviceman reintextuates his healthy body into the corpus of the invalid: in assuming the symptoms of madness and physiological diseases he achieves a means whereby he can temporarily circumvent the strait-jacket of military regimes. (173)

Like Rivers, Pugliese implicitly assigns a large degree of agency and intentionality to the subject. Concerned primarily with the "discursive systems of representation" used to map

out illness (162), Pugliese stresses the performative and signifying aspects of the traumatised soldier: "The hysteric [...] mimic[s] a corporeal language in which to signify his/her meaning" (173). Pugliese implies that male "hysteric[s]" actively convey a "meaning" which is apparent to them, temporarily "assuming" and mimicking corporeal symptoms in order to manipulate discursive systems for their own benefit. However, as Joan Busfield notes, "shell-shock [...] meant an increasing recognition of the anxieties and fears war could generate [...] and a denial of male *agency and rationality*" (220, emphasis added). Busfield's statement appositely juxtaposes two related concepts which are difficult to reconcile with Pugliese's and Rivers's models of the agency and intentionality of somatic dysfunction. Firstly, Busfield posits the existence of extra-discursive psychic experiences (such as fear) which are not expressed clearly in either the somatic or linguistic domains. Secondly, she alludes to the manner in which this failure of expression undercuts notions of agency and autonomy.

"A Failure of Translation": The Illegibility of Repression

In order to examine the threat posed to notions of masculine agency and self-awareness by the figure of the soldier whose psychic trauma is manifested in the physical realm, it is necessary to revisit the concept of repression. Earlier, I claimed that Rivers characterises repression as being akin to forgetting, an unwillingness to confront consciously the memory of traumatic experiences. However, his "treatment sometimes consisted simply of encouraging the patient to abandon his *hopeless* attempts to forget" (26, emphasis added). This allusion to the inevitable return of the repressed implies that repression cannot be equated simply with forgetting, and demonstrates that conscious attempts to forget painful experiences are doomed to failure. Repression, then, may be characterised as a phenomenon which is beyond the subject's conscious control. Goodheart

notes that “the insidiousness of repression is precisely its unconscious character. I say ‘unconscious’ rather than ‘irrational’ because repression *has* its reasons” (*Desire* 117, emphasis in original). The “reasons” that Goodheart refers to are clearly illustrated in the etymology of the term:

It will be noticed that in the account given in the *Studies* the term actually used to describe the process is not ‘repression’ but ‘defence’. At this early period [ie. 1895] the two terms were used by Freud indifferently, though ‘defence’ was perhaps the commoner. (Editor’s note on “Repression” *SE*, Vol. 14, 144)

The fact that ‘repression’ and ‘defence’ are synonymous in Freud’s early work reminds us of the role that he assigned to repression, which is precisely that of preventing elements of the subject’s psychic experience from entering consciousness. In its transformations and displacements, repression serves to conceal sensations which are literally inadmissible, thereby defending the conscious mind from thoughts and emotions which would necessitate complete psychic re-orientation. It may be characterised, therefore, as a form of unconscious defence mechanism.

Clearly it is problematic to conceptualise repression in terms of agency and autonomy, and *Regeneration* repeatedly emphasises the notion that repression destabilises the traumatised subject. Whereas Sassoon’s protest constitutes a clear articulation of aspects of his trauma, other characters in the novel struggle to make sense of their experience of what Pugliese would call “reintextuation.” Referring to his breakdown and lapse into mutism, Prior tells Rivers that he “just want[s] to understand why it happened” (105). In desperately seeking an explanation, Prior reveals the extent to which his behaviour has been influenced by forces beyond the grasp of his conscious mind. He demonstrates, too, that the gulf between unconscious motivation and conscious

understanding is a source of anxiety. "I couldn't see what .. I'd need to forget," he declares (105), a statement which succinctly encapsulates the non-equivalence of repression and consciousness. Prior's dilemma suggests that repression may serve not only to protect the subject from having to confront problematic emotions in the realm of consciousness, but also to hinder their perception of the very existence of such emotions.

Freud, of course, viewed dreams as one means by which repressed emotions could be accessed by the conscious mind. For Prior, though, the nature of his oneiric transformations and displacements gives rise to suicidal thoughts and "makes it really quite impossible to like [him]self" (100). Significantly, it is not the direct memory of traumatic experiences which haunts Prior, but rather the way in which these experiences are condensed and displaced; it is implied that for Prior, the most troubling aspect of the nightmares is their sexual content. The fact that inadmissible, repressed reactions to traumatic experience come to be expressed and relived in the form of nightmares is a recurrent theme in *Regeneration*. Indeed, the cries of men awaking in terror from nocturnal visions constitute a form of textual refrain. Whereas the affective content of these nightmares may undoubtedly be traced to the front, their form and structure is supplied by the men themselves, whose own psychic mechanisms ensure that they are unable to access consciously the sources of their pain.

Rivers characterises repression as a damaging force in the mental life of his patients and an obstacle to their recovery, but in an extended meditation he demonstrates an awareness of the forces that necessitate it as a form of defence:

In leading his patients to understand that breakdown was nothing to be ashamed of, that horror and fear were inevitable responses to the trauma of war and were better acknowledged than suppressed, [...] he was setting himself against the whole tenor of their upbringing. They'd been trained to identify

emotional repression as the essence of manliness. [...] The change he demanded of them—and by implication of himself—was not trivial. Fear, tenderness—these emotions were so despised that they could be admitted into consciousness only at the cost of redefining what it meant to be a man. (48)

Repression defends Rivers's patients from painful recognition of their own failure to match up to models of masculinity, models which constitute the "whole tenor of their upbringing" and, by extension, the only available discourses in which to situate their experience. However, although their inability to express fear within the realm of language leads directly to its expression in the form of nightmares, corporeal dysfunction and mutism, this transference does not mitigate the threat posed to their masculinity by the experience of fear. Ironically, their breakdown is itself interpreted as a deviation from the masculine norm; as Busfield notes, "the concept [of shell-shock] still called the masculinity of its recipients into question" (220). Rivers acknowledges as much: when a patient claims that he "suppose[s] it is *possible* someone might find being locked up in a loony bin a fairly *emasculating* experience," Rivers responds that he "think[s] most people do" (29, emphasis in original). Pugliese's characterisation of "the serviceman's rejection of patriarchy" (172) and of the "empowering space" occupied by the war neurotic (171) overlooks the fact that a problematic relationship to discursive structures does not equate to a transcendence of those structures.

The male characters in *Regeneration* often interpret their deviation from norms of masculinity as indicative of their own pathology, rather than as an indictment of such norms. In their attempt to articulate emotions or experiences that exceed prescribed models of masculinity, they must resort to alternative forms of expression. Rather than serving to alleviate tension, however, these forms of expression in turn prove to be a source of anxiety due to their illegibility. This illegibility is itself a result of the transformations and concealments performed by the mechanism of repression; Shoshana Felman notes that "the

very essence of repression is defined by Freud as a 'failure of translation,' that is, precisely as the barrier which separates us from a foreign language" (*Writing* 19). The men who are unable to articulate their fears expressly are confused when their psyches obstinately refuse to discard the emotions, opting instead to employ expressive media which are inscrutable to the conscious mind. The expression of fear is couched in a language that traumatised subjects cannot read, and this "failure of translation" ensures that these acts of expression are both mystifying and self-destructive. While fear provides the affective motivation for nightmares, mutism, stammering, and paralysis, a defining feature of each of these symptoms is that they fail to express fear clearly. Instead, they serve both to estrange men from their emotional reaction to trauma, and to problematise their already strained engagement with discourses of masculinity which privilege mastery and autonomy.

Foreign Bodies: Traumatic Bodily Experience

In addition to tracing the manner in which the body may be employed inadvertently as an expressive medium, *Regeneration* explores the notion that soldiers' exposure to dismembered and mutilated bodies may directly undermine their own physical capability. It is often claimed that the incidence of mental breakdown in the First World War gave rise to a greater emphasis in psychiatric thought on the psyche's ability to undermine somatic function. Oppenheim claims, for example, that "the Great War [...] demonstrated beyond doubt that psychological agents can, by themselves, utterly disrupt the body's functions" (qtd. in Busfield, 220). *Regeneration* suggests, though, that this disruption is not always or necessarily mediated through consciousness or discourse.

It is worth quoting in full a passage which emphasises the role played by the body in experiences of trauma. A character named Burns (whose very name is evocative of the

fragility of corporeal stability) loses control over his bodily functions as a result of his traumatic intermingling with what is literally a foreign body:

He'd been thrown into the air by the explosion of a shell and had landed, head-first, on a German corpse, whose gas-filled belly had ruptured on impact. Before Burns lost consciousness, he'd had time to realise that what filled his nose and mouth was decomposing human flesh. Now, whenever he tried to eat, that taste and smell recurred. Nightly, he relived the experience, and from every nightmare he awoke vomiting. Burns on his knees, as Rivers had often seen him, retching up the last ounce of his bile, hardly looked like a human being at all. His body seemed to have become merely the skin-and-bone casing for a tormented alimentary canal. (19)

Burns's trauma is manifested in the psychic realm in the form of nightmares, but the passage clearly demonstrates the centrality of the body in both the causation and the expression of his trauma. We are told that "before Burns lost consciousness, he'd had time to realise" what was occurring, to attempt to map out his experience mentally. However, the episode suggests that mental factors play a secondary role in his encounter, occurring after the fact rather than constituting the primary source of trauma. Terms in the passage denoting physical phenomena far outnumber those referring to psychic events: "head-first," "corpse," "gas-filled belly," "his nose and mouth," "decomposing human flesh," "vomiting," "knees," "retching," "bile," "his body," "skin-and-bone," "alimentary canal" and "taste and smell" are all terms which suggest that Burns's experience is one which takes place largely within the physical realm. Arguably "taste and smell" cannot be categorised as instances of purely physical phenomena, but nevertheless they provide an apposite example of the imbrication of the psyche and the body. The passage confounds accounts of breakdown or masculinity which rely solely on notions of discourse, and demands instead that we recognise that "the fundamental human unit is a psyche-soma" (Flax, paraphrasing Winnicott, 150).

One crucial aspect of the Burns episode is the emphasis on the loss of boundaries between self and other. The German corpse “fill[s] his nose and mouth,” invading his body physically while simultaneously entering less directly in the form of smell and taste. A consequence of this invasion and intermingling is that Burns has difficulty maintaining his own physical boundaries, involuntarily expelling fluids through “vomiting” and “retching.” Rivers perceives him not in terms of solidity and coherence, but rather in terms of his capacity for discharge and release, as a “tormented alimentary canal,” a metaphor which again emphasises the way in which the body channels and interprets elements of the physical world. Burns can no longer maintain a sense of coherence or unity, and is instead threatened by recurring phantasmic sensations which confound the notion that the senses provide a reliable link between the psyche and the physical realm. Eric Leed refers to the actual case described in Rivers’s notes which presumably served as a model for the Burns character. Significantly, like Barker, Leed emphasises the extent to which this instance of traumatic intermingling serves to undermine distinctions: “It would be difficult to find a more complete violation of the distinctions which separate the dead from the living, friend from enemy, rotten from edible, than this experience” (19).

A character named Anderson provides another example of the importance of traumatic perceptions of the body in *Regeneration*. Like Burns, Anderson’s trauma is manifested as a loss of control over bodily fluids. He has performed “ten amputations a day” before breaking down upon witnessing a soldier bleed to death; he recalls that “it pumped out of him” (30). Anderson’s perception of a body’s inability to contain fluids leads directly to his own inability to contain fluids. Crucially, Anderson himself alludes sardonically to the fact that his bodily reaction to the experience is not mediated by aspects of consciousness typically associated with rationality or agency. When Rivers asks him “when [he] said *enough*” (31, emphasis in original), he replies: “you make it sound like a

decision. I don't know that lying on the floor in a pool of piss counts as a decision." The text also refers to a "young man [...] who'd broken down after finding the mutilated body of his friend" (139), yet another instance of the causal connection posited in the novel between perceptions of the body and breakdown.

An incident which is central to the narrative of *Regeneration* also explores the issue of traumatic bodily experience. In a passage which differs from the bulk of the text insofar as it consists of an extended description of events taking place at the front line, Prior recovers—through hypnosis—access to the memory of events directly preceding his lapse into mutism. Smell, touch and taste figure prominently in the account, demonstrating the physical nature of Prior's experience of the front, and suggesting that it is not only emotions that may be subject to repression, but sensual experiences too. In the process of cleaning up the site of a shell explosion,

Prior [...] glanced down, and found himself staring into an eye. Delicately, like somebody selecting a particularly choice morsel from a plate, he put his thumb and forefinger down through the duckboards. His fingers touched the smooth surface and slid before they managed to get a hold. He got it out, transferred it to the palm of his hand, and held it towards Logan. He could see his hand was shaking, but the shaking didn't seem to be anything to do with him. 'What am I supposed to do with this gobstopper?' [...] When at last they stood back, [...] he wanted to say something casual, something that would prove he was alright, but a numbness had spread all over the lower half of his face. (103)

I noted earlier that Rivers explains mutism in terms of "a conflict between wanting to say something, and knowing that if you do say it the consequences will be disastrous" (96), a tension within the realm of discourse. However, the passage quoted above suggests that Prior's mutism arises as the result of a more profound disruption of the link between psyche and soma. Upon encountering the *dissecta membra* of a man he has just spoken to,

Prior becomes increasingly alienated from his bodily functions. "The shaking didn't seem to be anything to do with him," and as he is taken to a casualty clearing station he displays a disregard for his bodily well-being, feeling "as if nothing could ever touch him again" (103). Prior may be characterised as becoming increasingly disembodied, and arguably it is this disembodiment that is responsible for his silencing.

The significance of the final word that Prior speaks cannot be overstated. It suggests that his visual and tactile exposure to the isolated, dislocated eye leads directly to his own inability to control his body; the eye literally "stops" his "gob." A gob-stopper is, of course, designed to be enjoyed in the mouth, and it is possible to read Prior's use of the term as indicative of a traumatic imaginary intermingling: by inadvertently imagining the eye in his mouth, he erodes the boundaries between self and other. The reference to him being "like somebody selecting a particularly choice morsel from a plate" supports this hypothesis. Whether or not one embraces this particular reading, Prior's use of the term "gob-stopper" is indicative of the extent to which his trauma centres around his relationship with another body.

Klaus Theweleit argues that language not only "signifies" and "expresses," but also plays a "role in [...] man's relationship to external reality [...] The relationship of human bodies to the larger world of objective reality grows out of one's relationship to one's own body and to other human bodies" (*Male Fantasies* 24). An extreme post-structuralist position might hold that bodies serve merely as vessels for discursive structures. Theweleit's formulation encourages us to reverse this emphasis, to conceptualise language as subservient to the corpus, a means by which bodies regulate relationships among themselves. I do not wish to endorse either of these extreme positions here. However, *Regeneration's* depiction of the aetiology of Prior's mutism certainly suggests that the body may disrupt a subject's relationship to discursive structures just as surely as discourse can

dictate conceptions of the body. Prior's encounter with the eye problematises his perception of other bodies. This leads directly to an estrangement from his own body, which in turn leads to his inability to employ language in order to define his own relationship to other bodies and his environment; he "wanted to say something [...] that would prove he was alright, but a numbness had spread all over the lower half of his face" (103). Indeed, it is possible to claim that Prior's breakdown stems from his inability to reconcile the eye and the "I", and to read the passage as indicating that bodily experience (meaning experience of the bodies of self and other) shapes and limits men's engagements with discursive structures.

It is possible, of course, to locate examples in the text of the manner in which discourse shapes both conceptions of the body and bodily experience. Prior, for example, provides a clue as to why exposure to dismemberment is such an isolating experience; he notes that letters of condolence must not contain references to such gruesome realities (134). Forced to channel their knowledge of mutilation into an acceptable narrative of noble death, soldiers are made to play their part in the maintenance of an ideal of masculine corporeal strength. The gulf between this ideal and their own experience serves as a barrier to their incorporation back into mainstream society; "yesterday [...] I felt as if I came from another planet," Prior declares (134). The unspeakable, inadmissible fact of dismemberment and mutilation is all the more traumatic for soldiers without access to an acceptable discursive framework with which to mitigate the experience. It is significant in this context that Sassoon's poetry contains references to "a hideous wound," "bloody fingers" (24), "young faces bleared with blood," "limbs that twist awry" (25), and "the eyeless dead" (157). Once again, the literary space functions in *Regeneration* as one of the few discursive sites in which soldiers may locate traumatic experiences of the body.

Conclusion: Rivers and “the Demands of a National War”

The themes I have explored in this chapter can be summarised through a discussion of Rivers, *Regeneration*'s primary protagonist. In his capacity as a military psychiatrist, Rivers usefully represents a figure who occupies a contradictory position. He is subject to institutional regimes and discursive structures, while simultaneously embodying those structures and enforcing the dictates of military ideology. Freud observed that this contradiction served to complicate the role of the military psychiatrist:

The physician himself was under military command and had his own personal dangers to fear—loss of seniority or a charge of neglecting his duty—if he allowed himself to be led by considerations other than those prescribed for him. The *insoluble conflict* between the claims of humanity, which normally carry decisive weight for a physician, and *the demands of a national war* was bound to confuse his activity. (“Introduction” 214, emphasis added)

Arguably, Rivers's attempts to resolve this “insoluble conflict” provide the primary narrative power of *Regeneration*. His ambivalence enables the text to posit analogies between the repression and disavowal enacted by male soldiers, and the forms of societal repression and silencing intrinsic to the conduct and maintenance of war. In his therapeutic role, Rivers encounters a contradiction: to heal traumatised male soldiers, he must encourage them to confront within consciousness painful actualities which must be repressed at a societal level in order to maintain a discourse of idealised exemplary masculinity. As a result, Rivers comes to view the suffering of his patients as an indictment of the very social structures with which he is implicated:

[T]he therapy was a test, not only of the genuineness of the individual's symptoms, but also of the validity of the demands the war was making of him. Rivers had survived partly by suppressing his awareness of this. (116)

Regeneration traces the way in which Rivers becomes increasingly less able to “suppress” his disenchantment with social practices that he can no longer endorse.

Although Rivers is shown to occupy a privileged position from which to negotiate a relationship with oppressive discursive structures, this interrogation is nevertheless a painful and disempowering one. Initially, he is “plagued by questions” which “drained him of energy that rightly belonged to his patients” (19), and he is “aware, as a constant background to his work, of a conflict” (47). As the narrative advances, his empathy with men who have broken down in the face of intolerable stress precipitates his own breakdown. When Bryce asks him what is wrong, he replies: “war neurosis. [...] I already stammer and I’m starting to twitch” (140). He describes his symptoms as “psychosomatic,” but can only consent when Bryce observes that “as [they] keep telling [their] patients, psychosomatic symptoms are REAL.” Another passage describes him as “suffering from the usual medley of physical and neurasthenic symptoms—headaches, dry mouth, pounding heart” (156). Of course, Rivers has not directly experienced the horrors of trench warfare, but the text suggests that the counter-transference involved in the therapeutic process is sufficient to undermine his physical well-being and ideological orientation. After the session of hypnosis with Prior, Rivers “pull[s] down his right lid to reveal a dingy and blood-shot white. *What am I supposed to do with this gob-stopper?* ” (106, emphasis in original). Just as Prior struggles to process his encounter with the eye, Rivers too is shown to be affected by the episode, and this empathy infects his own experience of embodiment.

Despite the pain caused by his increasing disenchantment and ambivalence, Rivers characterises his development as being ultimately healthy, and claims that his encounter with traumatised soldiers has been liberating. “I think perhaps the patients’ve ... have done for me what I couldn’t do for myself,” he says; “you see healing *does* go on, even if not in the expected direction” (242, emphasis in original). In an extended meditation, he notes that he has been subject to the same shaping forces that play a crucial part in the aetiology of his patients’ disorders:

[H]e himself was a product of the same system, even perhaps a rather extreme product. Certainly the rigorous repression of emotion and desire had been the constant theme of his adult life. In advising his young patients to abandon the attempt at repression and to let themselves *feel* the pity and terror their war experience inevitably evoked, he was *excavating the ground he stood on*. (48, latter emphasis added)

In challenging entrenched discourses of masculinity, Rivers is “excavating the ground he [stands] on”: this formulation provides a concise metaphor for the experience of the other male characters in the novel, whose attempts to reject aspects of military and masculinist ideology are problematised by the fact that they are effectively undermining their own psychic foundations. Rivers’s ambivalent engagement with discourse is also represented in the form of his lifelong stammer; Prior confronts him with the challenge that “[he] might actually have to sit down and work out what it is [he’s] spent fifty years trying not to say” (97).

In confronting aspects of discourse which are at least partly responsible for the suffering of his patients, Rivers finds it increasingly difficult to reconcile his own needs and beliefs with the societal demands of his position. This in turn leads to a more general disenchantment with society. Witnessing in dramatic circumstances Burns’s relapse into breakdown, he thinks “*nothing justifies this. Nothing nothing nothing*” (180, emphasis in

original), and at the novel's conclusion his empathy directly jeopardises his societal allegiance:

It was a far deeper change [...] than merely coming to believe that a negotiated peace might be possible, and desirable. [...] As a young man he'd been both by temperament and conviction deeply conservative, and not merely in politics. Now, in middle age, the sheer extent of the *mess* seemed to be forcing him into conflict with the authorities over a very wide range of issues [...] medical, military. Whatever. A society that devours its own young deserves no automatic or unquestioning allegiance. (249, emphasis in original)

While Rivers characterises his transformation as empowering and liberating, the novel's conclusion demonstrates that his antipathetic relationship to societal structures with which he continues to be engaged serves to limit and indeed silence him. As I alluded to earlier, Barker claims that "the book actually ends, in a sense, with the silencing of Rivers" (Perry 55). The novel's penultimate sentence is: "there was nothing more he wanted to say that he could say" (250). Significantly, it is implied that Rivers has strong feelings and beliefs that he wants to express, but which his role as a military psychiatrist prevents him from revealing. Although he interrogates the nature of the discursive space he occupies, this challenge leads directly to his disempowerment.

Rivers, then, is emblematic of the way in which male subjects are both constituted within, and oppressed by, social structures which exceed them. His empathy and subsequent "war neurosis," on the other hand, imply the existence of extra-discursive psychic and corporeal phenomena. In a discussion of Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Goodheart notes that "civilisation itself is incredibly ambiguous in its relation to the self. It is at once a condition of selfhood and a source of suffering" (125). Rivers, Sassoon, Prior and the other damaged characters that populate *Regeneration* attempt to

reconcile the intolerable “demands of a national war” with their own increasing ambivalence towards societal structures. These attempts threaten their psychic foundations, though, and problematise their existence as social beings. In his memoirs, Sassoon writes that “the fact that it was everybody’s business to be prepared to die for his country did not alter the inward and entirely personal grievance one had against being obliged to do it” (48). *Regeneration* examines the difficulty for men of reconciling “entirely personal” experiences—such as fear and traumatic exposure to dismembered bodies—with discursive models which are alien to them, yet simultaneously a necessary condition of their existence.

In attempting to articulate their trauma, *Regeneration*’s male characters confront a dilemma: their own fears and bodily experiences constitute precisely that which must be denied at the level of discourse in order to maintain the functioning of a gendered society at war. The lack of expressive space arising from this discrepancy between private and public ensures that when trauma speaks, it employs an inscrutable vocabulary of mutism, bodily dysfunction and nightmare. The men of *Regeneration* inadvertently express their pain through silence, through their bodies, and through terror, but they cannot understand exactly what they are speaking, or what is being spoken through them.

Chapter Two

Divided Loyalties: Surveillance and Dissociation in Pat

Barker's *The Eye in the Door*

[T]he war neuroses brought into prominence once again the very phenomenon of dissociation or splitting that had been considered the defining characteristic of female hysteria and female multiplicity.

Ruth Leys¹

[M]an is not truly one, but truly two. I say two, because the state of my own knowledge does not pass beyond that point. Others will follow; others will outstrip me on the same lines, and I hazard the guess that man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens.

*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*²

In the previous chapter, I argued that Pat Barker's *Regeneration* explores the various social and psychic structures which prevented soldiers of the First World War from articulating their experiences of trauma. I claimed that in *Regeneration*, this failure of expression may be traced to the irreconcilable tension between soldiers' experiences of trauma and their allegiance to social mechanisms. Such tension also figures prominently in the second volume of Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, *The Eye in the Door*. Like *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door* is concerned with the gulf between the home and the war fronts, and it too traces the difficulty for men of reconciling these disparate worlds; in *The Eye in the Door*, divided loyalties constitute both the object of

¹ Ruth Leys, "Traumatic Cures: Shell Shock, Janet, and the Question of Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 20.4 (1994): 632.

² Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Stories*, ed. Jenni Calder (1886; London: Penguin, 1979) 82.

inquiry and the central plot device. Whereas *Regeneration* is primarily concerned with notions of protest and silencing, *The Eye in the Door* considers other manifestations of the rupture between the individual and the social. The soldiers in the novel endure paranoia, confusion and nightmares, but most significantly they are afflicted by psychic rifts and splits, or what might be termed pathological dissociation.

Following Foucault, this chapter argues that in *The Eye in the Door*, psychic splitting is integrally related to the operations of power and the demands of social disciplinary mechanisms. The novel suggests that dissociation is no accidental by-product of war, but rather an integral component of the systems which produce soldiering masculinities. Accordingly, *The Eye in the Door* explores some of the techniques—such as surveillance—deployed to rigorously police discrete binary categories of masculinity, sexuality, and selfhood. Through its intertextual allusions to the works of Robert Louis Stevenson and Oscar Wilde, the novel also posits the notion that the threat of masculine instability and multiplicity precipitated by the First World War occurred in a climate in which unitary models of male subjectivity were already under threat from other areas. The soldiers in *The Eye in the Door* see themselves reflected not in models of heroic, unitary masculinity, but rather in works by men who themselves had cause to challenge conceptions of singular identity and sexuality.

“Neither Fish nor Fowl”: Prior’s Divided Loyalties

Notions of duality, binary division, and psychic splitting constitute the primary concern of this chapter. This focus is dictated by the subject matter of *The Eye in the Door*, a text replete with instances of splitting and division. The novel may be read as depicting the psychic conflict of the male soldier at the level of plot, the presentation of ambivalent subjectivity in dramatic terms. The narrative traces Billy Prior’s inability to

balance his competing allegiances: in his capacity as an instrument of the military regime, he inadvertently betrays his childhood friend, the pacifist Mac. Further, Prior develops a form of split personality disorder—diagnosed by Rivers in terms of “fugue states” (255)—apparently as a result of his inability to reconcile the disparate aspects of his experience. Torn between the home and war fronts, Prior is able to locate himself ideologically with respect to neither. Mac describes him as “equally *not* at home in both” worlds (110, emphasis in original), and Prior acknowledges that “he [is] right” (116).

In several respects Prior is emblematic of the divisions upon which a society at war is predicated: he is an officer with a working-class background (and therefore a “temporary gentleman,” 19); his outward display of heterosexuality is complicated by his willingness to engage in homosexual acts; he is simultaneously opposed to the war and an ardent supporter of it; he has spent time in a mental asylum but been declared mentally fit for service in the Ministry of Munitions. A character named Charles Manning observes that Prior is “neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring” (20). It is even suggested that the way in which Prior straddles both sides of various binary disciplinary categories is what problematizes his orientation to the gender order: Mac notes that it “must be quite nice, really. A foot on each side of the fence. Long as you don’t mind what it’s doing to your balls” (111).

Gender and War

Whereas Mac implies that Prior’s liminality serves to emasculate him, it is possible to argue, conversely, that Prior’s ambiguous engagement with the gender order gives rise to his traumatic duality. Indeed, a crucial passage in the novel initially appears to endorse the view that all instances of binary opposition and splitting can be traced to the gendered binary, or what Cixous calls “‘the’ couple man/woman” (91).

Revisiting his family home, Prior observes the ongoing violent clash of his parents, a form of domestic warfare. This confrontation has been a source of trauma for him since childhood:

Obviously his present attempt to understand his parent's marriage was more mature, [...] but it didn't content him, because it was also a lie: a way of claiming to be 'above the battle'. And he was not above it: he was its product. *He* and *she*—elemental forces, almost devoid of personal characteristics—clawed each other in every cell of his body, and would do so until he died. (90, emphasis in original)

It is not difficult to envisage a reading of the novel which would identify this episode as the key to the text, and the primal scene of Prior's psychic existence. Such a reading might identify this description of the play of gendered opposites either as a metaphor for Prior's attempt to navigate a path between the masculine demands of the war front and the feminised domestic sphere, or as evidence of the semiotic space in which his subjectivity is enacted. The latter interpretation would accord with Cixous' argument regarding the centrality of the male/female binary in the structuring of all psychic existence. Prior's description of himself as both the product and the site of the "battle" of gendered "elemental forces" resonates with Cixous's description of the "universal battlefield" (91) which she sees as characterising the production of meaning within phallogocentric systems.³

Certainly the episode is a significant one, but it must be read in relation to another primal scene that structures the novel, and which informs Prior's involuntary recollections and nightmares: his experience of battle at the front. It is essential to take this other founding moment of Prior's psychic life into account, as its textual presence

³ Battle imagery occurs frequently in accounts of the production of meaning: Lucas speaks of "the violent conflict b/w a dominating and patriarchal symbol and an inevitable and resistant semiotic" (150), and Andre Green argues that "whenever there is antagonism, with the domination of one term over another [...] it is possible [...] to imagine a no-man's-land" (qtd. in Rutherford, 111).

serves to confound any potential conclusions about the centrality of the binary division of gender in structuring all psychic life. Without doubt the text suggests that notions of gender play a large role in the formation and maintenance of identity. However, it also explores the way in which entirely other forms of experience may play perhaps more crucial roles in structuring or disturbing psychic equilibrium. To argue that Prior's exposure to the horrors of war plays a central role in the aetiology of his condition may appear to be stating the obvious. It is necessary to stress this point, though, in order to avoid prematurely attributing too much causal power to the operations of gender.

With this in mind, it is important to note that in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, Silverman traces war trauma directly to disruptions in the gender order. Challenging conceptions of gender through an examination of marginal sites of masculinity, she argues that periods of "historical trauma" (8) such as war precipitate crises of faith in conventional masculinity. I think Silverman is correct to identify a connection between gender issues and war trauma. Her suggestion that models of masculinity reveal their inconsistencies and tensions in periods of upheaval is also instructive. However, her investigation is concerned primarily with the cultural effects of war, and the means by which challenges to the gender order are redressed. This focus informs her argument that war trauma may be traced directly to the cultural privileging of notions of masculine presence over feminised lack and "specularity" (9).⁴ *The Eye in the Door*, which examines processes of individual psychic degeneration rather than broader cultural phenomena, presents a different account of how a form of disciplined, singular masculinity proved untenable for many soldiers.

⁴ In speaking of "specularity," Silverman alludes to the Lacanian concept of the mirror stage, in which the subject's sense of identity is formed through narcissistic self-reflection and misrecognition. Silverman argues that "all subjects are necessarily within specularity, even when occupying a viewing position, and that all antitheses of spectator and spectacle are consequently false" (9). I employ the term throughout this chapter to refer both to the role played by images of selfhood in the structuring of identity, and to the condition of existing in the visual field. It is striking that Prior's encounters with women (such as Beattie and Hettie Roper) encourage him to consider his participation in regimes of specularity, and that these women provide insights regarding panoptic mechanisms (see pps. 85 and 90 below).

Alienation: Negotiating The Home and War Fronts

While *The Eye in the Door* is also concerned with the relationship between gender and war trauma, the direction of causation is, in a sense, reversed. Whereas Silverman traces war trauma to disruptions in the gender order, *The Eye in the Door* suggests that it stems from a rupture of a different kind. This rupture centres on the tension for male soldiers between allegiance to the social mechanisms which have produced them as soldiers, and disaffection with (and active resistance to) such disciplinary forces. Late in the novel, Rivers suggests a connection between Prior's "fugue states" and his childhood exposure to his warring parents. Prior, however, realises that although he has been afflicted with recurring dreams of childhood, "they were still about the war, he knew they were" (252). Significantly, these dreams concern not his parents' conflict, but rather his friendship with Mac. He recalls, for example, an occasion when Mac was punished unjustly by a schoolteacher named Horton for a crime they both committed: "Mac was savagely caned. [...] *Bastard*, Prior thought, as Horton's arm swung. Years later, after witnessing the brutalities of trench warfare, he still thought: *Bastard*" (253). The common link between the two events described is, of course, the injustice of the respective disciplinary systems.

In *Achilles in Vietnam*, Jonathan Shay argues that this kind of ideological disillusionment is the primary factor in the aetiology of war trauma. Like Silverman, Shay claims that "war can destroy the social contract binding soldiers to each other, to their commanders, and to the society that raised them as an army" (17). However, where Silverman identifies the traumatic encounter with the feminised phenomena of lack and specularità as a major cause of war trauma, Shay argues that the social contract is severed when soldiers can no longer "wrap *thémis* around themselves as a mantle of safety in the world" (37). The ancient Greek concept of *thémis* is translated by Shay as meaning a sense of "'what's right'" (11), and he argues that it is an essential element

binding soldiers to the social sphere in which their subjectivity is enacted. If this sense of justice and trust is betrayed, soldiers may begin to feel estranged from the society that has produced them, and to identify only with their fellow soldiers. Shay claims that “moral injury is an essential part of any combat trauma that leads to lifelong psychological injury,” and that “veterans can usually [...] return to civilian life, so long as ‘what’s right’ has not also been violated” (20). In a similar vein, Martin Stone argues that “disenchantment [...] was at the heart of many a case of shellshock” (262).

Prior’s sense of injustice may be characterised in Shay’s terms as a form of “moral injury,” but this injury does not precipitate his complete withdrawal from the social sphere, or even from the military regime. Embittered by his battle experience, he nevertheless continues to function as an instrument of the war machine, as an intelligence agent in the Ministry of Munitions. If the primary cause of his psychic turmoil is disaffection with the practices and structures which have constructed him as a soldier, why does he continue to act according to their dictates? A possible answer is presented in the form of Prior’s aggressive antipathy towards non-soldiering civilians. David Morgan observes that “military personnel, returning from the field of combat, often feel a sense of estrangement from the civilian society to which they are returning” (169). In Prior’s case, this estrangement is particularly intense. Significantly, his first episode of pathological dissociation is directly preceded by a daydream in which, disgusted by the apparent obliviousness of civilians to the events of the war, he imagines them being violently crushed by a tank. He later observes that “in spite of Not Believing in the War and Not Having Faith in Our Generals and all that, [the front] still seems like the only *clean* place to be” (275, emphasis in original). He notes, too, that “one did feel at times very powerfully that the only loyalties that actually mattered were loyalties forged [at the front]” (255).

At one level, then, Prior aligns himself with the military and condemns the “conchie[s]” (266) who refuse to contribute to the war effort. In response to Mac’s

taunt that he “thought [Prior had] finally worked out whose side [he was] on,” Prior declares firstly that “there was never any doubt about that,” and then, pointing to his uniform: “people who wear this” (265). However, the concept of competing and incompatible loyalties recurs throughout the text, and Prior’s confusion regarding “where the deepest loyalties lie” (266) is frequently apparent. Despite his claim that he has always known “whose side [he was] on,” his reaction upon discovering that he has inadvertently betrayed Mac is that “the bastards have won” (209). The trauma associated with his dilemma about whether to betray Mac, and his anguish upon discovering that he has done so, serve to illustrate the extent to which his loyalties are divided. Notwithstanding his bitterness towards civilians and pacifists, his allegiance to Mac (and to another intimate dating from childhood, Beattie Roper) is indicative of both his ongoing imbrication with the social framework, and the strength of his ideological investment in the civilian sphere.

If Prior’s loyalty to the military undermines his ideological alignment with civilian society, the converse is also true. A soldier’s engagement with the social sphere may serve to complicate his participation in military practices and discourses. For example, Samuel Hynes describes the “conflict [...] which Rivers faced, as officer and psychiatrist, and which confronted many of his patients at Craiglockhart [...] of martial values vs. the human feelings *that obstruct those values*” (*A War* 226, emphasis added). Prior must distance himself conceptually from his family and from civilian society in order to maintain his identification with the military. It is significant in this respect that “in the fugue state [Prior had] denied that his father was his father” (255): “I was born two years ago. In a shell-hole in France. I have no father” (240). However, as Butler argues, “no subject is its own point of departure; and the fantasy that it is one can only disavow its constitutive relations by recasting them as the domain of a countervailing externality” (“Contingent” 9). Of course, Prior realises that “to say that one had been born in a shell-hole is to say something absurdly self-dramatizing” (255). His declaration of imagined autogenesis nevertheless demonstrates that he does

“disavow [his] constitutive relations,” attempting to situate himself beyond the realms of the domestic and the familial in order to foster the illusion of psychological consistency and unity.

Splitting and Disciplinary Technologies

The Eye in the Door traces Prior’s competing loyalties, and suggests that his dissociation and duality are precipitated by this conflict. Additionally, the novel explores the notion that such psychic divisions are not merely a by-product or side-effect of disciplinary technologies, but rather an integral component of their very *modus operandi*. In a telling passage, Rivers (himself a figure of a subject caught between the two competing disciplinary technologies of medicine and the military) muses on the parallels between the dissociation required for the conduct of medicine, and that required for the conduct of war. Observing a colleague’s clinical detachment, he describes

a necessary suspension [of empathy], without which the practice of medical research, and indeed of medicine itself, would hardly be possible, but none the less identifiably the same suspension the soldier must achieve in order to kill. The end was different, but the psychological mechanism employed to achieve it was essentially the same. (146)

Rivers notes that his colleague’s detachment “was in some ways a benign [...] form of the morbid dissociation that had begun to afflict Prior” (146). *The Eye in the Door* examines repeatedly the notion that the dissociation demanded of the male subject by his participation in disciplinary technologies may lead to a pathological inability to reconcile competing aspects of psychic experience. Siegfried Sassoon claims that he has “succeeded in cutting off the part of [himself] that hates [killing]” (223) and is depicted as “a man whose internal divisions had been dangerously deepened by the

war" (229). Manning, too, notes that as a soldier "you split enormous parts of yourself off" (159). The novel posits the subject's participation in disciplinary systems as a major factor in the aetiology of divided mental states and psychic rifts, and relates these issues directly to the institutional environments in which subjectivity is structured; Rivers notes, for example, that "he had, after all, been subject to a form of education which is designed to inculcate precisely such a split" (141).

What is described by Rivers as Sassoon's failed "attempt at dissociation" (233) is but one example in the text of men's failure to re-integrate their disciplined soldiering subjectivities into the context of civilian society. In *The Eye in the Door*, the suspension of empathy demanded of the soldier becomes totally useless and inappropriate when he returns to the domestic sphere: a state of being which has previously been integral to both his survival and his sense of identity now serves only to alienate him from those who have not fought. The notion that certain forms of behaviour and subjectivity are made acceptable or beneficial by the context in which they are situated is suggested in *If This Is A Man*, Primo Levi's autobiographical account of life in a concentration camp. Levi describes a fellow inmate whose eccentric behaviour would, in normal circumstances, be read as signifying his insanity:

If Elias regains his liberty he will be confined to the fringes of human society, in a prison or a lunatic asylum. But here in the Lager there are no criminals because there is no moral law to contravene, no madmen because we are wholly devoid of free will, as our every action is, in time and place, the only conceivable one. (104)

Levi's observation concerning the conditions under which discursive notions of criminality and madness may arise points to the fact that social prescriptions and standards are dependent on certain conditions and contexts. *The Eye in the Door* examines the specific psychic demands made of men in the context of war, and contrasts these expectations with those of the society to which they must return.

Sassoon claims that “if people are going to have to kill, they need to be brought up to expect to have to do it. They need to be trained *not to care*” (231, emphasis in original). Sassoon’s dilemma centres on the impossibility of reconciling his social, compassionate, loving self with the demands made of him in his capacity as an officer; he quotes a training manual’s edict that “a commander must demand the impossible and not think of sparing his men” (230). Stone also points to the disparity between the demands of civilian life and those of soldiering, noting that “the soldier was actively encouraged to kill at the expense of unleashing infantile sadistic impulses that had previously been successfully repressed” (263). *The Eye in the Door* suggests that male soldiers are forced to transgress the limits of acceptable social behaviour in the context of war, and that this transgression serves to problematise their re-entry into civilian society.

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

To this point, I have argued that *The Eye in the Door* presents a vision of masculine subjects who are split and fractured due to their participation in disciplinary technologies. To further explore these ideas, it is necessary to acknowledge the intertextual presence in *The Eye in the Door* of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. A quote from *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* concerning “the thorough and primitive duality of man” constitutes the epigram to *The Eye in the Door*, and Stevenson’s novel also permeates the body of the text. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* influences Prior’s, Manning’s and Rivers’s conceptions of subjectivity and duality; it must also inform readings of *The Eye in the Door*. I will argue that *The Eye in the Door*’s allusions to *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* serve also to suggest a historical context for the climate in which the widespread phenomenon of male mental breakdown in the First World War was understood. The presence in *The Eye in the Door* of notions of split subjectivity will thus be read with respect to the challenges to unitary masculinity posed by

homosexuality, pacifism, and men's failure to live up to an impossible ideal of bounded, rational subjectivity.

The notion of divided masculine subjectivity is explicitly represented in the text in the form of Prior's pathological dissociation; he is, literally, a man divided. Traumatized and bewildered by this rupture in his experience of selfhood, he consults Rivers in an effort to regain a sense of unity and coherent identity. I have mentioned that part of Rivers's therapeutic technique involves encouraging Prior to talk about his childhood experience. Rivers's most explicit prescription for Prior's dissociation, though, constitutes one of the novel's intertextual links with *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Prior asks Rivers whether the primary issue needing to be addressed is that of memory:

'If I remember is that enough to heal the split?'

'No, I don't think so. I think there has to be a moment of ... recognition. Acceptance. There has to be a moment when you look in the mirror and say, *this too is myself*.' (249, emphasis added)

Rivers prescribes "recognition" as the remedy for Prior's division, but ironically the words he employs to describe the path to unity directly paraphrase a speech of perhaps the most famous and influential literary figure of split masculine subjectivity, Henry Jekyll:

And yet when I looked upon that ugly idol in the glass, I was conscious of no repugnance, rather of a leap of welcome. *This, too, was myself*. It seemed natural and human. In my eyes it bore a livelier image of the spirit, it seemed more express and single, than the imperfect and divided countenance, I had been hitherto accustomed to call mine. (Stevenson 84-5, emphasis added)

Of course, Jekyll's Lacanian moment of recognition does not lead directly to the resolution of the Jekyll/Hyde split. Nevertheless, the resonance between the two passages serves to highlight one of the common concerns of the two novels. Both texts

explore the notion that dissociation and splitting in men are related to their reflections upon themselves, the manner in which various aspects of their subjectivity come to be either incorporated into or excluded from their images of self. Whereas Jekyll is accustomed to viewing a “divided countenance,” Prior notes that the act of recognising and accepting problematic aspects of his psychic life “could be difficult” as he “find[s] some parts of [himself] pretty bloody unacceptable even at the best of times” (249). The idea that men may cut off problematic aspects of their subjectivity by refusing to recognise them is also explored through the figure of Rivers. When he tells Prior that a traumatic childhood experience precipitated his own loss of visual memory, Prior notes that “whatever it was, you *blinded* yourself so you wouldn’t have to go on seeing it” (139, emphasis in original). At one level, then, *The Eye in the Door*’s allusions to *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* serve to emphasise the texts’ common concern with the way men may split off and refuse to recognise unacceptable aspects of subjectivity.

Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde functions as a kind of interpretive device for the characters in *The Eye in the Door*. Indeed, any inquiry into the way the male characters in the novel see themselves must take their imagined relationships to *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* into account. Rivers muses, for example, on *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*’s influence as a signifier of divided subjectivities, noting that “it was odd how the term ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ had passed into language, so that even people who had never read Stevenson’s story used the names as a shorthand for internal divisions” (143). Rivers’s observation illustrates the extent to which *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* has permeated the cultural climate in which *The Eye in the Door* is set. It also points to the fact that a male subject scouring literature for a reflection of his own experience of division would have no trouble locating one. This, of course, is true of Prior, who explicitly frames his own experience in terms of the literary model which mirrors it most closely: he speaks “of looking at his hands to make sure they had not been transformed into the hairy hands of Hyde” (143).

“Legitimizing Stories”

The significance of Prior’s identification with Hyde becomes even more apparent when compared with his inability to see himself reflected in other textual models of masculinity. *The Eye in the Door* explores the difficulty for men of attempting to recognise themselves in ideals and models which do not reflect their own experience. Writing about the men’s movement of the 1970s, Jonathan Rutherford argues that “feminism didn’t so much remove men’s powers and privileges as strip them of their legitimating stories” (3). *The Eye in the Door* explores men’s ambivalent engagement with “legitimizing stories” which have been rendered illegitimate. One passage depicts Prior’s visit to the Achilles monument, and explicitly addresses his engagement with textual representations of masculinity:

[I]ts heroic grandeur both attracted and repelled him. It seemed to embody the same *unreflecting* admiration of courage that he found in “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” a poem that had meant a great deal to him as a boy, and still did, though what it meant had become considerably more complex. He stared up at the stupendous lunging figure, with its raised sword and shield, and thought, not for the first time, that he was looking at the representation of an ideal that no longer had validity. (127, emphasis added)

Significantly, Prior identifies the same invalid ideal—one of “unreflecting admiration of courage”—as informing two separate textual celebrations of heroic masculinity. This suggests the ubiquity and discursive dominance of the model of the courageous, unified male subject. Another pertinent feature of the passage is Prior’s description of the “unreflecting” single-mindedness of the ideal embodied in the statue and the poem. Prior’s own troubled reflections render him incapable of identifying with such an ideal, of seeing himself mirrored in “legitimizing stories” which do not countenance introspection or duality.

Although Prior is disenchanted with the ideal of unitary masculinity, he is not able to completely disregard it. He observes that the “Charge of the Light Brigade” “had meant a great deal to him as a boy, and still did” (127), and that the statue’s “heroic grandeur both attracted and repelled him.” His continuing investment in the ideal of unified masculinity is shown to be a source of confusion. While his own experience of division and psychic trauma has rendered his identification with the ideal “considerably more complex” (127), it nevertheless continues to exert its power over him. His ambivalent contemplation of the statue and the poem reveals his ongoing negotiation with an ideal of masculine boundedness and courage which has long served to structure his psychic life; the reference to his childhood investment in the poem neatly represents the fact that the ideal has structured his psychic and ideological alignment from an early age. While his divisions and his experience of war problematise his ability to see the “legitimizing stories” as reflections of his own psychic experience, he nevertheless retains some investment in the masculine ideal they embody.

The notion that a man’s war experience may constitute an obstacle to his engagement with texts is also explored in *The Eye in the Door* through the figure of Manning. Attending a controversial performance of Wilde’s *Salomé*, Manning finds that although he can relate to the subject matter of the play, he is “bored” and it “mean[s] nothing to him” (78). Whereas Prior is repelled by the content of the “legitimizing stories” he encounters, Manning cannot engage with the form of *Salomé*:

It was not that he thought the theme trivial or unworthy—certainly not that—but the language was impossible for him. France had made it impossible. He’d only to think for a second of the stinking yellow mud of the salient, the porridge in which the lumps were bodies, or parts of them, for an impassable barrier to come between him and these words. (78)

Manning, a bisexual husband and father, notes that he is sympathetic to the play's attempt to describe "a great passion [...] denied legitimate outlets, [...] expressed as destruction and cruelty because it could not be expressed as love" (78). Nevertheless, Manning's estrangement from the performance is indicative of the "barrier" between his own experience and the idealised realm of representation; the extent of this gulf is apparent in his description of a "thing Wilde couldn't have foreseen: people in the audience for whom severed heads were not necessarily made of papier mâché" (78). This observation accentuates the fact that it is Manning's actual experience that renders the play inaccessible to him; he observes that the language repels him because "France had made it impossible."

For different reasons, Prior and Manning both struggle to find textual reflections of their own experiences of war, trauma, and dissociation. Their ambivalent and "complex" (127) relationships to pre-war texts resonate with the debate among cultural historians concerning the extent to which the First World War constituted a break in imaginative tradition and forms of representation. One position, adopted by Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory* and Hynes in *A War Imagined*, holds that the cataclysmic events of the war rendered traditional forms of representation obsolete and ushered in new expressive media and styles. Hynes argues that the war "altered the ways in which men and women thought not only about war but about the world, and about culture and its expressions." According to Hynes, the war also "changed reality. That change was so vast and so abrupt as to make the years after the war seem discontinuous from the years before" (ix). It is certainly not difficult to read Manning and Prior as representative figures of such a cultural upheaval, and to trace their problematic engagement with texts produced before the war to a mismatch between their "changed reality" and outmoded representations of an older cultural climate. The characters can be read as symbols of the crisis in representation precipitated by the war, of the discontinuity between pre-war and post-war forms of expression.

Hynes and Fussell present convincing accounts of “a gap in history” (Hynes *A War* ix) and of the discontinuity between pre-war and post-war culture. Contrary to Hynes and Fussell, Jay Winter posits the existence of a certain continuity between the pre-war and post-war cultural landscapes, a continuity based around the wide-spread need to draw meaning from the calamitous events of the war through the medium of inherited imagery and language. In *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, Winter argues that although the First World War undeniably precipitated many cultural upheavals, the vast scale of the bereavement and mourning it engendered also prompted a revival of traditional imagery and language, much of it religious. Examining the “Great War and the persistence of tradition” (223), Winter contends that “the backward gaze of so many writers, artists, politicians, soldiers, and everyday families in this period reflected the universality of grief and mourning in Europe from 1914” (223). He also describes “the flowering in [the] wake of [the Great War] of an older set of languages about suffering and loss” (227).

Exploring the issue of why traditional “cultural forms” (225) proved so popular, Winter invokes Kristeva’s assertion that “religious discourse [...] set[s] forth a device whose prosodic economy, interaction of characters, and implicit symbolism constitute a very faithful semiological representation of the subject’s battle with symbolic collapse” (225). Significantly, Winter notes that Kristeva attributes the same function to “aesthetic and particularly literary creation.” *The Eye in the Door* is not particularly concerned with religious or apocalyptic imagery, but its intertextual allusions (to *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Salomé*, “The Charge of the Light Brigade” and the Achilles monument) do serve to suggest something of the cultural continuity posited by Winter. They also resonate with Kristeva’s assertion that literature may reflect and symbolise a subject’s struggle to come to terms with traumatic experience.

I have discussed Prior's and Manning's inability to identify with some texts and "legitimizing stories." This lack of identification or recognition appears to suggest the kind of cultural discontinuity posited by Fussell and Hynes. Significantly, though, I have also argued that Prior identifies with the protagonist(s) of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, thereby situating his own experience with respect to a literary model of subjectivity and masculinity which predates the war. To paraphrase Kristeva, the structure of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the interaction of Jekyll/Hyde's warring personalities, and the symbolism of masculine multiplicity constitute a very faithful semiological representation of Prior's battle with dissociation. In short, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde's* depiction of split masculine subjectivity constitutes the most apposite textual reflection of Prior's psychic turmoil available to him.

Fin-de-siècle models of Masculine Duality

Significantly, in searching for a literary reflection of his traumatic experience, Prior seizes upon a text produced in the relatively recent period of the *fin-de-siècle*. His choice serves to foreground a historical context in which experiences of fractured masculine subjectivity had already entered the realm of cultural representation. *The Eye in the Door* presents one entrenched strand of discourse through Prior's musings on the unitary ideal apparent in the Achilles monument and "The Charge of the Light Brigade." However, by alluding to *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Salomé*, *The Eye in the Door* also foregrounds the existence of an alternative tradition of duality, a competing historical strand which might more accurately be described as a historical *strain*, for these subversive depictions of masculinity constitute a challenge to discursively dominant models of the unitary male subject. In her discussion of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Elaine Showalter describes what Karl Miller has called "the Nineties School of Duality," and claims that "the *fin de siècle* was the golden age of literary and sexual doubles" (*Sexual* 106). In this alternative tradition, the impossibility of conforming to the oppressive

ideal of unitary, bounded masculinity constitutes a factor in the aetiology of psychic divisions and ruptures, which attain textual representation in the form of the explicit divisions and doubles found in the works of Wilde and Stevenson

The Eye in the Door explores the concept that men's war experience (and their participation in the disciplinary technologies associated with war) serves to undermine their relationships to ideals of masculine rationality and singularity. Of course, the same cannot be said of texts produced at the *fin-de-siècle*, which pre-date the war and demonstrate other concerns. What, then, might be the source of the earlier texts' preoccupation with the themes of doubling and division? A probable answer is presented in the form of Showalter's observation that "homosexuality represented a double life" in that period (*Sexual* 106), a statement which resonates with *The Eye in the Door*'s description of Manning as "profoundly committed to living a double life" as a result of his homosexuality (155). Showalter reads *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as "a fable of *fin-de-siècle* homosexual panic, the discovery and resistance of the homosexual self" (108), and notes that the tale was read by both Wilde and John Symonds as a reflection of their own need for dissociation and doubling. Showalter quotes Symonds's observation that "viewed as an allegory, [...] it touches upon one too closely," and also cites Wilde's description of "a friend of mine, called Mr. Hyde" (*Sexual* 115).

Symonds's experience of duality is explored at greater length in Ed Cohen's article "The Double Lives of Man." Cohen examines the "representational strategies" employed in both Symonds's autobiography and that of an "anonymous Hungarian physician [which] appears as Case 99 in Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*" (95). He argues that the same kind of doubling and splitting that Symonds identified with in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is apparent in these narrative accounts of homosexual subjectivity. This splitting, Cohen argues, was necessitated by the impossibility of articulating homosexual desire within the confines of the dominant model of unitary masculinity:

In order to [represent their homosexuality ...] it was necessary for them to interrupt those earlier definitions of self-consistent, self-identified 'character', inscribed as both a sociological and a narratological category, which established the standard for 'proper' male subjectivity in the period. (88)

The appearance of these "new narrative modes that encompassed non-unitary forms of male subjectivity" (88) both enabled the representation of forms of masculinity which did not conform to the dominant unitary model, and, further, undermined the validity of that model:

these depictions of non-normative forms of masculinity necessarily challenged the dominant sex/gender ideologies which portrayed male 'character' as unitary and self-consistent and therefore fomented the reconceptualisation of male subjectivity in these cases as inherently—or at least locally—divided or split. (Cohen 109)

The cultural spectacle of male homosexuality at the *fin-de-siècle* presented a challenge to contemporary accounts of gender and subjectivity which equated masculinity with heterosexuality, rationality, and unitariness. For the men who initially posed this challenge, though, articulating homosexuality involved the production of dissociated psychic states, multiple selves which could not be reconciled with models of the bounded masculine subject.

Prior's identification with Hyde does not merely highlight the similarities between his own experience of division and that of the earlier novel's (anti-)hero. *The Eye in the Door* implicitly posits parallels between the experiences of male homosexuals in the late nineteenth century and those of traumatised soldiers of the First World War. It thereby suggests that the widespread phenomenon of male mental breakdown

precipitated by the war occurred in a cultural climate in which the ideal of the unified, rational male subject was (always) already under threat from other areas. The novel effectively locates the figure of the divided, shell-shocked soldier in a period in which the notion of unitary masculinity was both contested and—correspondingly—rigorously policed. Prior, who identifies with both the divided subjectivity of Hyde and the unitary ideal embodied in the Achilles monument, is an exemplary symbolic representation of the uncertain and ambivalent status of the ideal of unitary masculinity in this period.

Specularity and Surveillance

While Prior is emblematic of tensions in the ideal of unitary masculinity during the First World War, *The Eye in the Door* is also concerned with mapping the ways in which individual men must negotiate the competing demands made of them by discursively powerful notions of gendered subjectivity (such as the unitary masculine ideal), and their own experiences of fear, irrationality, and dissociation. My discussion of Prior's engagement with textual representations of masculinity stemmed from the observation that the novel is concerned with men's reflections on themselves, and with the machinations of specularity. A concept which figures prominently in the novel, and which is closely related to the issue of self-reflection, is that of surveillance. If splitting and division constitute one of the text's primary themes, notions of surveillance and visibility occur just as frequently. Countless images of eyes, mirrors, and reflections permeate the text. On the very first page, "Prior, always self-conscious, [is] aware of approving glances" (3). In *The Eye in the Door*, the concepts of splitting and surveillance are inextricably imbricated. An examination of the novel's treatment of these themes will lead us into a consideration of *The Eye in the Door's* account of the

boundaries of subjectivity, of the fact that characters in the novel frequently experience surveillance and specularity in terms of violation and potential dissolution.

In *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, Silverman discusses the role played by specularity in the development of war trauma. She implies that for men, specularity comes into play only when soldiers are forced to confront the feminised phenomena of lack and alterity. However, *The Eye in the Door* presents a very different view of the climate of specularity and surveillance in which soldiering masculinities are produced, and in which split masculine subjectivities arise. As the novel's title hints, it is concerned with the atmosphere of suspicion and regulation engendered in wartime British society through the deployment of disciplinary technologies centring on observation. *The Eye in the Door* suggests that the male subject always negotiates the visual field, not only in marginal or extreme situations, and depicts a social space where the production of soldiering masculinities is directly related to an intricate system of observation and enforced self-regulation.

In his capacity as an intelligence agent, for example, Prior scrutinises the letters of his childhood friends:

It seemed strange to Prior to be reading his friends' private letters, though these had all [...] been read aloud at the Old Bailey. [...] No, there was no privacy left in these letters; he was not violating anything that mattered. And yet, as the train thundered into a tunnel and the carriage filled with the acrid smell of smoke, Prior turned to face his doubled reflection in the window and thought he didn't like himself very much. (88)

Prior's surveillance of the intimacies of others pollutes his own self-reflection; his "doubled reflection" symbolises both his competing loyalties, and the role played by images of selfhood in the structuring of identity. A series of textual puns revolving

around the slippage between the words 'I' and 'eye' also serves to suggest the extent to which the maintenance of identity is tied to reflection and viewing. Prior suggests the interchangeability of the terms by summarising a dream with the claim that "'eye' was stabbing myself in the 'I'" (75). *The Eye in the Door* also associates splitting explicitly with specularity through Rivers's juxtaposition of the two concepts. He observes that "the impact of [his childhood] experience had gone beyond the loss of visual memory and had occasioned a deep split between the rational, analytic cast of his mind and his emotions" (141). *The Eye in the Door* suggests that although visibility and specularity play a role in the maintenance and formation of a subject's sense of identity, they may also constitute a threat to that very identity. This seemingly paradoxical position is espoused by R.D. Laing, who notes that "being visible can be both in itself persecutory and also a reassurance that one is still alive" (113), and, further, that "the 'self-conscious' person is caught in a dilemma. He may need to be seen and recognized, in order to maintain his sense of realness and identity. Yet, at the same time, the other represents a threat to his identity and reality" (113).

Panopticism and "the fortress of identity"

In order to trace *The Eye in the Door*'s treatment of the notion of traumatic visibility, it will be useful to consider some alternative readings of the novel's title. The first of these alternative readings is suggested by the textual conflation of 'eye' and 'I'. Reading the title as 'The I in the Door' enables us to concentrate on the novel's concern with the boundaries of subjectivity, and to commence an analysis of the threats to "the very fortress of identity" (Stevenson 83) posed by surveillance and visibility. I employ this phrase from *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* deliberately and for two reasons: firstly, to illustrate yet another of the novels' common concerns, and secondly, for the sense of defensiveness and threat suggested by the term "fortress." Showalter notes that "*fin-de-siècle* images of penetration through locked doors" permeate *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*,

and quotes Stephen Heath's assertion that "the organising image for [*Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*] is the breaking down of doors, learning the secret behind them" (*Sexual* 110). Showalter suggests that these images evoke both the boundaries of subjectivity, and chinks in these defensive walls. *The Eye in the Door* is also replete with images of enclosed spaces, cells, and claustrophobic rooms, and it, too, explores the way in which the male subject attempts to safeguard his identity, protecting himself from threatening environments behind psychic barriers. *The Eye in the Door* is an examination of the way in which the 'I' is enclosed behind protective doors.

Conceptualising 'the door' as a symbol of the boundaries of the subject enables another reading of the title: 'The Eye in the Door' may be read as a reference to the internalisation of surveillance. Such a reading is supported by the observations of the character Beattie Roper, the subject of constant scrutiny by a painted eye in the door of her prison cell. Visiting Beattie in prison, Prior notices this disciplinary device:

He found himself looking at an elaborately painted eye. The peephole formed the pupil, but around this someone had taken the trouble to paint a veined iris, an eyewhite, eyelashes and a lid. This eye, where no eye should have been, was deeply disturbing to Prior. [...] 'That's horrible,' he said, turning back to Beattie.

'S not so bad as long as it stays in the door.' She tapped the side of her head. 'You start worrying when it gets in here.' (36)

Beattie's comments accord with Foucault's contention that disciplinary systems of surveillance operate through the subject's internalisation of both a sense of visibility, and the subsequent need for self-regulation. Analysing this mechanism of power (which he calls panopticism), Foucault argues that

he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes *in himself* the

power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (*Discipline* 202-23, emphasis added).

Foucault claims that panoptic surveillance “is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action” due to the fact that subjects internalise the concept of visibility (*Discipline* 201). Like Beattie, Prior alludes to this phenomenon of internalisation; he notes that “facing [the eye] was horrible because you could never be sure if there were a human eye at the centre of the painted eye” (40).

Surveillance can be seen to operate at the interface of the subject and the social field. As the link between the two, surveillance also constitutes a potential site of weakness in the subject’s protective armoury. A third reading of the novel’s title, then: ‘The Eye in the Door’ evokes the concept that surveillance constitutes a membrane of sorts in the “fortress of identity,” through which the subject can both see and be seen. This “eye” serves to undermine the solidity of “the door” protecting the subject from traumatic intermingling with the world. Surveillance and specularity function in the novel as impediments to the possibility of protective self-enclosure. Indeed, they serve to problematise the unity and coherence of identity; recall Foucault’s claim that panoptic disciplinary mechanisms ensure that the subject “simultaneously plays both roles” and “becomes the principle of his own subjection” (*Discipline* 203). The notion that panopticism both splits the subject and confounds the boundary between the self and social mechanisms is well represented in the following passage, in which Prior realises the extent to which he has become divided:

He went to the front door and locked it, then stood with his back to it, looking down the dark corridor to the half-open door of his bedroom, feeling a momentary relief at being locked in, though he quickly realized this was nonsense. Whatever it was he needed to be afraid of, it was on this side of the door. (131)

The “half-open door” in Prior’s apartment usefully symbolises the precarious status of his identity, which can no longer be clearly distinguished or differentiated from disciplinary mechanisms. The passage also resonates with Laing’s description of “subtle lobotomies and tranquillizers that place the bars of Bedlam and the locked doors *inside* the patient” (12, emphasis in original). Whereas *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* employs the image of the room to symbolise the “very fortress of identity,” *The Eye in the Door* examines the way in which male subjects are colonised by disciplinary systems of surveillance which problematise the distinction between inner and outer.

Traumatic Visibility

Several passages in the novel explicitly explore sensations of violation and traumatic visibility which are precipitated by instances of surveillance and specularity. Manning is profoundly disturbed when he receives a bizarre document implicating him in a German plot to undermine the moral fibre of English society through the propagation of homosexual practices. The document is titled “As I *See* it—The First 47,000” (152, emphasis added). Rivers’s observation regarding Manning’s reaction to the incident neatly encapsulates the themes I have been discussing:

For somebody like Manning, profoundly committed to living a double life, the revelation that both sides of his life were visible to unknown eyes must be like having the door to the innermost part of one’s identity smashed open. (155)

Rivers here addresses the need for homosexual men to conduct double lives, and the threat posed to identity by specularity and surveillance. Significantly, he also employs the door as a symbol for the boundaries of subjectivity.

Laing analyses the fact that schizophrenic subjects' ontological insecurity is often manifested in their fear of visibility, noting that "in a world full of danger, to be a potentially seeable object is to be constantly exposed to danger" (109). "Self-consciousness," writes Laing, "may be the apprehensive awareness of oneself as potentially exposed to danger by the simple fact of being visible to others" (109). Certainly this is true of Manning, whose homosexuality marks him out as a potential target in a cultural climate in which heterosexuality was rigorously enforced.⁵ Another textual description of Manning's reaction to surveillance suggests that Laing's formula also operates when the direction of causality is reversed: just as surveillance may threaten the boundaries of identity and signify vulnerability, so too may intrusions into the realm of identity engender traumatic sensations of visibility. Upon receiving another bizarre letter in his private mailbox, Manning notes that "opening the letter like this in his own home was in some ways a worse experience than opening it at the club would have been" (25). Manning's observation demonstrates the extent to which he conceptualises the incident as a violation of his personal space. His reaction centres on an imagined traumatic visibility:

Suddenly, the full force of the intrusion into his home struck at him [...]. The sensation was extraordinary, one of the worst attacks he'd ever had. Like being naked, high up on a ledge, somewhere, in full light, with beneath him only jeering voices and millions of eyes. (26)

For Manning, intrusions into his private realm lead to sensations of visibility, just as surely as the experience of specularity signifies the dissolution of "the door to the innermost part of [his] identity" (155).

The details of Manning's episode of imagined exposure bear a striking resemblance to a later passage in which Prior, visiting the Palm House with his girlfriend, suspects he is being observed from below. He "beg[ins] to feel exposed"

⁵ Hynes examines "the war against deviants" (*A War* 232).

(183), and notes that “Spragge had only to look up through a gap in the foliage and there he was, floodlit under the white light of the dome” (184). For Prior, though, the experience is particularly unsettling because of what he considers to be a greater “violation”:

What angered him was the thought that Spragge might have seen that little act of intimacy in the Palm House when Sarah had moved closer and rubbed his cock through the hard cloth of his breeches. [...] *Had* he seen? He must have. Prior was aware of feeling an almost excessive sense of exposure, of violation even, as if he'd been seen, arse upwards, in the act itself. (187, emphasis in original)

Significantly, both Prior and Manning's experiences of traumatic surveillance involve intrusions into the sphere of their sexuality. This fact suggests that the trauma in each case derives from the dissolution of the boundary between public and private. It also highlights the extent to which sexuality is conceptualised by the characters in the novel as something to be stored behind closed doors, within the “fortress of identity.” Paul Rabinow claims that “Foucault shows us [...] how during the nineteenth century [...] sex was seen as holding the key to self-understanding” (11). The episodes examined above reflect a similar emphasis on the import of sex. The characters in *The Eye in the Door* conceptualise their sexuality as residing at the core of their being, a clue to their essential natures and as such something to be hidden.

Two final episodes that I wish to discuss in this context explicitly relate specularity to disciplinary systems. Upon encountering a representative of the law, Utterson (the protagonist of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*) posits a connection between mechanisms of power and specularity: “when he *glanced* at the [police officer], he was conscious of some touch of that terror of the law and the law's officers that may at times assail the most honest” (48, emphasis added). Utterson's comments alert us to the manner in which disciplinary systems may exert power simply through a subject's

visual exposure to them. *The Eye in the Door* explores this concept through its depiction of the eye in Beattie Roper's prison cell, but it goes further in analysing the effect of such disciplinary technologies on the subject. Discussing her experience of cross-examination, Hettie Roper notes that "you're stood in that dock and you *feel* guilty, even though you know you haven't done it" (102, emphasis in original), a statement which mirrors Utterson's. Hettie, though, goes on to observe that "for months afterwards I felt people could look straight through me." Her comment reveals the impact on the subject of disciplinary surveillance, and is once again suggestive of the traumatic sense of visibility experienced by subjects exposed to the probing scrutiny of surveillance.

Conclusion

The Eye in the Door depicts subjects who are split due to their participation in disciplinary systems associated with the conduct of war, and it examines the role played by surveillance and specularity in this process of division. Through its examination of Rivers, the novel also depicts the emergence of a theoretical model of subjectivity which posits division and duality as the condition of all subjectivity. This chapter concludes, then, with some observations regarding *The Eye in the Door's* account of the cultural climate in which traumatised soldiers of the First World War grappled with splitting and duality. Might these struggles have contributed to a re-evaluation of the unitary ideal of masculinity? I will consider the possibility that the emergence of psychoanalytic models of split subjectivity may itself be traced to the demands of war.

I have discussed Cohen's analysis of the autobiographies of *fin-de-siècle* homosexual men, and traced his argument that in order to represent their experience they had to construct split narrative personae. Crucially, Cohen goes on to explore the fact that Freud himself employed these narratives in developing his theory of sexuality

and subjectivity. Cohen notes that in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud “uses the structural conditions that he recognizes as embedded in the sexological accounts of male homosexuality in order to problematize the entire field of sexual relations” (110). Cohen argues that Freud was attracted to the sense of division he identified in these accounts:

[Freud] used [these complex narratives] as a point of departure for his psychoanalytic project precisely because they emplotted the (temporal) dynamic we now recognize as a ‘splitting’ within the psyche—a splitting which he believed to be the generalized condition of human subjectivity. (88)

Two aspects of Cohen’s argument are of interest here: firstly, his suggestion that Freudian theory was profoundly influenced by the narratives of men who could not situate their experience within the dominant model of unitary masculinity, and secondly, his account of the inversion employed by Freud. For Cohen, the radical aspect of Freud’s reading of the narratives is the fact that he reads their deviation from the unitary model of subjectivity as evidence of the falsity of the model, rather than of the men’s pathology:

Rather than taking the example of male inverts as anomalous, [Freud] defines it as paradigmatic, thereby establishing the doubleness that he finds ‘reflected’ in their sexual object choices as a constituent bifurcation of all subjects. (110)

In this instance, Freud reads deviations from the norm as indicative of the unsustainability (or inherent instability) of that norm. His reading of the accounts of divided homosexual men thus informs his own theoretical account of the divided subject.

Of course, Freud's work in turn influenced both the field of psychiatry and conceptions of subjectivity. In an article examining the influence of shell-shock on British psychology, Stone notes that "Freud's theories did manage to gain a foothold in RAMC circles [...] largely thanks to an article by Rivers entitled 'Freud's Psychology of the Unconscious'" (255). Rivers exhibits Freudian tendencies in *The Eye in the Door*, and significantly is also depicted as having developed his own metaphors for dualism (in the course of his medical research into nerve regeneration). His description of a "primitive form of innervation they called the protopathic" and a higher form "which they called the epicritic" is immediately followed by a consideration of Henry Jekyll's discussion of "the thorough and primitive duality of man" (142). While dualism is a feature of Rivers's thought, the novel suggests that it is his experience with traumatised soldiers that encourages him to apply this dualism to his understanding of the human subject. In an inversion similar to that employed by Freud, Rivers begins to conceptualise his patients' divisions as emblematic of all human subjectivity, rather than as merely pathological. During a session of therapy, Sassoon tells Rivers that "[he]'d always coped with the situation by blocking out the killing side, cutting it off" (231). Immediately after the session, Rivers begins to doubt the validity of the unitary model of identity:

The epicritic grounded in the protopathic, the ultimate expression of the unity we persist in regarding as the condition of perfect health. Though why we think of it like that, God knows, since most of us survive by cultivating internal divisions. (233)

Rivers's experience with Sassoon leads him to contemplate his own "experience of duality," and to recall that "before the war he had experienced a splitting of personality as profound as any suffered by Siegfried" (235). He concludes by musing that "perhaps, contrary to what was usually supposed, duality was the stable state; the attempt at integration, dangerous. Certainly Siegfried had found it so" (235). Of course, Rivers is also prompted to consider the duality of subjectivity by his encounter

with Prior. Like Freud, Rivers is exposed to split subjects, which he too identifies as extreme examples of subjectivity. As a result, he begins to challenge the model of unitary identity.

Stone argues that “the upheavals caused by shellshock have a direct bearing on our understanding of how and why psychiatry developed into its modern expanded format” (248). Rivers’s experience in the novel can be seen as representative of a shift in psychiatric thinking precipitated by the widespread phenomenon of male mental breakdown arising from the First World War. While the ideal of unitary masculinity was challenged by the figure of the shell-shocked veteran, this need not have necessarily led to the dominance of dualistic conceptions of the subject. Bob Connell observes that

Freud’s concept of the unconscious, though immensely influential, is only one way in which [the] layering and contradiction [in the formation of subjectivity] can be represented. Sartre and Laing have provided another, in their analyses of contradictory commitments and practices. (“Psychoanalysis” 33)

Indeed, Laing emphasises the need to conceptualise identity as unitary if we are to understand “existential splits” as a form of illness, but notes that “no such concept exists, nor can any such concept be expressed within the current language system of psychiatry or psycho-analysis” (19). Laing’s approach highlights the influence of Freud on conceptions of subjectivity in the twentieth century. Jane Flax also argues that Freud “leaves as his legacy to psychoanalysis a set of dualisms that still govern its discourses today” (235).

Undoubtedly, *The Eye in the Door* can be loosely categorised as a ‘war novel’. However, while it traces the psychological ramifications of the First World War for a number of men, the novel contains very few descriptions of actual combat; it is more

concerned with the social conditions and consequences of the war than with battle itself. Nevertheless, the conduct of war hovers over the text like an omnipotent spectre, dictating both the psychic struggles of its protagonists, and the social field in which their drama is enacted. In a striking parallel, Foucault hints at the existence of a common agenda informing educational, punitive, and medical institutions and practices:

Ultimately what presides over all these [disciplinary] mechanisms is not the unitary functioning of an apparatus or an institution, but the necessity of combat and the rules of strategy. (*The History* 308)

Discussing “the fabrication of the disciplinary individual” he argues that:

In this central and centralized humanity, the effect and instrument of complex power relations, bodies and forces subjected by multiple mechanisms of ‘incarceration’, objects for discourses that are in themselves elements for this strategy, we must hear the distant roar of battle. (*The History* 308)

If, as Foucault proposes, disciplinary technologies are informed and dictated “ultimately” by “the necessity of combat,” the disciplinary nature of psychiatry—and its subservience to military imperatives—must be considered. Jane Flax argues in this respect that “[Freud’s] theories provide legitimation and support for practices of surveillance, regulation, and control” (235), and Pugliese claims that “in the military’s marshalling of the discipline of psychiatry, it is the very disciplinary nature of psychiatry that is productively invoked” (165). Applying these insights to *The Eye in the Door*, it is apparent that although Rivers is depicted as humane and caring, he is also shown to be implicated with the very disciplinary mechanisms which ensured that men would fight (and go on fighting), even in the face of the dissolution of identity. Stone notes that Rivers’s “vantage point was still very much from within the military

machine” (259). Despite his empathy, and his tentative rejection of unitary models of masculinity, Rivers ultimately encourages his patients to return to battle. Their traumatic experiences of dissociation are read not as an indictment of war, but rather as evidence that all subjects “survive by cultivating internal divisions” (233).

The Eye in the Door addresses the issue of why the unitary model of masculinity proved untenable for thousands of soldiers in the First World War, and examines the dissociation and splitting required of them by their participation in disciplinary systems (recall Rivers’s account of the suspension of empathy required to be a soldier or a doctor). Exploring the fact that homosexuality, pacifism and mental breakdown constituted threats to the production of soldiering masculinities, the novel suggests that these challenges were addressed through the deployment of disciplinary mechanisms, such as panopticism and psychiatry. *The Eye in the Door* proposes that a theoretical system which viewed subjectivity as divided arose as the result of—and in order to justify—the conduct of war, which requires split subjects. Henry Jekyll, prophesying at the *fin-de-siècle* that “man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous, and independent denizens” (Stevenson 82), could not have imagined the extent of the dissociation and splitting that would be demanded of men at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Chapter Three

Liminality and Hybridity in Pat Barker's *The Ghost Road*

Ideologies like to draw rigid boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not, between self and non-self, truth and falsity, sense and nonsense, reason and madness, central and marginal, surface and depth.

Terry Eagleton¹

Binarism, that most static of structures, produces internal instabilities in and through the very categories it deploys *in order* to clarify, divide, and stabilize the world. Thus the opposition us/them produces the anomaly of the internal dissident.

Jonathan Dollimore²

[T]he savage still goes in fear of the avenging spirits of the slain. But the spirits of his slain enemy are nothing but expression of his bad conscience about his blood-guilt; behind this superstition there lies concealed a vein of ethical sensitiveness which has been lost by us civilised men.

Sigmund Freud³

In Chapter Two, I argued that *The Eye in the Door*'s primary theme is masculine dissociation and multiplicity. Tracing men's inability to either conform to a unitary model of masculinity or police the "fortress of identity," the novel also suggests that male soldiers occupy a traumatically liminal position between the home and war fronts. Like *The Eye in the Door*, *The Ghost Road* is concerned with notions of duality and the boundaries of

¹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) 133.

² Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 87, emphasis in original.

identity, and it too traces men's problematic engagement with notions of nationhood, selfhood, and masculinity. While *The Eye in the Door* posits duality as a direct result of disciplinary technologies, *The Ghost Road* is concerned with unravelling the binary categories of self and other which mark out the limits of the state and the individual. In this chapter, I argue that *The Ghost Road's* juxtaposition of war and colonialism reflects its concern with the violence of binary categories: the novel interrogates the distinctions between death and life, civilisation and savagery, and madness and sanity. Through its depiction of liminal, hybrid figures, *The Ghost Road* explores the idea that encounters with alterity and difference may in fact reveal displaced similarity and proximity.

At least three types of ghost can be identified in *The Ghost Road*. Two of these are immediately apparent, and are explored explicitly in the text through the historical figure of Rivers. In his capacity as an anthropologist, Rivers analyses the spirits which occupy a central place in the cosmology and daily life of a Melanesian tribe. His role as an army psychiatrist leads him to encounter other apparitions: the traumatic remembrances of soldiers, manifested in the form of the persistent company of slain friends and enemies. Wansbeck, Sassoon and Harrington are but some of Rivers's patients who are visited by nocturnal "hypnagogic hallucinations" (227). The juxtaposition of Rivers's two encounters with ghosts enables the text's exploration of liminality and hybridity, a theme which is well represented by the figure of the ghost; neither dead nor alive, the ghost occupies both categories while confounding the distinction between them.

While the 'shell-shocked' men in the novel are tormented by the ghosts of their fellow soldiers, the characters themselves constitute a third form of implicit ghostly presence, both in the novel and in the cultural climate in which the text was produced and received. The success of *The Ghost Road* is testament to the manner in which the figure of

³ Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological*

the shell-shocked soldier continues to haunt the margins of discourses of masculinity and nation. A recent newspaper page juxtaposed the headline “Enduring tribute to Lonely Anzac” with another reading “Shell-shocked Diggers executed for desertion”; the recollection of past masculine glories is marked by the persistent spectre of men who could not perform gloriously or heroically (*Advertiser* [Adelaide] 9 Nov. 1998: 8). Freud argued that “the human being is subject not only to the pressure of his immediate cultural environment, but also to the influence of the cultural history of his ancestors” (“Thoughts” 283), and claimed that the First World War “tarnished the lofty impartiality of our science, [...] revealed our instincts in all their nakedness and let loose the *evil spirits* within us which we thought had been tamed forever” (“On Transience” 307, emphasis added). Robert Young employs a similar metaphor of haunting in claiming that “culture [...] is the form through which history manifests itself in the present, the labours of the dead that weigh upon and revisit the society of the living” (91). Arguably, although *The Ghost Road* is explicitly concerned with analysing and comparing two *historical* instances of ghosts, it too confronts a spectre, and sets out to exorcise the ongoing phantasmic cultural presence of war trauma. Through its examination of liminal histories, the novel explores the manner in which war trauma continues to confound the categories of masculinity and nation.

The Ghost Road is a work which explores questions of masculinity; arguably, any text concerning war must inevitably do so. However, *The Ghost Road* achieves this through its examination of practices and structures in which male subjects are implicated, among them war, colonialism, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and religion. In this respect, the novel accords with Connell’s claim that “masculinity is not just an idea in the head, or a personal identity. It is also extended in the world, merged in organized social relations” (*Masculinities* 29). In positing connections between the various systems and institutions with which men are engaged, *The Ghost Road*’s scope extends beyond the realm of the

individual male subject. Brian Moon argues that “by abandoning the notion that the subject must be the starting point or central locus of an inquiry, we may put things in their proper order, starting from specific social injustices and working up, rather than starting from totalising abstractions and working down” (195-96). If I am guilty of invoking certain “totalising abstractions” in the course of this chapter, this is necessitated by the range of issues covered by the novel.

The Ghost Road is certainly concerned with situating men’s psychic struggles with respect to the specific contexts in which they are conducted. This concern with cultural specificity and the importance of social context is evident in the text’s narrative oscillation between the divergent societies of Britain and Melanesia; it is evident too, in Prior’s observation that “murder was only killing in the wrong place” (44). However, the novel’s juxtapositions also serve to suggest that practices which may initially appear to be discrete and unique are in fact informed by common principles. *The Ghost Road* is a text which posits “totalising abstractions,” identifying similarities and analogies in place of divisions and binary categories. Accordingly, this chapter traces *The Ghost Road*’s depiction of mechanisms which inform the operations of both social systems and individual psyches, and argues that individual and social structures may be seen to be analogous in many ways. Through my reading of the novel, I posit parallels between colonialism, war, masculinity, and traumatic experiences of psychic liminality.

While *The Ghost Road* is concerned with war, the forms of conflict and struggle that it depicts do not centre on phenomena which threaten the state or the individual from without (such as the opposing German army). Rather, it explores internal threats. The novel traces rifts, ruptures, and points of tension within the systems of state and subject, exploring how the very rigidity of these systems may give rise to their own instability and

transformation. In a discussion of the particular forms of psychic disturbance caused by traumatic experiences of war, Freud hypothesises that

it might, indeed, be said that in the case of the war neuroses, in contrast to the pure traumatic neuroses and in approximation to the transference neuroses, what is feared is nevertheless an *internal enemy*.

("Introduction" 210, emphasis added)

Freud's statement is problematic, in that it situates war neuroses purely at the level of the subject, and overlooks the fact that such neuroses arise in the particular social context of the Western conduct of war. Nevertheless, his observation suggests that the perception of external danger may come to be manifested as an internal threat; the attempt to consolidate identity and maintain boundaries may result in the production of internal ruptures and points of tension.

Freud's image of the "internal enemy" can also be applied usefully to the realm of culture and society. The ongoing cultural presence of shell-shocked soldiers can be read as an example of precisely the kind of "internal enemy" (or what Jonathan Dollimore calls the "internal dissident," 87) that is produced by social technologies of masculinity and war. The very attempt to police the boundaries of the state, of sanity and of gender is, paradoxically, what gives rise to phenomena which threaten and haunt the state and the subject from within. *The Ghost Road* suggests that processes of binary categorisation, disavowal and repression are integral to the maintenance of both social and individual structures. Further, it suggests that these structures are therefore inherently unstable, always already in danger of being undermined by the contradictions and tensions which constitute them. Through its exploration of marginal figures and the death/life binary, the novel traces the manner in which repressed or disavowed terms may resist negation, instead re-asserting themselves through "a perverse return" (Dollimore 33).



Nation, Subject and Disavowal

Before departing England for France, Billy Prior wonders why he has chosen voluntarily to return to the field of battle. His thoughts provide an apposite point from which to begin to map out the text's approach to the issues of binary categories, disavowal, and traumatic proximity. Contemplating his antipathy towards "men as young as himself in civilian dress," Prior realises that

he could've been a munitions worker, [...] refusing to fight in 'the bosses' war'. But he'd never seriously considered doing that.

Why not? he wondered now. Because I don't want to be one of them, he thought, remembering a munitions worker's hand patting a girl's bottom as he helped her into the swing-boat. (6, emphases in original)

Prior's reasoning is an exemplary instance of the kind of hierarchized binary categorisation that can be seen to inform several of the practices and institutions in the novel: by constructing an antagonistic relationship between two principles—us and them—and aligning himself with the privileged term, Prior also effectively delineates the category of the other. It is significant that Prior's act of categorisation is immediately preceded by his imaginary identification with "men as young as himself." This juxtaposition suggests that his antipathy towards civilians is both informed and threatened by his proximity to them; I will consider further the notion of proximity in the conclusion to this chapter.

Psychoanalytic models of hierarchized binary categories and disavowal have become commonplace in much recent gender theory, but they are often examined in

isolation and treated as self-supporting, independent systems; Lacan's account of the symbolic order is such a case. Prior's reasoning, though, occurs in a climate of militaristic fervour, and is clearly influenced by both his battle experience and his subsequent inability to re-integrate with civilian society. This example of culturally situated binary reasoning suggests the importance of examining the ways in which binary categories are imbricated with the production and conduct of social relations. Rose Lucas identifies precisely this form of intermixing. She claims that:

the formation of a nation, in the sense of containment, is predicated on the creation of an exiled and dismembered otherness. Similarly, in psychological terms, the establishment of a fixed and dominant subjectivity inevitably involves, and indeed relies on, the formation—and immediate denial—of a suppressed and subjugated otherness. (150)

While Lucas hints at the possible existence of a common structuring principle informing the formation of state and subject, she does not elaborate upon the notion or suggest the location of any such mechanism.

The Ghost Road, however, does. Prior recalls “thinking that words didn't mean anything any more” (257). Qualifying this exclamation, he realises that

there's another group of words that still mean something. Little words that trip through sentences unregarded: us, them, we, they, here, there. These are the words of power, and long after we're gone, they'll lie about in the language, like the unexploded grenades in these fields, and any one of them'll take your hand off. (257)

By tracing binary categories to the operations of power and violence, Prior relates the machinations of the social order to the maintenance of gendered identity, both of which are

depicted in the text as involving violence, subjugation and struggle. In locating power at the level of language and discourse, Prior's declaration also provides a framework which can account for the fact that binary categories operate at the levels of both society and subjectivity, for language is surely integral to the functioning of both. This connection between discourse and power is also foregrounded explicitly in the text when Rivers notes that the Melanesians "made no distinction between knowledge and power, either in their own language or in pidgin" (128).

The Dissolution of Boundaries, the Fiction of Difference

The Ghost Road, then, is concerned both with the ways in which binary categories are invoked in the exercise of power, and with the fact that difference and otherness must be constructed in order to foster the illusion of national and individual containment. It explores these notions through an analysis of sites of marginality and liminality, where the oppositions and boundaries intrinsic to the coherence of the state and the individual undergo transformation and dissolution. Dollimore argues that "we know that the centre remains vulnerable to marginality because its identity is partly created and partly defined in opposition to (and therefore also *at*) the margins" (225, emphasis in original). Dollimore's observation suggests the paradoxically *central* role played by marginal sites in the production of notions of bounded states. It hints, too, at the capacity of marginal sites to undo the very containment that they are employed to support. The primary strategy employed in *The Ghost Road* to foreground the vulnerability of the boundaries of identity is the juxtaposition of an anthropological observation of the process of colonialism with a depiction of the psychological ramifications of war. The violence associated with activities of the state such as war and colonialism is shown to constitute one of the state's primary techniques of affirmation and maintenance. However, the novel suggests that these sites of

engagement with the other also reveal the fictive nature of the bounded state, exposing discourses of nation and subjectivity at their points of maximum stress, where marginal, ghostly figures are produced.

Tracing the ways in which colonialism and racism were historically informed by anxiety and instability, Robert Young argues that colonial discourse is marked by a desire for the other which must be disavowed in order to maintain the illusion of certitude. He argues that colonialism “was not only a machine of war and administration, it was also a desiring machine” (98), and invokes Homi Bhabha’s “idea of a constitutive ambivalence resting at the heart of colonial discursive production” (Young 161). In his capacity as an anthropologist, Rivers exemplifies the desire for knowledge of the other which paradoxically both supports and threatens the illusion of colonial certainty. This ambivalent desire ultimately leads to the erosion of his identification with the colonial state or with any notion of civilisation; his encounter with an alien culture undermines the construction of alterity integral to the demarcation of civilisation and its other. Unable to maintain faith in the fiction of difference, Rivers notes that a Londoner’s shrine to her dead son is “not fundamentally different from the skull houses of Pa Na Gundu” (117), and observes

the same human impulses at work. Difficult to know what to make of these moments of cross-cultural recognition. From a strictly professional point of view, they were almost meaningless, but then one didn’t have such experiences as a disembodied anthropological intelligence, but as a man, and as a man one had to make some sense of them. (117)

In highlighting the disjunction between a “professional point of view” and an embodied, gendered subjectivity, Rivers’s statement accords with Bhabha’s description of the ambivalence of colonial discourse. It suggests, too, that the desire for the other may at times be revealed as exceeding the rational framework in which it is explicitly situated.

While the goals of Rivers's anthropological expedition are to record and freeze an alien culture, to explore (and confirm) the supposed difference between savagery and civilisation, his endeavours ultimately produce entirely different effects, ones that he neither anticipates nor controls. Butler notes that "the effects of the instrumental action always have the power to proliferate beyond the subject's control, indeed, to challenge the rational transparency of that subject's intentionality" ("Contingent" 10). Rivers's discussion of the disparity between his state of curiosity, subjectivity, and desire and a theoretically objective "disembodied anthropological intelligence" confounds notions of the disinterested, rational colonial gaze, and accords with Young's claim that "no form of cultural dissemination is ever a one-way process, whatever the power relation involved" (174). I will return to this point later in order to explore further the nature of the transformations precipitated by Rivers's encounters with Melanesian culture and his patients' war trauma.

While Rivers identifies certain "human impulses" which transcend the borders of nationality and culture, *The Ghost Road* implicitly suggests further analogies between the culture of the colonising westerners and the colonised islanders. It does so by juxtaposing two examples of the therapeutic deployment of the technique of suggestion. Rivers's description of his treatment of a patient named Moffet reveals both a privileging of rationality, and a tentative admission of the extent to which his practice exceeds the realm of the rational. He notes that

what he'd actually tried was reason. He didn't *like* what he was going to do now, but it had become apparent that, until Moffet's reliance on the physical symptom was broken, no more rational approach stood any chance of working. (20, emphasis in original)

The text invites the comparison of Rivers with his Melanesian counterpart, Njiru; both are celibate, both have respected ancestors, both are described as deformed (110), and both

come to doubt the “value of [their] knowledge” and hence the “reality of [their] own power” (235). Rivers himself observes affinities between his approach and that of Njiru: “a witch-doctor could do this,” he muses, “and probably better than I can” (49). Both men, of course, are also involved in exorcising demons. Nevertheless, Rivers distances his use of suggestion from his standard scientific practice, noting that “the rules of medicine are one thing, the rules of ritual drama quite another” (53).

While the character Rivers is able to maintain his faith in a break between scientific approaches and more ‘primitive’ ones, *The Ghost Road* itself problematises any such distinction. In Melanesia, Rivers notes that “as so often happened, one could detect behind the native belief the shadowy outline of a disease only too familiar to western medicine” (51-52). The novel’s depiction of Rivers’s experience as an army psychiatrist suggests that the formula can also be inverted, that the diseases of western medicine are not so far removed from native beliefs; recall Freud’s description of “the evil spirits within us.” The ‘scientific’ practice of psychoanalysis can be read as a form of ritual drama, then, the staged exorcism of unconscious phantoms. Indeed, the text’s central juxtaposition encourages such a reading. Arguably, *The Ghost Road*’s comparison of ‘scientific’ and ‘primitive’ approaches to healing also highlights the manner in which science and psychoanalysis must disavow their origins in irrational beliefs in order to support their allegiance to modernity, objectivity and reason. Such a position is supported by Moffet’s claim that Rivers’s treatment “reminds [him] of seventeenth-century witch-finders, you know? They used to stick pins in people too” (48).

The Death/Life Binary

A common element in Njiru's manipulation of spirits and Rivers's treatment of war neurotics is the fact that both men confront the un/dead, the presence in life of the spirits of the dead. *The Ghost Road's* central juxtaposition of colonialism and war thus serves to emphasise and contrast Melanesian and Western conceptions of the life/death binary, and this binary warrants further consideration. Connell argues that "gender is a way in which social practice is ordered" (*Masculinities* 71). *The Ghost Road's* exploration of the death/life binary implicitly posits it, too, as one of the ordering principles of society, one which is responsible for the production of institutions and practices (such as war) which require specific forms of gendered subjectivity. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that the novel's exploration of the processes—such as disavowal and repression—involved in attempts to delineate a clear border between life and death may provide insights into masculinity and war trauma. While the following analysis of death may not appear initially to address questions of masculinity or war trauma directly, it analyses structures and processes which the text implicitly attributes to the maintenance of both masculine and national identity.

Whereas the Melanesians in the novel embrace the concept of death through a complex economy of mourning, exorcism, reverence for the dead, and communication with those in the afterlife, the Western approach centres on disavowal and denial: "we don't even mention our dead," Prior admits, "it's easier to forget" (200). Of course, *The Ghost Road's* depiction of haunted soldiers suggests the very impossibility of "easi[ly]" forgetting the dead. Although the novel depicts a séance, Prior observes that such practices are not officially endorsed by the disciplinary mechanisms of state religion; "contacting the dead's a heresy," he notes. Indeed, Prior is disgusted by the séance, and claims that "we have to

die, we don't have to worship it" (79). His statement stands in stark contrast to the novel's account of the central place occupied by death in the Melanesian cosmology.

Rivers is shown to approach death through the distancing practice of science. A striking passage juxtaposes two of Rivers's encounters with the un/dead: mentally revisiting a skull house in Melanesia, he recalls holding the skull of Njiru's ancestor, "the object of highest value in the world." In Britain, he reads an analytic, scientifically disengaged account of the horrendous head wounds of a soldier named Hallet (239). This juxtaposition serves to accentuate the divergent attitudes towards death circulating within the respective cultures. It also foregrounds Rivers's participation in a scientific paradigm which is predicated on disengagement, categorisation, and disavowal rather than on reverence for the dead. In his capacity as a doctor, Rivers is shown to be engaged in both healing and the prolonging of life. While the second of these notions may seem unproblematic, it is brought into question when (in his role as an anthropologist) he encounters the Melanesian concept of "*mate*." Observing a dying man, Njiru informs Rivers that the man is "*mate*," and Rivers notes that "'*mate*' in all the dictionaries was translated as 'dead'" (134). This, however, is not entirely correct. It becomes apparent that "*mate* did not mean dead, it designated a state of which death was the appropriate outcome," and that "the term for actual death [...] was *mate ndapu*. In pidgin, 'die finish'" (135). Rivers's reference to the difficulty of translating the term highlights once again the disjunction between the two cultural conceptions of dying. The episode also demonstrates that the distinction between death and life need not be understood in terms of a definitive break, by foregrounding the Melanesian conception of death as inhering in life, and vice versa. The notion of "*mate*" can be characterised as a hybrid concept, designating neither death nor life exclusively while simultaneously signifying both.

This notion is explored further later in the text, both when Prior rescues Hallet from death (condemning him to a form of death-in-life), and when Rivers agonises over his treatment of the dying man. Prior describes the rescue in his diary: “all the time I was thinking, What’s the use? He’s going to die anyway. I think I thought about killing him” (196). This sentiment is reinforced through its repetition: Prior claims that “all the time I was doing it I was thinking, Die can’t you? For God’s sake man, just *die*” (197, emphasis in original). Prior had “expected to find [Hallet] unconscious or dead, but he was neither,” a description which implies that Hallet cannot be characterised as being alive in any real sense. As Rivers witnesses Hallet’s struggle to stay alive, he notes that the Melanesian notion of death-in-life constitutes a better description of Hallet’s state than any Western concept:

Why are you alive? Rivers thought, looking down into the gargoyle face. *Mate*, would have been Njiru’s word for this: the state of which death is the desirable outcome. He would have seen Hallet as being, in every meaningful way, dead already, and his sole purpose would have been to hasten the moment of actual death: *mate ndapu*, die finish. (264, emphases in original)

Rivers’s reference to “the moment of actual death” is testimony to both his “allegiance to a different set of beliefs” (265), and his reliance on distinctions and binary categories; even in the act of describing a hybrid concept, Rivers invokes rigid categories. He cannot bring himself to expedite this “moment” of death, and must instead endure the agony of witnessing Hallet’s final struggle. Rivers’s “allegiance” to a scientific paradigm ensures that despite his reluctant acknowledgment that Hallet is “in every meaningful way, dead already,” he feels compelled to ascribe a precise temporal distinction to Hallet’s transition from life into death: when Hallet dies, Rivers’s immediate reaction—motivated by “sheer force of habit”—is to record the time of death (275). Although Rivers’s conception of the

death/life binary is problematised by both his anthropological experience and his treatment of mortally wounded soldiers, he nevertheless continues to employ the distinction.

Liminality, Hybridity and the 'Third Space'

My analysis of *The Ghost Road's* exploration of death is also motivated by the prominence in the text of the figure of the ghost, which, as I mentioned earlier, functions as a figure of liminality and marginality. Neither dead nor alive, the ghost straddles the binary opposition and serves to problematise the very distinction which seeks to order the boundaries of existence. Prior alludes to the manner in which this third term destabilises notions of life and death, noting that "even the living were only ghosts in the making" (46). The themes of liminality and marginality are prominent in *The Ghost Road*. I will examine two other episodes in the novel which explore male subjects' encounters with liminality and marginality. I want to suggest that in *The Ghost Road*, these encounters precipitate a condition of dislocation, something akin to both the hybrid third space posited by post-colonial theorists, and the state of nomadism outlined by Deleuze and Guattari.

In his capacity as an anthropologist, Rivers attempts to investigate and freeze alien cultures, but this process leads him to an interrogation of his own cultural framework. Conversing with a group of nomadic natives who "belonged nowhere" (119), his investigative techniques are turned back upon him. In an epiphanic moment, Rivers

realized that their view of *his* society was neither more nor less valid than his of theirs. No bearded elderly white man looked down on them, endorsing one set of values and condemning the other. And with that realization, the whole frame of social and moral rules that keeps individuals imprisoned—and

sane —collapsed, and for a moment he was in the same position as these drifting, dispossessed people.

A condition of absolute free-fall. (119-20, second emphasis added)

At the fragile boundary of colonial society and the other through which it defines itself, Rivers becomes aware of the artifice and arbitrariness of the privileging of the notion of “civilization” (104) essential to the maintenance of his “whole frame of social and moral rules.” However, Rivers’s realisation cannot easily be characterised as a conversion; he does not merely situate himself on the other side of a conceptual divide. Dollimore argues that

when the inversion of a binary reveals the proximate it is always more than a mere reversal, more even than the utopian unity of the binary dissolved or displaced. The inversion of a binary produces not merely reversal but proximities where there was difference. (229)

Rivers’s notion of “civilization” is supported by and dependent on its opposition with a corresponding notion of “savagery” (104), but his realisation of the proximity between his own culture and that of the islanders undermines his concept of difference.

Rivers’s identification with the privileged term of a binary opposition is replaced by a state of liminality, and this produces a sensation of vertiginous disorientation. His experience accords with Young’s account of hybridity:

Hybridity thus consists of a bizarre binate operation, in which each impulse is qualified against the other, forcing momentary forms of dislocation and displacement into complex economies of agonistic reticulation. (26-27)

Rivers comes to identify wholly with neither his own culture nor the 'primitive' beliefs of the islanders. Nevertheless he remains within the confines of the binary system, a hybrid whose investment in both sides of the opposition serves to set them off against each other, to reduce the privileged term to one contested commodity in a network of exchange and conflict. The experience is shown to be a profound one; Prior writes that he "sometimes [...] used to think [Rivers] was back with his fucking head-hunters [...] and that gives him a slightly odd perspective on 'the present conflict' as they say." (215).

While the concept of hybridity is usually employed in accounts of cultural interaction, a similar concept is proposed by the psychoanalytic theorist André Green. Green's description of the "no-man's-land" implicit in binary oppositions evokes territorial and colonial forms of "domination," but it is significant that he sees it as arising "whenever there is antagonism" (qtd. in Rutherford 111). His argument therefore supports my contention that the concept of hybridity need not be employed exclusively with respect to cultural interaction. Green discusses the notion of the "third space," and argues that

whenever there is antagonism, with the domination of one term over another, an alternative and oscillating domination, the excluded term tends to return, to reoccupy the space; consequently, it is possible, as in any area of movement, to imagine a *no-man's-land*, where the metaphor would assume a meeting in the potential reunion of what has been separated. (Rutherford 111, emphasis added)

Rutherford notes that Green's statement is "rather vague and ambiguous" (111). It could be argued that such ambiguity is a function of the object of inquiry, that liminal, hybrid figures inevitably resist interpretation. Indeed, the theoretical value of hybrid figures lies precisely in the fact that they confound existing systems of classification, revealing the violent and reductive power of binary categorisation.

In a similar vein, Young outlines Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "nomadism," claiming that it denotes "forms of deterritorialization that cannot be reterritorialized because they frustrate interpretation and recoding" (173). Two crucial aspects of Rivers's epiphanic moment accord with Young's account of nomadism. Firstly and most obviously, Rivers's experience leads him to identify with "drifting, dispossessed people," to view himself literally as a nomad. Young notes that "nomadism involves any activity that transgresses contemporary social codes through the dissolution of cultural and territorial boundaries" (173); certainly Rivers's relativism has precisely this effect. Secondly, Deleuze and Guattari view the human psyche as itself being the site of colonisation by systems of representation which channel desiring-production along certain prescribed axes. For Deleuze and Guattari, nomadism is valuable insofar as it provides momentary liberation from such technologies of territorialization. In this context, Rivers's description of his movement beyond the "rules that keep individuals imprisoned—and sane" also accords with Deleuze and Guattari's model. However, Young notes that nomadism "describes [...] a certain strategic manoeuvring" (172), and argues that the agency implicit in the concept of nomadism seems inconsistent with any consideration of "enforced dislocations" (173). It is difficult to characterise Rivers's experience of nomadism as empowering; the description of his ensuing "condition of absolute free fall" (120) suggests the extent to which the episode robs him of his sense of agency.

In equating imprisonment with sanity, Rivers highlights the danger associated with any liberation arising from the complete rejection of social codes. His position suggests the extent to which notions of personality, sanity and individual identity are dependent on corresponding notions of culture and the social body. Deleuze and Guattari argue that "Oedipus is always colonization pursued by other means, it is the interior colony [...], it is our intimate colonial education" ("What is Minor Literature?" 28n3). This formulation implies that the very mechanisms which constitute the subject as a discrete individual also

serve to ensure the subject's engagement with, and dependence on, the social sphere. The experience and sensation of individuality, then, exists only as the result of the subject's colonisation by systems which exceed him.

This idea also informs observations that Rivers later makes in his capacity as an anthropologist. Njiru tells him that a man who falls asleep on the beach may be visited by the ghost of a dead woman, and explains the physical ramifications of the visitation:

he suffered from a long list of complaints, not the least of which was a disappearing penis. Rivers would have liked to ask about the psychological effects, but that was almost impossible. The language of introspection was simply not available. (132)

Rivers does not imply that the lack of a "language of introspection" is evidence of the non-existence of "psychological effects," but his observation suggests that the two are intimately related (it may also be read as evidence that he depends on the "language of introspection" in order to exercise his jurisdiction over the psychological realm). Later, he notes that "the islanders seemed hardly to have discovered the idea of personality, in the western sense, much less to have contracted the habit of introspection" (234). Taken together, Rivers's statements suggest that the experience of interiority and individuality is dependent on both a discourse of selfhood, and a corresponding notion of society and culture: Rivers implies that identity arises only through a subject's positioning with regard to a discursive framework which exceeds him. Rivers notes that the difficulty he experiences in attempting to gain insight into the psychic lives of the islanders can be attributed to "not lack of words merely, but a lack of shared concepts" (233-34), but his musings point to the fact that language and "concepts" are inextricably entwined. In describing the "whole frame of social and moral rules that keeps individuals imprisoned — and sane," Rivers provides a model which explains why an individual subject's loss of

faith in culture and society may have the effect of jeopardising his sanity and sense of identity. The notion that identity and sanity are dependent on the subject's participation in a social framework is also apparent in Philip Goodchild's appraisal of the concept of nomadism: "perhaps it is better to be a paranoid slave than a schizophrenic nomad" (3).

Rivers's experience of liminality leads him to consider the connection between sanity and the subject's investment in the social order. This connection is also explored in *The Ghost Road* through the figure of Prior. In Chapter Two, I noted Jonathan Shay's argument that "war can destroy the social contract binding soldiers to each other, to their commanders, and to the society that raised them" (17). Shay contends that the erosion of the sense of belonging to a social space is a crucial component of war trauma. Prior's own experience of psychic trauma problematises his faith in the social body. While the mad/sane binary is depicted in the novel as constituting one of the disciplinary technologies of the military, Prior occupies a liminal position, neither wholly mad nor entirely sane. Like Rivers, he can be read as a hybrid figure, oscillating between the opposing poles of a binary opposition and thereby confounding the notion of difference which informs the distinction.

In considering the idea that Prior's experience of marginality constitutes a challenge to the social order, the notion of hybridity once again provides a useful conceptual framework. I have noted Young's description of hybridity as "a bizarre binate operation, in which each impulse is qualified against the other" (26), and this formulation aptly describes Prior's experience. Rather than situating himself on either side of a conceptual divide between reason and madness, Prior employs each term to undermine its opposing principle, playing them off against each other and effectively preventing the privileging of either term. A hierarchized binary is thus replaced by a system of exchange and contestation. Before facing a medical board which is to evaluate his psychic competence,

Prior notes that “we’re all mad here. [...] And really, amidst the general insanity, was it fair to penalize a man merely because in conditions of extreme stress he tended to develop two separate personalities?” (16). A privileged notion of rationality and sanity must be employed in order to mark out certain forms of behaviour or psychic states as insane. Prior, though, reads the marginalised principle of insanity back into the centre—“we’re all mad here”—and this inversion enables him to reconceptualise his own behaviour (namely his tendency to develop “two separate personalities”) as reasonable and sane. His own ‘madness’ is qualified against what he perceives to be a “general insanity”.

Back at the front, he exclaims “*look at us*. We don’t remember, we don’t feel, we don’t think—at least not beyond the confines of what’s needed to do the job. By any proper civilized standard (but what does *that* mean *now*?) we are objects of horror” (200, emphases in original). Just as Prior utilises a perceived general insanity to justify his own psychic state, he employs the insanity of his position to interrogate the rationality of the social structures which have placed him in that position. This reversal enables him to question the assumption that the war is supported by reasonable motives. Confronted by Hallet’s idealism, Prior “wonder[s] how long it’ll take him to work out that *nobody* knows what’s going on?” (113), and he later tells Hallet that “things are actually much worse than you think because there isn’t any kind of rational justification left. It’s become a self-perpetuating system. Nobody benefits. Nobody’s in control. Nobody knows how to stop” (144). These sentiments are echoed by Owen: ““You say we kill the Beast,’ Owen said slowly. ‘I say we fight because men lost their bearings in the night’” (144). Prior’s and Owen’s identification of irrationality at the heart of the social enterprise of war serves to confound notions of civilisation and society. Like Rivers, Prior’s experience of liminality not only problematises his faith in the boundary he has transgressed, but also his sense of partaking in a bounded, contained social space. For Prior there is no longer anything that could be described as a “proper civilized standard,” and he too can be characterised as a

nomad occupying a “no-man’s-land,” a “third space” between the opposing poles of sanity and madness, civilisation and chaos. Of course, Prior later occupies a literal no-man’s-land, “intolerably exposed” (193), and notes that “the whole thing was breakdown territory, as defined by Rivers” (194).

Traumatic Proximity

The men of *The Ghost Road* occupy a fragile social and psychic space predicated on the construction of binary categories and disavowal. Their experiences of liminality and marginality serve both to disrupt their engagement with social structures, and to confound notions of rationality, civilisation, and even life itself. I want to suggest that this disruption centres not on the encounter with otherness or alterity, but rather on the (re-)discovery of unexpected similarity and proximity. Earlier, I used the example of Prior’s antipathy towards civilians to introduce the themes of binary categorisation and disavowal. I noted briefly the significance of the fact that Prior’s hatred of “them” (6) seemed to stem from a kind of identification, a recognition of similarity. Dollimore argues that such recognition informs most instances of the construction of otherness. He claims that “otherness may be rooted in a fear of, a disavowal of, similarity” (122), and also notes that “to be against (opposed to) is also to be against (close up, in proximity to) or, in other words, up against” (229). Another incident involving Prior evokes this sense of the need to construct difference in order to disavow and displace a threatening identification. Despite Prior’s claim that he “[doesn’t] pay” (35), he employs the services of a prostitute named Elinor, enjoying “the sober certainty of power” (40):

And then something went wrong. He looked at the shuttered face and recognized the look, recognized it not with his eyes but with the muscles of his own face, for he too had lain like this, waiting for it to

be over [...], not so much resorting to prostitution as inventing it, for he knew of nobody else who got money that way. (41)

Disturbed by this moment of identification, Prior constructs as completely alien and other that which threatens his own “certainty” and “power”: “the only way not to be her was to hate her” (41). Prior averts a traumatic sensation of proximity by channelling it into an economy of difference and distinction; his own identity is thereby affirmed through its opposition with that which is other. It is telling that in order to construct this notion of difference, Prior draws upon an existing image of otherness: “narrowing his eyes, he blurred her features, ran them together into the face they pinned to the revolver targets. A snarling, baby-eating boche” (41). This reference to the “snarling, baby-eating boche” which is “pinned to the revolver targets” emphasises Prior’s participation in a warring society predicated on the construction of otherness, and also evokes the artifice involved in the production of notions of difference.

Despite Prior’s violent attempt to demarcate the boundaries of power and identity, his experience with Elinor ultimately produces “ambiguity” (43): “he hadn’t been sure at the end who was fucking who” (42). Other damaging ramifications of Prior’s reliance on notions of difference and otherness are explored throughout *The Ghost Road*. When Rivers asks Prior about his nightmares, Prior’s response resonates with the passage analysed above:

I had one where the *faces on the revolver targets*—you know, horrible *snarling baby-eating boche*—turned into the faces of people I love. But only after I’d pulled the trigger, so there was nothing I could do about it. (98, emphasis added)

In order to distance himself from both Elinor and enemy soldiers, Prior must disavow their proximity. However, this very proximity is what returns to haunt him, confounding the construction of difference integral to his psychic orientation. No longer able to distinguish between that which he hates and those who are close to him, Prior exemplifies the disruptive power of displaced proximity, which haunts binary distinctions and threatens their dissolution. Dollimore argues that “the displacements which constitute certain repressive discriminations are partly enabled via a proximity which, though disavowed, remains to enable a perverse return, an undoing, a transformation” (33). Prior’s nightmare can be characterised as an instance of such “perverse return.” Later, Prior is haunted by the face of a German soldier which in no way resembles “the face they pinned to the revolver targets”:

Get flashes from the battle while I’m filling in forms. The man I bayoneted. What worries me is that he was middle aged. Odd really—it’s supposed to be golden youth you mourn for. But he was so obviously somebody who should have been at home, watching his kids grow up, wondering whether brushing his hair over the bald patch would make it more or less obvious, grumbling about the price of beer. And yes, you *could* see all this in his face—with some people you can. (217-18, emphasis in original)

Once again, Prior is here troubled by his encounter with similarity and proximity, by the dissolution of the distinction between friend and foe, self and other.

Dollimore is concerned with “that fearful interconnectedness whereby the antithetical inheres within, and is partly produced by, what it opposes” (33). Employing remarkably similar terms, Terry Eagleton argues that one of the aims of the deconstructive analysis of texts should be to reveal the operations of binary categories, to “begin to unravel these oppositions a little, demonstrate how one term of an antithesis secretly

inheres within another" (133). Of course, a text may effectively perform this kind of deconstruction itself; arguably this is the major achievement of *The Ghost Road*. Through its representational strategy of qualifying phenomena through their juxtaposition with apparently opposing principles, the novel traces the dissolution of difference, and suggests that each term of an "antithesis" "inheres" in its opposing term.

I have noted the fact that Green employs the metaphor of the "no-man's-land" in his discussion of liminality. Significantly, similar spatial metaphors appear in Eagleton's account of the disavowals and repressions involved in the maintenance of masculine identity:

Not only is [man's] own being parasitically dependent upon the woman, and upon the act of excluding and subordinating her, but one reason why such exclusion is necessary is because she might not be quite so other after all. Perhaps she stands as a sign of something in man himself which he needs to repress, expel beyond his own being, relegate to a securely *alien region* beyond his own definitive *limits*. Perhaps what is outside is also somehow inside, what is alien is also intimate—so that man needs to police the absolute *frontier between the two realms* as vigilantly as he does just because it may always be transgressed, has always been transgressed already, and is much less absolute than it appears. (133, emphases added)

Eagleton's account of the male subject's need to relegate that which is traumatically proximate to a zone which can be marked out as other is strikingly similar to processes I have already examined; the terms "man" and "woman" could easily be replaced with the oppositions of civilisation and savagery, sanity and madness, or life and death. Indeed, by employing spatial metaphors, Eagleton implicitly draws parallels between masculine subjectivity and the colonial process of defining civilisation through the construction of its other. His use of terms such as "limits", "the frontier between the two realms" and the

“alien region” are testament to the similarities between some aspects of gender theory and the work of post-colonial theorists. In *The Ghost Road*, too, it is suggested that apparently divergent phenomena such as war, colonialism and masculine identity are informed by similar mechanisms and principles. The novel’s depiction of the transformations occasioned by both Rivers’s anthropological experience and Prior’s psychic trauma may thus be read as an exploration of the very processes by which men align themselves with notions of the masculine: disavowal, repression and troubling encounters with hybridity and liminality.

Conclusion

I shall conclude with a discussion of two related binary oppositions which figure prominently in *The Ghost Road*: that of civilisation/savagery, and that of life/death. Employing some of Freud’s and Foucault’s declarations concerning the disavowal of death, I will consider the novel’s depiction of the return of the repressed, the manner in which a “civilization” premised on the privileging of life and the denial of death is ultimately responsible for the “savagery” of mass killing (104).

I have argued that one difference between the two cultural approaches to death explored in the novel is the fact that death occupies a central role in Melanesian society, whereas it is disavowed and relegated to a marginal position in British society. Significantly, though, the textual juxtaposition of these two conceptions of the life/death binary also suggests that each concept is necessarily informed by and imbricated with its opposing term. Thus, while death is marginalised in the Britain of *The Ghost Road*, it is nevertheless shown to play a symbolically central role. Describing the church he attended as a child, Prior remembers that “behind every altar [was] blood, torture, death. St John’s

head on a platter, [...] Christ at the whipping block, [...] St Sebastian hamming it up and my old friend St Lawrence on his grid" (176). In a similar vein, Rivers refers to the phenomenon of "priests keeping a model of a skull on their desks [...] [b]ecause it reminds them of their faith" (225).

The sections of the novel set in wartime Britain depict a culture in which the societal and individual disavowal of mortality is challenged by the phenomenon of mass death. One might argue that this constitutes a "perverse return" of the repressed term in a binary coupling. Indeed, one contemporary commentator took precisely this view:

We showed an unmistakable tendency to put death on one side, to eliminate it from life (289). It is evident that war is bound to sweep away this conventional treatment of death. Death will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in it [...]. Life has, indeed, become interesting again; it has recovered its full content. ("Thoughts" 291)

The writer is Freud, who noted that "we are unable to maintain our former attitude towards death, and have not yet found a new one" ("Thoughts" 292). Freud's account of the "former" Western privileging of life and disavowal of death provides a good explanatory model for the trauma experienced by grieving individuals. However, it seems inconsistent with the West's willingness to enter into war, where, as Samuel Hynes argues, "death is the whole point, the truest truth, the realest [sic] reality" (*Soldiers'* 19).

Foucault posits one explanation for this apparent paradox. Like Freud, he identifies a historical shift towards an emphasis on life and an accompanying denial of death, but crucially he argues that this shift rendered life the domain of power:

One might say that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death. This is perhaps what explains that disqualification of death which marks the recent wane of the rituals that accompanied it. [...] Now it is over life, throughout its unfolding, that power establishes its domination. (*The History* 138, emphases in original)

Foucault deftly employs this account of what he calls 'bio-power' to explain the proliferation of killing in the modern age, arguing that slaughter is paradoxically justified and indeed necessitated by the privileging of life. He claims that

entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital. It is as managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race, that so many regimes have been able to wage so many wars, causing so many men to be killed. (*The History* 137)

Foucault argues that mass killing is justified by the privileging of its binary opposite, namely the maintenance of life: "if genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers, this is not because of a recent return of the ancient right to kill; it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life" (*The History* 137).

Immediately after speaking to Prior for the last time, Rivers recalls two stories of sacrifice. In Melanesia, he remembers,

there was a custom that when a bastard child was born some leading man on the island adopted the child and brought him up as his own. The boy [...] was given the honour, as befitted the son of a great man, of leading in the sacrificial pig [...]. And, as the boy drew near, [the father] brought the club down and crushed his son's skull.

In one of his father's churches, St Faith's, at Maidstone, the window to the left of the altar shows Abraham with the knife raised to slay his son, and, below the human figures, a ram caught in the

thicket by his horns. The two events represented *the difference between savagery and civilization*, for in the second scenario the voice of God is about to forbid the sacrifice, and will be heeded. (103-04, emphasis added)

Rivers employs these stories to bolster his conception of “the difference between savagery and civilization,” but their textual juxtaposition suggests one final instance of proximity and similarity. While the Melanesian story depicts the “right to kill,” and the Western parable may more accurately be characterised in terms of the “power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death,” the two stories are nevertheless remarkably similar; in both cases a father is prepared to slay his son. Rivers’s observations are framed by his “aware[ness] of the strong father-son element in his relationship with Prior” (98), and the fact that he has effectively just sent Prior back to be killed at the front. The passage therefore suggests that a “civilization” which condones the sacrificing of its sons cannot easily be distinguished from a form of “savagery” which is perhaps more direct—but no more brutal—in its approach to killing. In the moral universe of *The Ghost Road*, the distinction between a society explicitly devoted to head-hunting and a society predicated on the sanctity of life is gradually unravelled, as the Melanesian reverence for the dead appears increasingly civilised next to the horrors of the First World War.

On the final page of *The Ghost Road*, immediately after witnessing Hallet’s death, Rivers himself experiences an episode of reenactment:

And there, suddenly, not separate from the ward, not in any way ghostly, not in *fashion blong tomate*, but himself in every particular, advancing down the ward of the Empire Hospital, attended by his shadowy retinue, as Rivers had so often seen him on the coastal path on Eddystone, came Njiru. (276, emphasis in original)

Rivers's perception of Njiru cannot be characterised easily in terms of the binary categories interrogated in the novel. Blurring the lines between rationality and irrationality, sanity and madness, "savagery and civilization" (104) and past and present, Rivers's experience serves to demonstrate the manner in which traumatic reenactment confounds binary categorisation: it is difficult to imagine how Rivers might reconcile the experience with his own "allegiance" (265) to the rational and the scientific. Rivers's encounter with death, then, precipitates a traumatic state of liminality which resists articulation. In Section Two of this thesis, I explore further the question of why war trauma—and the encounter with death which is a characteristic feature of the phenomenon—eludes representation. Each of the texts I read in the following three chapters posits a gulf between experiences of war trauma and narrative accounts of such trauma, and I trace some textual strategies which address this gulf.

Section Two

“Trauma Literature”

Chapter Four

“They could pretend to each other they were men”:

Representational Anxiety in James Jones’s *The Thin Red Line*

The memory is a weapon for re-winning lost wars: what one person claims to “remember,” another will not “believe.” It may contain a “truth,” but only accidentally. [...] So the reports of soldiers, “remembering” something, can’t be taken as documents about what *happened* or what they did; but they tell a lot about bodily structures, wishes, fears, goals, the “program” of the speakers for the present moment.

Klaus Theweleit¹

In Section One, I argued that Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy is concerned primarily with analysing features of masculinity, trauma, and discourse which ensure that war trauma constitutes a private and alienating experience. The discrepancy between men’s actual experiences and cultural models of masculinity and war is also explored in James Jones’s Second World War novel, *The Thin Red Line*. In this chapter I trace *The Thin Red Line*’s ambivalence regarding the representation of private war experience, and argue that its attempt to give narrative shape to the experience of war trauma is hindered by its conventional, linear narrative approach. The novel’s chronological structure, I argue, does not reflect the atemporality and otherness of war trauma, which resists relegation to the past. Crucially, this incommensurability is acknowledged in the novel itself, most notably in its final sentence. This chapter begins, then, by considering some possible readings of *The Thin Red Line*’s self-reflexive conclusion.

¹ Klaus Theweleit, “The Bomb’s Womb and the Genders of War,” *Gendering War Talk*, ed. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993) 307, emphasis in original.

Until the final sentence of *The Thin Red Line*, its linear narrative structure and omniscient narrator mark it out as a realist text. Given that the novel is set entirely in the theatre of war, it may not initially seem to constitute an examination of how men's traumatic war experiences come to be accommodated within the structures of memory and personal narrative in their post-war civilian existence; it is a book which appears to be concerned exclusively with combat and men's immediate reactions to it. The novel's apparently mimetic depiction of the psychological struggles of soldiers is complicated by relatively few explicit reflections on the complexities of the storytelling process or the vicissitudes of memory. However, the novel's final sentence makes explicit the novel's concern with memory and trauma, and demands that the entirety of the preceding text be re-evaluated: "One day one of their number would write a book about all this, but none of them would believe it, because none of them would remember it that way" (529). Foregrounding its own artifice, the novel concludes by raising questions about memory and representation, questions which effectively serve to undermine the text's own authority.

This conclusion can, of course, be interpreted in many ways, and the questions it raises are to an extent dictated by the conceptual focus applied to the text. Might the conclusion refer to the novel's inability to represent the actual experience of combat soldiers? One possible interpretation of the final sentence is that it acknowledges that the very representational strategy of the novel renders it incapable of reflecting the experience of combat. Such a reading might concentrate on the disparity between the psychological experience of warfare and the narrative structure of the text, calling attention to the ways in which the novel must inevitably fail to mimetically reflect the confusion and incoherence that constitute soldiers' war experience. The narrative enclosure of the book, such an argument may continue, does not correspond with men's inability to consign their traumatic

experience to the enclosed frameworks of memory and narrative; whereas the book manages to situate trauma and fear within a rational and chronological structure, the task is far more difficult at the level of the individual psyche.

However, the ambiguity of the novel's crucial final sentence enables at least two other substantially different readings. One might interpret the conclusion as an observation about the psychological state of veterans, rather than a comment on the representational failure of the novel. Such a reading might maintain that the novel does indeed constitute a faithful and accurate reflection of war experience, arguing that veterans would not "believe it" because they would have developed different personal narratives and accepted public histories, stories which could not accommodate Jones's vision of terror, powerlessness, and male lack. In a similar vein, it could be argued that the claim that "none of them would remember it that way" refers to the notion that no veteran would re-enact and relive the traumatic experience of warfare as meticulously and completely as the novel does; they would not "remember" it the way the novel does for to do so would be too threatening and traumatic.

A third approach to this issue might focus on the temporal disjunction between experiences of combat and the production of narrative representations, and could explore the role of memory in bridging this gulf. Arguably, the novel's distance from the events it portrays ensures that the reliability of the narrator's testimony is compromised by the fallibility of memory, and this problem raises yet further questions. In their introduction to a collection of essays on gender and war, Cooke and Woollacott address the imbrication of memory with the representation of war: "In what ways do memory, with its inadvertent or deliberate retrospective distortion, and myth interact to present the unrepresentable?" (xi), they ask. A third reading of *The Thin Red Line's* claim that "none of them would remember it that way" is suggested by Cooke and Woollacott's question, which accentuates the

transformations and displacements of memory. Conceivably, the text will not be believed because it is structured and compromised by such “distortion”, or conversely because the veterans who read it have themselves diluted their experience through the transformative filter of memory. Theweleit complicates the issue further by introducing gender into this equation: “Are there male as opposed to female ways of constructing a memory, and how are they related to the different forms of making wars or avoiding wars by men and women?” (“The Bomb’s Womb” 309).

Clearly there are many ways of addressing the challenge issued by the novel’s problematic ending. It is apparent, too, that any reading of the text which fails to do so must be regarded with suspicion, as the conclusion effectively unravels any sense of certainty or closure that may have been produced in the body of the text. Rather than initially privileging any of these possible readings, I will begin to explore these issues by considering some existing critical responses to the novel. An analysis of these readings will enable me to consider what is at stake in various interpretative approaches to the text. It will also provide a point from which to begin to trace the novel’s preoccupation with male lack, performativity, and the traumatic dissolution of subjectivity.

The Valorisation of Male “Sacrifice”

James Giles’s account of the novel’s conclusion is clearly shaped by his own interpretive focus. For Giles, the primary theme of *The Thin Red Line* is the manner in which individualistic notions about the worth of the self, and indeed “human egos” (124), must be sacrificed in the context of combat. “In this novel,” he writes, “Jones has reached the critical point in his concept of the evolution of the soldier—the time when face-to-face confrontation with a foreign military enemy demands the suppression of the self” (122-23).

Giles claims that “with one exception, the characters in *The Thin Red Line* have largely succeeded in sacrificing their egos to the welfare of C-for-Charlie Company,” and contrasts this with the “romantic individualism” of a character in another of Jones’s war novels, *From Here to Eternity* (123). “A conditional anonymity has been accepted by virtually all the men of Charlie Company,” he argues (123). The “one exception” he identifies is Corporal Fife, who “is never a total soldier, primarily because he is unable to adjust to the requisite sacrifice of self” (131). I will consider further the problematic “exception” of Fife below.

Giles’s somewhat confused reading of the novel’s final passage is informed by his focus on the “sacrifice of self.” He notes that the final sentence is preceded by the musings of a character named Sergeant Welsh, who hopes “that if pursued long enough and often enough, [combat numbness] might really become a permanent and mercifully blissful state” (*The Thin Red Line* 529). Giles claims, with no textual evidence, that “Welsh knows that even if most of the men survive New Georgia, there will be another island and another and another” (145). His reading of the passage culminates with an extravagant claim which restricts the final sentence to a commentary on Welsh’s musings rather than the text as a whole:

What Welsh comprehends goes beyond good and evil and perhaps beyond the possibility of communication to others. The last line of the novel would seem to state the impossibility of communicating such bitter wisdom. (145)

It is unclear whether “what Welsh comprehends” refers to Welsh’s desire for permanent numbness, or his alleged awareness of the relentless momentum of the war. Nevertheless, it is clear that Giles accords a great degree of significance to the revelation, which is described in quasi-mystical terms; it is an insight which constitutes an instance of

“wisdom” and which transcends the binary system of “good and evil” (the use of these latter terms is particularly puzzling, given that neither appears at any stage in the text itself). For Giles, then, the final sentence of the book is evidence of fact that the soldiers in the novel become privy to a form of specialised knowledge, one which may not be communicated and which is, one can only presume, somehow related to the “sacrifice of self” that Giles identifies as the novel’s main concern.

In speaking of the “sacrifice of the self,” Giles ascribes a degree of autonomy to the soldiers’ traumatic experiences of the dissolution of personality, even equating it implicitly with a form of heroism; their “suppression of the self” is evidently privileged over the “romantic individualism” he identifies in *From Here to Eternity*. In a similar vein, Saul Bellow describes the soldiers’ dissolution of personality in terms of a kind of heroic transcendence of “false” and “easy” notions of selfhood (162):

What Jones describes here is the casting off of a childish or feminine or false virtue, despised because it cannot meet the test of survival. In apprehending what is real, Jones’s combat soldiers learn a bitter and leveling truth and in their realism revenge themselves on the slothful and easy civilian conception of the Self. The new idea cruelly assails the old, exposing its conventionality and emptiness. (162)

For Bellow, the manner in which the soldiers manage to see through the “conventionality and emptiness” of normative notions of subjectivity is evidence of their maturity; he argues that “childhood in some cases ends for the fighting man as he accepts the lesson of realism” (161). Bellow implies that in discarding their faith in “civilian” conceptions of selfhood, the soldiers not only display their maturity, but also manage to see through the fictive nature of existing notions of subjectivity. Their maturity is the product of “the lesson of realism,” which enables them to transcend discourses of selfhood in the process of “apprehending what is real.” Although Bellow concedes that the new-found conception of individual

insignificance constitutes a “new idea,” he clearly suggests that it reflects reality in a way that “childish or feminine or false” individualism does not.

Edmond L. Volpe reads *The Thin Red Line* in similar terms, arguing that “Jones’s novel strips away all inherited concepts and illusions, metaphysical or social, about man’s inherent dignity and being” (111). Unlike Bellow, Volpe does not claim explicitly that this interrogation of certain notions of selfhood is evidence of maturity and “realism.” Nevertheless, his statement reveals a similar tendency to read *The Thin Red Line*’s depiction of the dissolution of masculine identity in terms of the rejection and transcendence of “inherited concepts and illusions.” For Volpe, the novel is first and foremost about the “ultimate insignificance of individual man” (112), a phrase which is repeated in his article; he also claims that Jones “has presented a frightening twentieth-century view of individual man’s insignificance in society and in the universe” (112). Volpe’s description of a “twentieth-century view” echoes Bellow’s formulation of “the new idea,” and suggests the influence of historical events such as the World Wars on the development of this “vision of human existence [which] is brutal and unsentimental” (112). His brief account of the novel’s conclusion (which fails to account for its startling final sentence) also resonates with that of Giles; he claims that “the “insignificance of individual man” he identifies in the text is “conveyed at the end of the novel” (112).

A common theme emerges in the readings of Giles, Bellow and Volpe, who all regard the novel as an exploration of how the experience of combat precipitates both the dissolution of identity, and the rejection of “inherited” notions of subjectivity and individuality. Undoubtedly, *The Thin Red Line* is concerned with the effect of combat on the coherence and stability of masculine identity. However, another point of commonality in the three critical responses I have examined is that this dissolution is read as signifying neither the damaging effect of entrenched notions of masculinity, nor the destructive,

dehumanising nature of the masculine conduct of warfare. The numbed automatons in the novel who struggle to accept the violent challenge to their identities are not viewed by these critics as powerless victims of systems of gender and power which exceed them. Rather, they are seen as heroic pioneers of a new form of subjectivity, one stripped of the romantic illusions which circulate in civilian society. Bellow refers to “the rugged course” (162) of combat as though it is a crucible in which a more “realistic” and therefore superior form of subjectivity can be fashioned, and Volpe implicitly applauds the way the novel “strips away all inherited concepts and illusions” (111). How is it that these critics are able to read the novel’s depiction of male lack and powerlessness as an account of heroic masculinity? Do these readings effectively serve to negate the challenge the novel poses to notions of masculine mastery? Is it possible that these interpretations of a novel which so forcefully presents male lack actually employ the text to defend the normative masculine standard of subjectivity?

Silverman and Dean on Lack

To explore these questions it will be useful to consider the arguments of two theorists who examine the impact of war on notions of masculine mastery. Kaja Silverman and Carolyn Dean both argue that the World Wars of this century have influenced the functioning of the gender order, at the level of the individual psyche and in the cultural sphere. Dean speaks of “crises in male subjectivity originating after the Great War” (271), and Silverman describes

that brief moment in the 1940s when the forces of destruction and dissolution got out of the control of those attempting to orchestrate the war, and served to annihilate less the enemy than the positivities of the masculine ‘self.’ (64-65)

It has often been noted that war is a crucial site for the production and policing of established gendered norms; Cooke and Woollacott claim, for example, that “war is an arena in which gender constructions [...] are culturally encoded” (xiii). In positing a link between war and crises in the gender order, though, Silverman and Dean provide a context in which to situate Giles’s, Volpe’s and Bellow’s remarkable valorisations of the traumatically fragmented soldiers of *The Thin Red Line*. The notions of “lack” and “mastery”, which play a central role in Silverman’s theoretical framework, require closer examination.

As a psychoanalytic theorist strongly influenced by Lacan, Silverman proceeds from “the assumption that lack of being is the irreducible condition of subjectivity” (4). Silverman argues that this lack is traditionally deposited at the site of the feminine in order to support the illusion of presence, mastery, and cohesion that is associated with the masculine subject. While this state of lack constitutes the actual state of all subjects, she argues, masculine mastery functions as the dominant cultural model of subjectivity. However, this model is threatened when men can no longer maintain their belief in their own cohesion and mastery, and are forced to confront the lack at the core of their being. Silverman writes that “the male subject’s aspirations to mastery and sufficiency are undermined [...] by the traumatically unassimilable nature of certain historical events” (52), and posits war as an example of such “historical trauma”:

It is not surprising, then, that when the male subject is brought into a traumatic encounter with lack, as in the situation of war, he often experiences it as the impairment of his anatomical masculinity. What is really at issue, though, is a *psychic* disintegration—the disintegration, that is, of a bound and armoured ego, predicated upon the illusion of coherence and control. (62, emphasis in original)

Silverman reads several post-war films as “attest[ing] to a radical loss of belief in the conventional premises of masculinity” (51), and argues that their depiction of male lack must be contained and disavowed in order to “dispel these threats to normative masculinity” and restore general belief in the “dominant fiction” of masculine mastery and presence. For Silverman, the absence and lack underlying all subject formations must be constantly banished from the site of masculinity.

Unlike Silverman, Dean argues that the conception of the bounded, rational male subject had been substantially undermined in the first half of the twentieth century. Significantly, she too associates this change with the impact of war, and discusses “different historical crises around the question of the male self” (281). Whereas Silverman insists on the tenacity of the “dominant fiction” of male mastery, Dean argues that the equation of presence with masculinity had already been rendered problematic: “This image of the male subject, the one assumed by interwar cultural critics, thus already presumes a self rooted not in masculinity, but in its erosion, not in reason, but in its disruption” (292). In attempting to account for the “absence of gender as a category of analysis” in Foucault’s work (271), Dean claims that it is crucial to consider the historical and social context in which Foucault’s works were produced. “Foucault’s history of sexual subjectivity,” she argues, “is derived from a history of male lack rather than male potency, and the historicity of Foucault’s work is inextricable from this perception of male lack” (287).

A significant aspect of Dean’s argument is her account of how Foucault employs this “history of male lack” to problematise the foundations of subjectivity; it is this formulation that sheds light on the readings of Giles, Volpe and Bellow. Dean argues that instead of viewing the erosion of masculinity as evidence of the fragility or dissolution of male subjects, Foucault moves from an analysis of models of masculinity to declarations about the fragmentary, socially constituted nature of subjectivity itself. “Foucault does not

rescue man by restoring his manhood,” she claims, “but restores manhood by eroding the traditional foundations of masculinity” (290). In Dean’s account, Foucault effectively negates a challenge to normative masculinity by renegotiating the terms in which debates about gender and subjectivity must be conducted. If it became apparent that men were not the bounded, rational subjects they were once thought to be, this was evidence not of the failure of masculinity, but rather of the impossibility of identifying any foundation or core to subjectivity itself:

He defined ‘real’ (that is, changing, mutable, foundationless) manhood as the ‘trace’ that forever eludes the historian (the would-be detective). Foucault is both the product and producer of a new normative sexual subjectivity anchored not by reference to an integral male self but by reference to a male subject at once self-possessed and (unspeakably) self-fragmented. (293)

Dean argues that while Foucault’s work undermines the authority of the hegemonic conception of masculine mastery, it nevertheless enables masculinity to continue to function as the standard by which subjectivity is evaluated and conceptualised. In Foucault’s work, the “self-fragmented” male subject becomes both the proof and the normative exemplar of the condition of all subjectivity: fragmented, inscrutable, and infiltrated by power.

Masculinity as Normative Standard

Returning to my analysis of readings of *The Thin Red Line*, Silverman’s and Dean’s explorations of the masculine encounter with lack—and this encounter’s impact on normative models of subjectivity—proves illuminating. A significant feature of the readings of Giles, Bellow and Volpe is that gender barely functions as either an object of inquiry or as an investigative category. The very absence of gender in these accounts invites

suspicion, and it will become apparent that where gender does figure, it is employed in order to support declarations about “the self” (Giles 123) and “human existence” (Volpe 112) rather than about masculinity. Arguably Volpe’s article constitutes an exception, but ultimately he too demonstrates an inability to regard the novel as anything other than a comment on the human condition. I will argue that this refusal to consider gender enables these critics to negate *The Thin Red Line*’s depiction of male lack and to rehabilitate the normative function of masculinity.

Giles’s exegesis is predicated on abstractions such as “the self” and “human egos” (124). There are parallels between his description of the “sacrifice of self” demanded of the soldier, and Silverman’s argument that war often precipitates the male subject’s encounter with lack. However, while Silverman describes this encounter in terms of the erosion of agency, Giles implicitly accords a great deal of autonomy to the soldiers who “sacrifice” their individuality in the name of “group cooperation” (123). He claims that “the characters in *The Thin Red Line* have largely succeeded in sacrificing their egos” (123), with the exception of Fife, who is “unable to adjust to the requisite sacrifice of self” (131). Whereas Silverman describes the encounter with lack in terms of the dissolution of subjectivity and agency, Giles employs the concept of instinct in order to attribute the “sacrifice of self” to male subjects themselves: “Such sacrifice is almost never the result of abstract loyalty or idealism; rather it is an instinctive realisation that whatever safety is possible in combat lies in the smooth functioning of the company” (123). For Giles, the dissolution of masculine identity in *The Thin Red Line* is evidence not of the erosion of male subjects’ mastery and agency, but rather of precisely the opposite: the “sacrifice of self” constitutes a supreme effort of the will. Paradoxically, he describes the dissolution of identity in terms of agency, and in so doing interprets the novel’s depiction of male lack as evidence of men’s ability to choose to transcend the “self.”

Volpe's interpretation of the novel begins promisingly by acknowledging the gendered dimensions of the text. He argues that "the absence of women in *The Thin Red Line* has much to do with its success [because] Jones cannot create complex female characters, and he cannot deal with the relations of men and women" (107). He also claims that "Jones's fictional terrain is limited to that peculiar all-male world governed by strictly masculine interests, attitudes, and values" (108). Given this acknowledgment, it might be expected that Volpe will read the novel as an investigation of male subjects and the structures of masculinity, and that he will assess its "success" in terms of the insight it provides into "masculine interests, attitudes, and values." This, however, is not the case. He argues that "individualism is identified, in *From Here to Eternity*, with this masculine life, as if the army were the last frontier of rugged individualism" (108), but fails to employ this insight in his reading of *The Thin Red Line*. Interpreting the novel as an account of the "insignificance of individual man" (112) and the erosion of individualism in the face of "incalculable forces [...] beyond the individual's control" (111), he ultimately reads this depiction of lack as a comment upon the human condition. Although he associates individualism with masculinity and the army, and acknowledges that the text's scope is limited to precisely these areas, he nevertheless describes the book as a "vision of *human* existence" (112, emphasis added) and a "terrifying view of *human* insignificance" (119, emphasis added). *The Thin Red Line*'s depiction of male lack is therefore interpreted as an account of "human" lack. This slippage between the terms "man" and "human" is evidence that Volpe, too, ultimately attempts to perpetuate the normative role of masculinity even in the face of its apparent problematisation.

Like Giles and Volpe, Bellow reads the novel's depiction of male lack in terms of the erosion of a "conception of the Self" (162), and, like them, he valorises a "new idea" of fragmented subjectivity, implicitly positing it as a normative standard. In Bellow's account, though, the manipulation required to enact this rehabilitation of masculinity is particularly

transparent. It therefore provides a useful demonstration of how lack is transferred from the site of the feminine to the masculine in these readings. The most remarkable feature of Bellow's reading is the way he contrasts a heroic masculine acceptance of lack with a fiction of presence that he associates with the feminine; he claims that the novel depicts "the casting off of a childish or *feminine* or false virtue [which] [...] cannot meet the test of survival" (162, emphasis added). For Bellow, the encounter with lack does not bring male subjects into traumatic proximity with qualities associated with femininity. Rather, it enables them to see through the "feminine" pretence of presence, thereby "apprehending what is real" in embracing lack (162).

Agency and "Combat Numbness"

In the readings of Giles, Bellow and Volpe, the dissolution of masculine identity in *The Thin Red Line* is seen as signifying either the tragedy of human insignificance, or the heroic acceptance of the true state of subjectivity. In order to maintain these positions, they must neglect the gendered dimensions of the text. Perhaps more crucially, their readings are also inconsistent with the numerous passages in the novel which depict men's inability to understand or transcend their encounters with lack and powerlessness. Indeed, the struggle to maintain the performance of masculine presence and mastery in the face of traumatic dissolution arguably constitutes *The Thin Red Line's* primary theme. Concluding his argument that the book is about the way men discard selfhood, Bellow claims that "young Fife, after he has gone the rugged course, kills like the rest, becomes quarrelsome, drinks and brawls, and casts off his hesitant, careful and complaining childishness" (162). This remarkable characterisation overlooks (or disavows) the fact that Fife is not able to reconcile culturally produced notions of masculinity with his own experience of lack. Rather than enabling him to transcend or discard the fiction of masculine mastery, Fife's

combat experience further problematises his identification with a model of heroic masculinity:

Fife had thought the combat numbness was a new state of mind. And when it went away and left him again a quivering mass of jelly, he was not prepared. He was forced to face once again the same fact he had faced before, which was that he was not a soldier. He was right back where he started. [...] So he was forced to face up once again to the same old fact he had always known. He was a coward. (514)

Despite his brief experience of “a new state of mind,” Fife remains trapped within a binary model of masculinity in which heroic presence and mastery is valued over cowardice; unable to align himself with the privileged term, Fife is traumatised by his failure.

A crucial feature of the above passage is the implication that the “combat numbness” which figures prominently in *The Thin Red Line* constitutes a merely temporary state of being. Whereas Bellow and Giles valorise the “suppression of the self” (Giles 123) that arises in combat, Fife’s trauma clearly suggests that any such transcendence of identity is ephemeral. The passage also provides a useful perspective on the novel’s conclusion, which describes Welsh’s “calculated hope and belief that if pursued long enough and often enough, [combat numbness] might really become a permanent and mercifully blissful state” (529). I noted that Giles characterises Welsh’s belief as a form of incommunicable “bitter wisdom” (145), but Fife’s situation suggests the futility of Welsh’s desire. Given the novel’s preoccupation with the transience of combat numbness, Welsh’s desperate “hope” can surely be read as signifying rather less about the wisdom gained through transcending selfhood than it does about the impact of combat on the male psyche. For Welsh, a state of permanent numbness would be “mercifully blissful,” a description which suggests the extent to which the experience of war has problematised his identity. In a declaration which

completely undermines his central proposition, Giles notes that Welsh “is fighting to deny the feeling, emotional side of his self; and such a struggle can only lead to madness” (128).

The passages depicting Welsh’s and Fife’s desire—and concomitant inability—to maintain a state of numbed selflessness suggest that the experience of “combat numbness” proves difficult to integrate into the structures of masculine identity which invariably resurface after battle. This notion is further explored through the figure of John Bell, *The Thin Red Line*’s most introspective and insightful character:

Somewhere within the last few minutes—Bell did not know exactly when—he had ceased to feel human. So much of so many different emotions had been drained from him that his emotional reservoir was empty. He still felt fear, but even that was so dulled by emotional apathy (as distinct from physical apathy) that it was hardly more than vaguely unpleasant. He just no longer cared much about anything. And instead of impairing his ability to function, it enhanced it, this sense of no longer feeling human. (283-84)

While Bell is aware of the benefits of this new state, he soon realises that it has its price. “It was amazing how the longer one lasted in this business, the less sympathy one felt for others who were getting shot up as long as oneself was in safety,” he thinks, noting that “terror became increasingly limited to those moments when you yourself were in actual danger” (305):

Then, suddenly, like a bucket of cold water dashed in his face, his own supreme callousness smashed into his consciousness and shook him with a sense of horror at his own hardened brutality. How would Marty like being married to this husband when he finally did get home? (307)

For Bell, combat numbness is useful precisely insofar as it enables him to perform his soldierly functions. However, he is also painfully aware that a state of “hardened brutality” constitutes an asset for him only in the extremely limited and specialised context of battle. The fact that Bell concludes his musings by imagining his wife’s reaction to his transformation neatly evokes the different roles and traits demanded of men in civilian society. It evokes, too, the extent to which Bell’s “sense of [...] feeling human” is tied to his personal relationships. The passage highlights the fact that the “hardened brutality” demanded of male soldiers has ramifications in their post-war existence, and suggests that the experience of combat numbness serves as a traumatic disruption to Bell’s masculine identity.

While Giles, Bellow and Volpe applaud the way in which the soldiers in *The Thin Red Line* discard notions of selfhood, the novel suggests that this process is only ever partial and temporary. Rather than enabling a superior form of subjectivity, it functions instead as a rupture in men’s identities. Indeed, the novel explicitly associates “numbness” with insanity: describing the aftermath of a battle, the narrator claims that “all of them were a little bit mad. The combat numbness, with its stary [sic] eyes and drawn faces, had not yet left them” (484).

“Pretend[ing] to each other they were men”

Just as Bell is used to examine the corrosive effects of combat numbness on the male psyche, he also provides a vehicle for the text to explore how this damage is controlled and contained in the years following the war. Describing the “denumbification process,” the omniscient narrator notes that “by the third day” after a battle “*nearly* all of them had become *almost* the same personalities they had been before” (363, emphasis

added). However, Bell “could not help wondering if any of them could ever really become the same again. He didn’t think so. Not without lying anyway” (363). His observation again suggests that combat numbness takes its toll on the men who experience it. Crucially, it also implies that the men wish to “become the same again,” and that they will attempt to do so by “lying.” As Bell ponders the defence mechanisms men will employ in an effort to contain the threat to their identity, the text’s scope expands from the theatre of war to the wider cultural sphere in which the soldiers must eventually situate their traumatic experience. This is a crucial passage, because it examines the kind of representations of the war that will be produced, representations in which men will be invited to see themselves reflected:

Perhaps long years after the war was done, when each had built his defences of lies which fitted his needs, and had listened long enough to those other lies the national propaganda would have distilled for them by then, they could all go down to the American Legion like their fathers and talk about it within the limits of a prescribed rationale which allowed them selfrespect [sic]. *They could pretend to each other they were men.* And avoid admitting they had once seen something animal within themselves that terrified them. But then, most of them were doing that right now. Already. (363, emphasis added)

I began this chapter by arguing that the novel’s conclusion serves to foreground its own status as a narrative which other men may not “believe.” The allusions in the above passage to different forms of representation suggest one possible reason why the text anticipates that veterans will choose to identify with other accounts of their experience. In speaking of a “prescribed rationale” determining depictions of the war, *The Thin Red Line* effectively locates itself outside the limits of a kind of discourse “which allow[s]” veterans “selfrespect,” with the implication that its own brutal vision of male lack does not do so. Through its scathing allusions to the “lies” that constitute both personal narratives and national propaganda, the novel also presents itself as a more truthful account. The novel

may be rejected, the passage implies, because the truths it contains would be too painful to “believe.”

Bell’s reflections emphasise the crucial role played by narrative in men’s attempts to contain and understand their traumatic war experience. In his analysis of the stories of Vietnam veterans, Stanley Rosenberg argues that “‘war stories’ are a central part of [veterans’] attempts to construct a narrative identity: a workable conception of self” (43). He also examines the inverse of this equation, noting that the experience of war serves to threaten and problematise veterans’ narratives of selfhood. He claims that war experience is “the central defining moment in [veterans’] construction of self, but is simultaneously a potentially shameful moment filled with meanings that must continue to be repressed and distorted if a viable self is to be maintained” (47). Like Rosenberg, Bell ascribes the narrativisation of war experience a central role in veterans’ maintenance of masculine identity, by characterising the act of exchanging war stories as “pretend[ing] to each other they were men.”

A significant feature of Bell’s contemplation of post-war defence mechanisms is the fact that he identifies two forms of “lies”: private narratives and collective, social ones. In his description of “the defences of lies which fitted [each man’s] needs,” he conveys the notion that the trauma these narratives address (or repress) is of an individual nature, personal and distinctive; private narratives must therefore reflect and be shaped by this singularity. The main target of his cynical musings, however, is the way in which men may attempt to disavow and negate their traumatic experience through their shared participation in collective forms of storytelling. Employing Elliot Jaque’s formulation of “collective defense” (47), Rosenberg examines the manner in which social narratives serve to contain trauma by transforming, dispersing, and displacing it. He argues that

multiple distortions of meaning and desire such as denial, negation, projection, and derealization [...] are made all the more potent because of their collective nature. Each person can draw support from the group culture in defensive efforts to reliable experience, efforts that are in fact anticipated and encouraged by collective tropes. (47)

In claiming that “collective tropes” anticipate and encourage men’s attempts to narrativise their experience, Rosenberg implies that men are aided in their attempts to disavow their trauma by social mechanisms which also seek to negate the disruptive potential of male lack. In a similar vein, Silverman argues that post-war cultural production addresses this rupture in the gender order; she claims that “ideology attempts to recuperate the trauma of history through trivializing representation” (77). Bell’s conjectural account of post-war narratives reflects this idea that cultural forces anticipate and actively assist men’s disavowal; he notes that “the national propaganda would have distilled [lies] for them” (363). The notion is also present in another character’s description of “the great conspiracy of history” (395), which I discuss below.

Another significant aspect of Bell’s meditations is the sense of gathering and community conveyed in his prediction that “they could all go down to the American Legion like their fathers” (363). Two features of this statement are noteworthy: the clear image of a shared cultural site around which veterans can congregate, and the importance of paternal precedents for men attempting to reconcile their individual traumatic experience with the social order. With respect to the former point, Rosenberg argues that a shared discourse and sense of belonging to a group is vital for veterans attempting to “ward off unbearable anxiety” (47). He argues that

the commonalities in [veterans’] narratives reflect their shared participation in a very specialized subculture, which they allude to as a ‘fraternity,’ that is, a symbolic order. This system functioned as a

'collective defense,' by structuring their discourse and by establishing the terms by which texts of identity could be constructed. (46)

The parallels between Rosenberg's reference to "collective defense" and Bell's vision of "defences of lies" are striking. Both describe a form of masculine collective through which men will be able to structure their narratives. The "American Legion" can be seen to constitute a clear and particularly explicit example of the kind of "fraternity" characterised by Rosenberg as a symbolic order, which enables veterans to participate in an exchange of narratives; for Bell, the Legion's function is precisely to enable the men to "talk about it." Rosenberg's claim that these collective mechanisms assist traumatised men by "structuring their discourse" also echoes Bell's reference to a "prescribed rationale."

The Thin Red Line, then, conveys the concept of masculine "fraternity" through an allusion to a place—the American Legion—where men exchange narratives which contain trauma and avoid dissolution. The fact that it constitutes a physical space enforces the notion that men's disavowal is centred around specific cultural sites. This technique is also employed in an episode which describes a character named Stein's visit to "the Regimental 'Officer's Club'" (391). Stein anticipates that "they would be talking that relaxed, amiable chitchat conversation about tactics which helped all of them himself included to keep up *the pretence of sanity*" (391, emphasis added). Again, the episode suggests that men's shared participation in a framing discourse serves as a mechanism through which trauma is kept at bay, and again the episode alludes to a shared space in which this process occurs.

Stein's description of the "pretence of sanity" resonates with Bell's earlier claim that "they could pretend to each other they were men" (363). This implicit textual equation of masculinity and sanity suggests that the trauma and terror the men attempt to keep at bay through their discourse centres precisely on lack and the dissolution of masculine identity.

Taken together, Stein and Bell's statements present an account of masculinity which accentuates its performative and fictive nature. By describing the performative nature of masculinity and the performative nature of sanity in the same terms, and by presenting both as roles which male subjects adopt to cover over the trauma which threatens their identities, *The Thin Red Line* portrays the performance of masculinity as a neurotic, defensive structure.

The Paternal Imago and "the great conspiracy of history"

I have noted that another significant feature of Bell's reference to the American Legion is the fact that he imagines that men will go there "like their fathers" (363). Arguably, this statement accords with Rosenberg's characterisation of the masculine "collective defense" as a form of symbolic order; in Lacanian thought the law of the father is, of course, the central organising principle of the symbolic order. Contrary to Rosenberg, Silverman claims that "the fiction of a phallic masculinity generally remains intact only for the duration of the war" (63). She argues that upon re-entering civilian society, soldiers can no longer rely on group defenses, and must instead attempt to realign themselves with respect to an overarching symbolic order she calls the "dominant fiction" (63), which is itself structured by the "Name-of-the-Father":

As long as the soldier remains on the battlefield, he is fortified to some extent by his comrades; the 'binding' which can no longer take place at the level of the ego occurs instead at the level of the group. [...] But once removed from the battlefield, the traumatized veteran no longer enjoys the support of his comrades-in-arms. All that stands between him and the abyss is the paternal imago, within which he can no longer recognize himself. (63)

Silverman's claim that veterans cannot draw succour from "the support of [their] comrades-in-arms" in civilian society does not accord with *The Thin Red Line's* allusion to collective masculine fictions which certainly occur "at the level of the group." Perhaps more significant, though, is Silverman's argument that in the absence of any such support, men can turn only to a "paternal imago" associated with presence and mastery.

The Thin Red Line suggests that a kind of paternal imago does indeed structure soldiers' post-war existence, but that it does so at the level of collective masculine fictions in which men participate. In the novel, the qualities associated with this symbolic, paternal, organising principle are not necessarily those of presence and mastery, however, and the text highlights this principle's artifice and its instability. Indeed, the novel suggests that a male subject's war experience may serve to rob the "paternal imago" of its aura of truth and hence some of its power, thereby enabling him to "recognize himself" in precisely its fictive nature. Stein's experience provides *The Thin Red Line's* clearest account of men's engagement with paternal symbols and precedents.

When Stein is relieved of his command because his superior officer thinks he isn't "tough enough" and that his "emotions govern [him] too much," his immediate reaction is to wonder: "what would his father the ex-World War I Major say to this?" (348). At the moment of his greatest failure, "studying his own reactions" (348), Stein employs the spectre of his father in an attempt to evaluate the impact of the incident on his psyche. This suggests that Stein's identity is structured by his relationship to the authority symbolised by his father. It suggests, too, that his sense of presence and mastery is dependent on the extent to which his own experience corresponds with this image. However, a later passage depicts Stein's renegotiation with paternal authority, and his realisation that it constitutes a fiction of sorts. Wondering whether a crucial decision has been motivated by compassion for his men or by his own fear, Stein realises he will never know:

That was something to live with, but on the other hand Stein found he no longer gave a damn what his father the World War I Major thought. Men changed their wars in the years that followed after they fought them. It was that old thing about 'I'll-believe-your-lies-about-you, if-you'll-believe-my-lies-about-me.' History. And Stein knew now his father had lied—or if not lied, had augmented. And Stein hoped he would never do that. He might, but he hoped not. (394)

With his realisation that “men changed their wars,” and that his own father’s experience has been presented to him through a transforming, containing, discursive framework, Stein is liberated from the tyranny of paternal authority.

Initially Stein rejects the processes of transformation and distortion, hoping that “he would never do that.” Significantly, though, Stein extrapolates from an interrogation of the image of his father to an analysis of the wider cultural sphere, noting that “history” is structured by the same processes of narrativisation and containment. As he contemplates his return to America, he realises the benefits of conforming to the cultural negation of lack:

And even if rumour followed him, nobody was going to say anything to him about it because it was all part of a great conspiracy. And as long as you played ball with the conspiracy ... the great conspiracy of history ... ” (395)

Stein identifies a fiction structuring civilian society which he associates with the image of his father, but it is suggested that his loss of faith in the “parental imago” is precisely what will enable him to disavow his own lack and to collaborate with “the great conspiracy of history.”

Powerlessness and the Business of War

Stein's struggle with the image of his father enables him to renegotiate his imagined relationship to society, and thereby to envisage a means of incorporating his experience of failure into the wider cultural framework. Conversely, several other passages in the novel suggest that men's experiences of combat and army life serve to disempower them with respect to cultural forces which exceed them. A major theme that emerges in characters' analysis of their war experience is the concept of powerlessness, of being the "tool[s]" (381) and "pawns" (229) of institutions and systems which exploit them. Just as Stein extrapolates from contemplation of his father's war stories to an analysis of "history," so too he sees the powerlessness of soldiers as evidence of individual men's subjection to the state:

It was a horrifying vision: all of them doing the same identical thing, all of them powerless to stop it, all of them devoutly and proudly believing themselves to be free individuals. It expanded to include the scores of nations, the millions of men, doing the same on thousands of hilltops across the world. And it didn't stop there. It went on. It was the concept—concept? the fact; the reality—of the modern state in action. (229)

Stein's account of the lack of autonomy entailed by "the reality [...] of the modern state" is based on his observation of one battle, but constitutes a general declaration about the way individuality is subsumed by social structures. Crucially, this revelation is based on a "horrifying vision," which is also described as an "unholy, heartfreezing picture" (229). Giles argues that "a conditional anonymity has been accepted by virtually all the men" in the novel (123), but the above passage implies that for Stein, the awareness that he is "powerless to stop" his subjection to a system made up of "millions of men" is traumatic

and disturbing. It also suggests that this trauma informs his imagined relationship to the culture of which he is a part.

The idea that the devaluation of individuality involved in war is merely an extension of civilian society is also conveyed in Stein's judgment of "the long-awaited, soul-illuminating experience of combat. Stein could not find it any different from working for one of the great law offices, or *any* of the huge corporations. Or for government" (350, emphasis in original). Fife, too, views the conduct of war and the functioning of civilian society as points in a continuum, rather than as qualitatively different phenomena. Viewing his first battle, "the main thought uppermost in Fife's mind [is] that everything [is] so organised, and handled with such matter-of-fact dispatch. Like a business. Like a regular business" (38). Like Stein, Fife is traumatised by this notion, and the force of the revelation again stems from its impact on his sense of autonomy:

The very idea itself, and what it implied, struck a cold blade of terror into Fife's essentially defenceless vitals, a terror both of unimportance, his unimportance, and of powerlessness: his powerlessness. He had no control or sayso in any of it. Not even where it concerned himself, who was also a part of it. It was terrifying. He did not mind dying in a war, a real war,—at least, he didn't think he did—but he *did* not want to die in a regulated business venture. (42)

For Fife, the "terrifying" aspects of this revelation are his feelings of "unimportance" and "powerlessness." The passage contrasts his expectation of "a real war" with his description of the "regulated business venture" of which he is "a part." The comparison suggests that Fife is terrified because he realises that the masculine agency and autonomy which he had anticipated would shape his war experience are in fact of negligible importance in the context of mass industrialised warfare. Indeed, in claiming that he has no "control or sayso in any of it," Fife provides a clear example of how the concept of masculine mastery may

be eroded in warfare and revealed as a fiction. Again, the passage suggests that for Fife this insight does not apply merely to the context of war, but rather to the “whole world of men” (373).

The passages exploring Stein’s and Fife’s traumatic impotence accord with Silverman’s proposition that the trauma experienced by male soldiers centres on their confrontation with the “conditions of subjectivity [...] upon the denial of which traditional masculinity is predicated: lack, specularity, and alterity” (50-51). Of course, Stein and Fife do not explicitly associate agency and autonomy with masculinity. When Bell contemplates soldiers’ subjection to systems which exceed them, though, he makes precisely this association. In a statement which echoes Fife’s frustrated expectation of “a real war,” Bell thinks that “American warfare had changed from individualist warfare to collectivist warfare” (245). For Bell, a consequence of this change is that “the whole thing was too vast, too complicated, too technical for any one individual man to count in it. Only collections of men counted, only communities of men, only *numbers* of men” (244-45, emphasis in original). Again, this conception of masculine insignificance constitutes a traumatic insight. Extending it to his own situation, Bell realises that he “could not possibly live through this war. He could not possibly go home to his wife Marty Bell.” The narrator notes that “the emotion which this revelation created in Bell was not one of sacrifice, resignation, acceptance, and peace. Instead, it was an irritating, chafing emotion of helpless frustration [...]” (245).

A later passage explores the connection between masculinity and autonomy even more explicitly. Realising that combat numbness reduces his “sense of [...] feeling human,” Bell begins whistling “a song called ‘I Am An Automaton’ to the tune of ‘God Bless America’” (284):

They thought they were *men*. They all thought they were real people. They really did. How funny. They thought they made decisions and ran their own lives, and proudly called themselves free individual human beings. The truth was they were here, and they were gonna stay here, until the state through some other automaton told them to go someplace else, and then they'd go. But they'd go freely, of their own free choice and will, because they were free individual human beings. Well, well. (284, emphasis added)

By contrasting his fellow soldiers' belief in autonomy with his own sense of automatism, Bell implies that the sense of agency experienced by other men is illusive. Crucially, though, he links this sense of agency to the maintenance of masculine identity; in claiming that "they thought they were men," Bell suggests that masculinity itself is a fragile construction underpinned by the fictive concepts of mastery and autonomy. Arguably, the fact that Bell conflates the concepts of "men" and "free individual human beings" undermines my contention that this passage is concerned with masculinity; one might argue that Bell identifies the fiction of agency as a component of all subjectivity. However, an alternative interpretation would read this conflation as evidence of the way in which masculinity is once again employed here as a normative standard. Regardless of which position one adopts, Bell's criticism of the concept of agency serves both to problematise notions of masculine mastery and to reinforce the novel's preoccupation with male lack and the relative power of "the state."

In its exploration of the erosion of male subjects' sense of mastery and its concomitant allusions to powerful cultural shaping forces, *The Thin Red Line* contains another implicit explanation for its problematic, self-reflexive final sentence. Introducing his reading of the novel, Volpe recounts his own youthful realisation that the army was "an inexorable maw that chewed up unsuspecting individuals and turned them into identical links in a never-ending human sausage for the delectation of the war gods" (106). He

claims that “perhaps for [his] generation this vision of anonymity was the great trauma,” and identifies “this vision” as the central preoccupation of *The Thin Red Line*. For Volpe, then, the novel is a successful representation of the traumatic recognition of “individual man’s significance” (112). Arguably, though, this very sense of “anonymity” serves to problematise the narrative process. In his essay “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin identifies a link between the First World War and the fact that “experience ha[d] fallen in value,” claiming that “men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience” (83-84). Alice Gambrell claims that

Benjamin [...] suggested that in the wake of the war, an unmediated faith in the truth of ‘experience’ was abandoned on the battlefields of Europe, which young soldiers left behind equipped with a keen and entirely new sense of their own vulnerability to violent, all-encompassing, and mostly invisible forces that operated far beyond the scope of their control. (3)

Benjamin’s formulation of war’s devaluation of experience reflects many of the same themes that structure *The Thin Red Line*, such as men’s loss of faith in autonomy, and their realisation that their lives (and potential deaths) are dictated by “those in power” (Benjamin 84). However, these resonances appear to present a paradox: if *The Thin Red Line* attempts to represent the phenomenon of male lack in war, while simultaneously suggesting that men employ narrative strategies to disavow this lack, how could it succeed without negating either of these central themes? How could a war story about the impossibility of producing truthful war stories be possible? Arguably the novel’s conclusion acknowledges and addresses precisely this dilemma. By foregrounding its own artifice, the text exhibits a distrust of the very “experience” on which it is based. Although the novel alludes to the displacements and distortions which structure representations of war, it also explores men’s intense need to produce such narrative accounts. In doing so it provides a framework in which to situate its own sceptical, uncertain account of male lack.

“Art [...] was shit”: Narrative, Chronology, and Trauma

The final section of this chapter will consider another possible explanation for *The Thin Red Line*'s remarkable conclusion: the text questions its representational success because of its suspicion that traumatic experience and linear narratives are incommensurable. This incommensurability may be seen to centre on trauma's tendency to confound the very chronology and continuity which structure both conventional narratives and memory. I have argued that men's struggle to maintain belief in the fiction of masculine mastery is a major theme of the novel. However, the men in *The Thin Red Line* are not oblivious to the centrality of fiction, narrative and role-playing in the maintenance of their identities. Indeed, the text repeatedly emphasises men's awareness that they employ narrative and performative devices to process their traumatic experiences. An early episode recounts a character named Doll's realisation that

everybody lived by a selected fiction. Nobody was really what he pretended to be. It was as if everybody made up a fiction story about himself, and then he just pretended to everybody that that was what he was. (14)

One “selected fiction” that the novel interrogates is the notion of the “tough veteran” (368), which is depicted as a form of coping mechanism:

they were tough veterans; that much had been explained to them, and they sought desperately to carry out the role — not only because they were egotistically proud of it, but also because there wasn't any other role. (368)

A major theme of the novel, then, is the manner in which men process traumatic experience through framing roles and narratives.

Although the men employ narrative devices themselves often and knowingly, Bell exhibits a distrust of such structures. In an extended meditation, he posits several reasons why the standard representational techniques which structure depictions of war ensure that the full trauma of battle cannot be conveyed through “creative art” (244):

If this were a movie, this would be the end of the show and something would be decided. In a movie or a novel they would dramatise and build to the climax of the attack. When the attack came in the film or the novel, it would be satisfying. It would decide something. It would have a semblance of meaning and a semblance of an emotion. And immediately after, it would be over. The audience could go home and think about the semblance of the meaning and feel the semblance of an emotion. Even if the hero got killed, it would still make sense. Art, Bell decided, creative art, was shit. (244)

Three aspects of Bell’s thought are relevant here. Firstly, he objects to the fact that narrative accounts of war inevitably contain semblances of “meaning” and “emotion,” qualities which he implies do not feature in his experience of battle. Secondly, in claiming that “even if the hero got killed, it would still make sense,” Bell alludes to a disjunction between representations of death and soldiers’ traumatic encounters with mortality (such encounters take the form of both the fear of dying, and exposure to the deaths of other men). Bell suggests that experiences of mortality confound representation because narrative structures always imply the possibility of interpretation, and therefore cannot convey the sheer illogicality, irreducibility and otherness of the encounter with death. This disparity between death and representations of death is also apparent in Fife’s observation upon witnessing the death of a friend: “it was so different from the books he’d read, so much more *final*” (251, emphasis in original).

A third, crucial aspect of Bell's analysis of "creative art" is his criticism of the chronologically contained nature of narrative. He refers to "the end of the show," noting that "immediately after, it would be over [and] the audience could go home." Continuing his meditation, Bell contrasts such enclosed, finite structures with his own experience of battle, noting that "nothing had been decided, nobody had learned anything. But most important of all, nothing had ended" (244). Arguably, Bell's observations are restricted to the disparity between his immediate experience of battle and potential representations of such experience. However, this chapter has emphasised *The Thin Red Line's* implicit exploration of the ways men may seek to contain traumatic experience in their post-war lives. This underlying textual theme allows us to read Bell's critique of "creative art" as a commentary on the way war trauma must resist and exceed the process of narrativisation. Bell's claim that "nothing had ended" therefore implies that enclosed representations of traumatic experience must fail to reflect the persistence of trauma, the way in which it resists relegation to the past.

Bell's criticism of "creative art" focuses on the disparity between the traumatic experience of war and representations of it. Bell suggests that this incongruity is related to the fact that narrative constructions employ linear chronology in order to create the illusion of enclosure and containment. John Talbott argues in this respect that "the reenactments of combat trauma exist outside time; they abide in an eternal present; they fail to distinguish now from then" (440). Lawrence Langer also argues that traumatic experience serves to problematise conceptions of temporal progression. He posits a distinction between "durational" and chronological" time, and describes

the difference between the chronological current, which flows until we channel it between the permanent banks of historical narrative, and durational persistence, which cannot overflow the blocked

reservoir of its own moment and hence never enters what we call the stream of time. Or at least not until I alter it by trying to write about it as if it had a before, a during, and an after. (15-16)

Langer argues that because trauma is distinguished by its “durational” quality, it constitutes “an always-present past” impervious to the progression of “chronological” time (15): “time as chronology,” he claims, “does not and cannot heal the wounds of time as duration” (18). Like Bell, Langer contrasts the persistence of trauma with narrative attempts to contain it, and he too discusses the reliance of narratives on closure and chronology; “most writing cannot exist without the temporal succession that violates the uniquely imprisoned persistence” of trauma, he claims (16).

Memory and “Something Else”

Thus far, I have examined war trauma’s challenge to chronology with reference to public narratives and representations. These observations can be seen to apply not only to the realm of textual representations, but also to memory. In his discussion of the “durational” quality of trauma, Langer implies both that memory is structured by the same temporal progression that informs narrative, and that trauma serves to disrupt this structuring principle. Like Bell, he contrasts the containment of public narratives with the atemporal persistence of individual trauma:

durational time relentlessly stalks the memory of the witness, imprinting there moments immune to the ebb and flow of chronological time. No public ritual can ease the sting of such private recall, which persists outside the frame of consolation or closure. (22)

An implication of Langer's position is that because trauma confounds chronology and disrupts the structures of memory, it presents a challenge to subjectivity. This point is made explicitly by Dominick LaCapra, who argues that "trauma brings about a lapse or rupture in memory that breaks continuity with the past, thereby placing identity in question to the point of shattering it" (*History* 9). When Stein witnesses his men under the influence of "a crazy sort of blood lust," the narrator notes that it is "a scene which would stay with him the rest of his life" (339). While the text does not directly explore the impact of this experience on Stein's post-war identity, it implies that it will continue to haunt him, dictating his experience of history and selfhood. Although *The Thin Red Line* is set entirely within the theatre of war, episodes such as this demonstrate that the novel's scope includes the ongoing challenge to identity posed by war trauma.

The Thin Red Line examines men's attempts to contain and disavow traumatic experiences through containing narratives. However, it suggests further that this very attempt at containment is precisely what ensures the tenacity of trauma; the persistence of trauma is related to the fact that narrative accounts inevitably fail to contain it. In constructing stories about their experience, the men in the novel are both distanced from their encounter with lack and further bound to it. Langer and Silverman both examine the notion that trauma resists representation. Langer traces its gradual progression from "an always-present past" through "a presented past" to its eventual status as "a represented past," asking "what is lost during [these] transitions?" (15). His observation accentuates the transformations invariably involved in any attempt to narrativise trauma, and posits a gulf between trauma and representation. Silverman also examines this divide in her account of the Freudian concept of "binding," which she describes as "the process whereby [memories] are anchored to signifiers, and consequently to meaning" (64):

The memories in question are totally transformed by this binding operation; indeed, it might be more accurate to say that something else is put in place of the original hallucinatory mnemonic traces. That 'something else' is a signified, or rather a cluster of signifieds. (64)

In describing the process by which traumatic memories are transformed into "something else," Silverman proposes that the attempt to narrativise and ascribe meaning to trauma involves a metonymic substitution. This substitution, she suggests, is responsible for the non-equivalence of traumatic memories and the narrative structures deployed in attempts to contain them.

Silverman's formulation of the substitution involved in attempts to contain trauma provides a useful model with which to read one of *The Thin Red Line's* most explicit examinations of the disparity between traumatic experience and representation. After killing a man, a character named Bead is "ashamed and embarrassed" and filled with "horror" (178), but he soon attempts to disavow the traumatic aspects of his encounter:

He tried to put into his eyes all the fierce toughness of a man just returned from killing an enemy. [...] They walked on down in silence, Bead aware with a kind of horrified disgust that already he was fitting the killing of the Japanese man into the playing of a role; a role without anything, no reality, of himself or anything else. It hadn't been like that at all. (178-79)

Bead's experience provides a clear example of the failure of narrative structures to contain trauma. His observation that the role he has adopted reflects "no reality, of himself or anything else" attests to the fact that it does not constitute a mimetic representation of his trauma, but rather "something else." Later, he thinks that "he could look at it now without pain, perhaps even with pride, in a way, because now it was only an idea like a scene in a play" (185). However, in substituting a fiction for the emotions engendered by his

disruptive experience, Bead ensures that the trauma of the episode eludes both representation and memory. This substitution may be partly responsible for any later recurrence of the trauma he has evidently failed to process adequately.

In substituting a fictive device for the experience of trauma, Bead is alienated from the emotional content of his encounter. Other episodes in the novel suggest that this substitution does not necessarily follow traumatic experiences, but may occur contemporaneously with them. In her account of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Cathy Caruth describes the way in which “the overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess, in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them” (“Recapturing” 151):

Yet what is particularly striking in this singular experience is that its insistent reenactments of the past do not simply serve as testimony to an event, but may also, paradoxically enough, bear witness to a past that was *never fully experienced as it occurred*. Trauma, that is, does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is *not yet fully owned*. (“Recapturing” 151, emphases added)

Bead’s traumatic encounter ceases to be “fully owned” by him as soon as he substitutes it with a framing narrative, but two other episodes suggest that trauma may “never [be] fully experienced.” Welsh prides himself on his cynicism and lack of sympathy. In the course of an altruistic act which compromises this self-image and places his life in danger, the narrator notes that “it had no more reality for Welsh than a movie. He was John Wayne and Tella was John Agar” (257); the description echoes Bead’s acknowledgment of his role’s lack of “reality.” Bell also compares his experience to a movie: “to John Bell [...] it was all once again like some scene from a movie, a very bad, cliché, third-rate war movie. It could hardly have anything to do with death” (279). These episodes suggest another reason why

trauma may never be fully present in either the structures of memory or representations of men's combat experience: having been experienced only through the filter of coping and framing devices, trauma must always remain alien, however intrusive and persistent it may be. In Chapters Five and Six of this thesis, I explore further Caruth's notion that trauma constitutes an absence of experience, rather than an intense or heightened form of it.

Conclusion

"There's only a thin red line between the sane and the mad." The fact that this "old middlewestern saying" constitutes one of *The Thin Red Line's* two epigraphs may lead us to expect that the text contains representations of both madness and sanity. However, it is debatable whether the novel succeeds in representing "the mad." While the novel certainly examines men's encounters with potential dissolution, it is difficult to identify many episodes which depict explicitly the experience of insanity. In concluding this chapter, I will argue that *The Thin Red Line's* clearest attempt to portray a male character who has crossed the "thin red line" into madness constitutes a rupture in the text. In its challenge to the chronology and linearity of the narrative, this rupture serves to highlight precisely those aspects of the bulk of the text which preclude the representation of male lack and trauma.

For almost its entire length, *The Thin Red Line* adopts a linear, chronological narrative approach. Although it depicts the thoughts and feelings of its characters, it does so through an omniscient narrator. However, in a passage depicting a character named McCron's experience of traumatic, involuntary reenactment, the text deviates briefly from this consistent narrative style, segueing from an omniscient point of view to the speaking position of McCron himself. The passage also shifts abruptly from the present to the past, violating the chronological and temporal structure of the narrative:

McCron took another one of his fits. [...] While they rushed to him and tried to straighten him out and soothe him, he screamed at them half in incomprehensible gibberish, half in lucid phrases. When they first stood up Wynn screamed 'O my God!' in a voice of terrible recognition with the blood spurting a foot from his throat, and had gone down. Nineteen. Only nineteen. Next to him Earl went down in silence because his face had been torn open to a mass of red. He was twenty. Further to the left the other two Darl and Gwenne had gone down too yelling 'I'm killed! I'm killed!' All of them at once, in a matter of seconds. And then the others. All the others. He had tried to help them. He had tried to protect them. I tried. I tried. Finally they got him to stop screaming [...]. (396)

This passage's violation of the text's representational strategy enables the novel's most vivid and disturbing portrayal of war trauma, powerlessness and male lack. McCron's cries are the only declarations in the novel which are not framed by quotation marks. This fact suggests that the text here strains to convey the singularity of trauma, the impossibility of speaking for others. In its evocation of trauma's singular and personal nature, and in its challenge to notions of temporality and memory, the passage succeeds where the majority of the text cannot. It serves, then, to accentuate the novel's failings.

The Thin Red Line explores the notion that the singular, individual nature of war trauma may be dissipated through public histories and discourses which seek to disavow the phenomenon of male lack. It also suggests that the containment, linearity, and chronology characteristic of narrative are inconsistent with men's inability to consign trauma to enclosed frameworks. Nevertheless, it is itself a linear narrative. These tensions permeates the text, which exhibits a distrust of its own authority, and a suspicion that rather than being a successful depiction of male madness, lack and trauma, it can only hope to be "something else." Jones dedicates *The Thin Red Line* "cheerfully" and sarcastically

to those greatest and most heroic of all human endeavours, WAR and WARFARE; may they never cease to [...] provide us with the heroes, the presidents and the leaders, the monuments and museums which we erect to them in the name of PEACE.

Apparently, Jones suspects that ultimately his work may merely constitute one of the many “monuments” to war, and may be employed for ideological purposes to support discourses of militancy and male heroism. The readings of Giles, Bellow and Volpe would seem to prove the validity of this scepticism.

In a “Special Note” which prefaces the text, Jones claims that “naturally, any resemblance to anything anywhere is certainly not intended.” The novel’s final sentence also calls into question the novel’s “resemblance” to either actual events or the traumatic memories of veterans. Beginning and ending with statements which highlight its artifice, *The Thin Red Line* strives to ensure that it will be read neither as a source of knowledge regarding war trauma, nor as a reliable substitute for the actual experience. The novel suggests that the defining feature of war trauma is a form of otherness and difference, a “strange, insane” irrationality which cannot be conveyed through narrative:

They had crossed a strange line; they had become wounded men; and everybody realised, including themselves, dimly, that they were now different. [...] this had been done to them, without warning, without explanation, perhaps damaging them irreparably; and now they were wounded men; and now explanation was impossible. They had been initiated into a *strange, insane, twilight fraternity* where *explanation would be forever impossible*. [...] Tenderness was all that could be given, and, like most of the self-labelled human emotions, it meant nothing when put alongside *the intensity of their experience*. (46, emphases added)

Although this passage refers specifically to physical trauma, it neatly summarises the shock and the elusiveness of war trauma, its refusal to be either known in the present or relegated to the past; “explanation would be forever impossible” is a formulation which evokes both the irrationality and the atemporal persistence of war trauma. The reference to a “fraternity” of traumatised men echoes Rosenberg’s description of the discursive mechanisms which enable men to speak of war experience and construct “texts of identity” (46). Contrary to Rosenberg, *The Thin Red Line* posits the impossibility of such communication, foregrounding instead its own participation in a textual and discursive network which must invariably fail to articulate or reflect “the intensity of [veterans’] experience.” “These men had crossed a line,” claims the narrative voice, “and it was useless to try and reach them” (48).

Chapter Five

History, Alienation and the Trauma of Survival in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*

'Remembering' or 'not remembering' simply means making decisions about the reality to be produced.

Klaus Theweleit¹

Of itself, the shocking physical experience of the explosion [...] had been almost identically the same for them as for those other ones who had gone on with it and died. The only difference was that now these unexpectedly and illogically, found themselves alive again.

*The Thin Red Line*²

In 1833, Carlyle observed that the history of the universe is an infinite sacred book that all men write and read and try to understand, and in which they are also written.

Jorge Luis Borges³

In chapter four, I argued that *The Thin Red Line* foregrounds its own artifice and exhibits a certain anxiety regarding its representational success. I concluded that the one passage in the novel which seems to convey something of the otherness and disruptive power of trauma is distinguished by its deviation from a standard, realist narrative approach. This suggests that if war trauma may be represented, it demands unconventional

¹ Klaus Theweleit, "The Bomb's Womb and the Genders of War," *Gendering War Talk*, ed. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993) 308.

² James Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (1963; London: Sceptre-Hodder & Stoughton, 1998) 46.

³ Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 231.

narrative techniques and structures. In this chapter, I examine Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and argue that its non-linear structure and use of seemingly fantastic concepts such as "flying saucers and traveling [sic] in time" (39) enable it to explore aspects of traumatic experience that resist representation in more 'realistic' narrative forms. Tracing the traumatised subject's ambivalent engagement with time and history, the novel suggests that the demands of historical discourse may constitute "cultural silencers" (Culbertson 170) which ensure that the very irrationality and atemporality characteristic of war trauma must remain unspeakable. In order to establish a context in which to approach *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s treatment of these issues, this chapter begins by considering Samuel Hynes's study of war memoirs and narratives, *The Soldiers' Tale*, tracing Hynes's ambivalent conception of the relationships between truth, history, and the individual.

Hynes asserts the "authority of ordinary men's witness" (1), and argues that soldiers' participation in war accords their narratives a certain privileged status. Significantly, Hynes traces this authority to the fact that war experience constitutes a form of engagement with history:

For most men who fight, war is their one contact with the world of great doings. [...] [F]or ordinary men—the men who fight our wars—there will probably be only that one time when their lives interact with history, one opportunity to act in great events. Not to alter those events—no single soldier affects a war, or even a battle—but simply to be there, *in* history. So men feel a need to say, like the ubiquitous Kilroy, 'I was there.' (2, emphasis in original)

For Hynes, these assertions of participation in history constitute a primary source of sorts, and can themselves contribute to conceptions of history; he notes that "because wars exist in history, personal narratives of war must add to our historical knowledge" (285).

However, a certain tension runs through *The Soldiers' Tale*. Although Hynes argues that war narratives are both influenced by history and capable of contributing to historical knowledge, he notes that his own text "is *not a history* of war, or even of narratives of war, but a more personal engagement with the subject" (xiii, emphasis added); this engagement, it becomes apparent, is influenced by Hynes's own war experience. He argues, too, that in contrast to "the accounts that appear in newspapers and history books," war narratives "tell a different story, one that is quite often ahistorical, even anti-historical" (11). His original assertion of the authority of soldiers to bear witness to history is later qualified. Significantly, "memory and language" feature in his admission that soldiers' narratives may not be easily equated with "historical truth":

We are confronted with an apparent contradiction here: the man-who-was-there asserts his authority as the only true witness of his war; but the truth that he claims to tell is compromised by the very nature of memory and language. (25)

These observations inform Hynes's assertion that "we don't need to call [war narratives'] convergence of witnesses historical truth, if that seems too confident; call it instead the recoverable past of war" (25). *The Soldiers' Tale*, then, argues for the capacity of the individual witness to observe and inform history, while simultaneously positing language and memory as barriers to the production of "historical truth," a concept which is implicitly interrogated throughout the text.

If Hynes has difficulty establishing the degree of authority that we should accord to war memoirs which explicitly "make absolute claims for their authority" (1), the process is further complicated when approaching *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a text which it is difficult to characterise as fiction, memoir, reportage, science fiction, or autobiography. Containing elements of each of these literary forms, the novel serves to highlight the artifice of any

distinction between them. Further, its metafictional reflexivity and its blend of historical 'facts' and apparent fantasy serve to make the task of distinguishing between Vonnegut's inventions and 'what really happened' extremely problematic. Reading *Don Quixote*, Borges notes that "Cervantes takes great pleasure in confusing the objective and the subjective, the world of the reader and the world of the book" (*Labyrinths* 229). The same can certainly be said of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, whose first-person narrator, claiming to be Vonnegut himself, both introduces the body of the text and makes occasional appearances throughout the story, his fortunes mirroring those of the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim.⁴ Indeed, Lawrence Broer notes that there are "those who confuse Vonnegut with Billy Pilgrim" (86).

Just as Hynes argues that men's participation in historical events gives rise to the "need to say [...] 'I was there'" (2), *Slaughterhouse-Five* depicts Billy's need to bear witness to his imbrication with the violence of history. Recovering from a near-death experience, he testifies to an uncaring historian: "it was now that Billy Pilgrim spoke up intelligently. 'I was there,' he said" (165). Significantly, Billy's choice of words accords not only with Hynes's account of war narratives, but with another episode in the novel which confounds any distinction a reader may wish to draw between fiction and fact in the text. In a passage describing Billy's experiences in the immediate aftermath of the Dresden bombing, Vonnegut's narrative voice again intrudes: "I was there. O' Hare was there. We had spent the last two nights in the blind innkeeper's stable" (184). The resonance between Billy's and Vonnegut's assertions testifies to the manner in which fiction and the reporting of historical 'facts' are intertwined throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It also serves, paradoxically, to both highlight the text's privileged access to historical knowledge, while simultaneously undermining the notion of a historical truth free of subjective distortion and

⁴ Unless otherwise specified, the term "Vonnegut" is used in this chapter to refer to the first-person narrator of *Slaughterhouse-Five* rather than its author.

narrative framing. The text, then, exhibits the same tentative claim to historical authority that Hynes identifies in war narratives, and the same ambivalence: "All this happened, *more or less*," Vonnegut informs us in the first sentence. "The war parts, anyway, are *pretty much* true" (1, emphasis added).

Slaughterhouse-Five, then, is framed by a qualified declaration of its own veracity, a declaration supported by Vonnegut's assertion that "[he] was there" (184). However, the fact that Vonnegut was present at the bombing of Dresden gives rise to several questions: Why is it necessary for him to employ the figure of Billy Pilgrim in order to depict his own experience? Would simple reportage not have sufficed? What aspects of the experience could not have been conveyed in that manner? Why should a text which is concerned with portraying a real traumatic experience of the violence of history contain sections which portray the protagonist's abduction by aliens? Is it possible, indeed, that the fictional and fantastic elements of the text may serve to convey "historical truth" more effectively than a straightforward, linear narrative account? This chapter will argue that the non-linear structure of the novel, and its inclusion of science fiction elements are, rather than mere distractions from the task of conveying historical truth, crucial to its success in representing both the effect of trauma on memory, and the manner in which traumatic experience may resist representation in realist narratives and linear histories. I will argue, too, that the novel's narrative strategies are necessitated by the strange logic of traumatic memories, whose incessant presence may paradoxically constitute a form of absence and discontinuity, and a challenge to conceptions of progress, chronology, and history. I will begin to explore these questions through an examination of the novel's first chapter, where Vonnegut describes his own struggle to find a narrative framework in which to situate his experience and memories of the Dresden bombing.

Chronology and The Persistent Elusiveness of Trauma

Describing the prolonged gestation period of his planned “famous Dresden book” (3), Vonnegut alludes to the paradox that although his war experience constitutes a defining and crucial moment in his life, it nevertheless refuses to yield up its secrets, to be recalled or transformed into narrative. “When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen,” he observes. “But not many words came from my mind then—not enough of them to make a book, anyway. And not many words come now, either, when I have become an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls” (2).

The tension between Vonnegut’s desire to relate his experience and his corresponding inability to access memories of it is a phenomenon which many writers identify as a defining characteristic of trauma. Cathy Caruth notes that “the ability to recover the past is [...] closely and paradoxically tied up, in trauma, with the inability to have access to it” (“Recapturing” 152), and Judith Lewis Herman argues that “the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (*Trauma and Recovery* 1). Roberta Culbertson asserts that “violence and trauma [...] leave the survivor preoccupied with the memory of it, which itself seems both absent and entirely too present” (169), and Dominick LaCapra argues that “with respect to trauma, memory is always secondary since what occurs is not integrated into experience or directly remembered” (*History* 21). Vonnegut’s observations regarding the elusiveness and inscrutability of his Dresden memories may therefore be read as evidence of the traumatic nature of his war experience. They also indicate that the experience resists direct conscious access, and must instead be “reconstructed from its effects and traces” (LaCapra *History* 21). It is significant in this respect that Vonnegut

contacts an old friend for “some help remembering stuff” (4), a description which resonates with *The Thin Red Line*’s account of collective acts of remembrance.

A crucial aspect of Vonnegut’s struggle to describe his traumatic Dresden experience is the manner in which his story resists closure and containment. “I think of how useless the Dresden part of my memory has been, and yet how tempting Dresden has been to write about,” he notes (2). This apparent contradiction, he continues, reminds him of a song whose repetitive, looping structure (in which the ending of one cycle constitutes the beginning of another) ensures that it continues “on to infinity” (3). This structure is, of course, reproduced in *Slaughterhouse-Five* itself, whose non-linear narrative concludes with an episode which refers us back to an earlier part of the text, and so on. Vonnegut also relates his effort to map out the story in graph form, noting that he “had *outlined* the Dresden story many times” (4, emphasis added); this description evokes his futile attempt to impose boundaries on an experience which resists containment. He describes one such effort, in which “one end of the wallpaper was the beginning of the story, and the other end was the end” (5). However, even this description of an attempt to contain the story itself refuses to be contained, instead bleeding into another narrative. “The end, where all the lines stopped, was a beetlefield on the Elbe” (5), Vonnegut notes, continuing the story by relating his return from the war and concluding with a repetition of his earlier statement, that “now [...] [he’s] an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls” (6). Later, he claims that he “must have written five thousand pages by now, and thrown them all away” (13), a statement which again indicates his inability to contain his traumatic experience within a bounded, finite narrative framework.

The struggle that Vonnegut describes centres on a certain incommensurability between the experience he wishes to relate and the narrative devices he employs in the attempt to do so. He suggests, that is, that his earlier attempts at narrativisation failed to

reflect some essential quality of the experience, and that it may have been precisely their linear, contained quality that prevented them from doing so. Culbertson notes that traumatic memories “appear in nonnarrative forms” (169), and that trauma “live[s] on in the victim survivor in ways that confound ordinary notions of memory and narrative, or to which ordinary narrative is simply inadequate” (171). A crucial aspect of Culbertson’s formulation of this incommensurability is her emphasis on the notion of time. For the victim of trauma, she argues, “violation seems to continue in a reverberating present that belies the supposed linearity of time and the possibility of *endings*” (170, emphasis added). The notion that traumatic memories cannot easily be reconciled with standard conceptions of linear, chronological time is, once again, a common feature of writings on trauma. John Talbott notes that “the reenactments of combat trauma exist outside time; they abide in an eternal present; they fail to distinguish now from then” (439), and LaCapra argues that “trauma brings about a lapse or rupture in memory that breaks continuity with the past” (*History* 9). Caruth twice characterises trauma as a “breach” and a “break in the mind’s experience of time” (*Unclaimed* 4, “Traumatic Departures” 32). Langer also refers to the incommensurability of trauma and narrative, describing

the lack of a language to confront the difference between the chronological current, which flows until we channel it between the permanent banks of historical narrative, and durational persistence, which cannot overflow the blocked reservoir of its own moment and hence never enters what we call the stream of time. (15)

The incessant disruptive force of trauma is, then, often characterised as an affront to the very distinction between past and present which informs linear narratives and histories.

These formulations suggest a way of reading Vonnegut’s failed attempts at containment and narrativisation: his traumatic history refuses to obey the logic of memory

and narrative because it exists on a different plane altogether, one structured not by linearity and presence, but rather by atemporality and absence. His inability to finish his “Dresden book” therefore attests to the fact that trauma problematises his engagement with time and history. Three other episodes in the self-reflexive first chapter support such a reading. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is replete with allusions and references to other cultural texts; the cyclical song which reminds Vonnegut of his repetitive, inscrutable memories is one example. Two other texts alluded to in the first chapter are *Céline and His Vision* and the Gideon Bible. Both are apparently invoked due to their concern with time. Vonnegut notes that Céline was himself a soldier, “until his skull was cracked. After that he couldn’t sleep, and there were noises in his head” (18). A consequence of this, Vonnegut implies, is that “time obsessed [Céline]” (18); the parallels with Vonnegut’s situation are clear (*Slaughterhouse-Five*’s title page also contains a Céline quotation). Searching the Bible “for tales of great destruction” (19), Vonnegut recounts the story of Lot’s wife, “turned to a pillar of salt” and paralysed as the result of the fact that “she *did* look back” (emphasis in original) at the site of her encounter with traumatic violence. “This [book] is a failure, and had to be,” Vonnegut claims later on the same page, “since it was written by a pillar of salt.” This declaration neatly encapsulates the incompatibility of the chronological imperatives of narrative, and a writer who is compelled to “look back” incessantly, to return repeatedly to the site of his own trauma.

The third episode which suggests that Vonnegut’s narrative difficulties can be traced to his problematic engagement with time and history concerns his experience of the present:

We went to the New York World’s Fair, saw what the past was like, according to the Ford Motor Company and Walt Disney, saw what the future would be like, according to General Motors. And I asked myself about the present: how wide it was, how deep it was, how much was mine to keep. (16)

Vonnegut's references to multinational companies convey a sense in which he feels estranged from history, from a conception of time and society dictated by social structures which exceed him. The passage implies that these constructions of history (and they are literally that) do not reflect Vonnegut's own disjointed temporal experience, which also undermines his sense of the present. Given that the past and the future have already been colonised by discursive systems, Vonnegut doubts his own hold over the present. The fact that he employs *spatial* metaphors in an attempt to define the present constitutes a symbolic demonstration of the incommensurability of his experience of time and the concepts with which he attempts to process that experience. Culbertson explores the notion that past traumatic experience may structure and permeate the present; "perhaps it shapes current events according to its template, itself unrecognized," she proposes (170). The passage concerning the World's Fair suggests that the present is not Vonnegut's "to keep" because it is dictated by the imperatives of a violent history which paradoxically both exceeds and constitutes him.

The "adventure" of "people with peculiar opinions"

I have argued that *Slaughterhouse-Five's* first chapter is concerned primarily with exploring Vonnegut's struggle to find a narrative strategy capable of representing his problematic engagement with time, an engagement which is dictated by his traumatic exposure to the violence of history. Approaching the body of the text with this in mind, it becomes apparent that the tale of Billy Pilgrim is in many respects the same story. Whereas the very existence of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is testament to the fact that Vonnegut successfully devises (to some extent) a narrative strategy with which to represent his experience of trauma, Billy is less successful, and his story remains largely untold. When

he does attempt to convey aspects of his traumatic experience, he is disbelieved and his sanity is questioned.

Whereas Billy's trauma certainly originates in the violence of history, its persistent hold over him may be traced to the fact that his story cannot be reconciled with the narratives, discourses and histories which he encounters. In short, there is no cultural location in which Billy can situate his experience, and this renders him powerless, effectively silencing him. Arguably, it is the absence of any cultural or discursive reflection of his trauma which also ensures that Billy can never fully apprehend its impact upon him. Herman claims that "to hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in a common alliance" (*Trauma and Recovery* 9). In the absence of any such affirming "social context," Billy must search for an alternative discourse with which to frame his experience.

A clear demonstration of Billy's impotence with respect to official histories and discourses is provided when he encounters "a Harvard history professor named Bertram Copeland Rumfoord [...] working on a one-volume history of the United States Army Air Corps in World War Two" (158-59); the title of Rumfoord's planned text is evocative of the imposing authority and discursive power he commands. Recuperating from a near-fatal accident, Billy overhears Rumfoord describing his "problem about Dresden" (164-65):

His one-volume history of the Army Air Force in World War Two was supposed to be a readable condensation of the twenty-seven volume Official History of the Army Air Force in World War Two. The thing was, though, there was almost nothing in the twenty-seven volumes about the Dresden raid, even though it had been such a howling success. (165)

Rumfoord's "problem," then, is Billy's problem too. The episode demonstrates that Billy's trauma is located in a discursively constructed aporia, which ensures that in the culture of which he is a part, Billy's experience has never officially happened; Rumfoord notes that "from the official Air Force standpoint, it'll all be new." (165). Rumfoord's comment suggests that although history purports to portray the past objectively, historical viewpoints are themselves informed and dictated by their temporal and cultural location, and are therefore open to transformation and disruption.

It is at this point that Billy declares that he "was there" (165). While this simple statement barely begins to convey the nature or extent of his traumatic experience, it nevertheless meets with resistance from Rumfoord: "Rumfoord's ears wanted to treat the words as a foreign language that was not worth learning" (165). Despite the simplicity of Billy's message, his declaration still constitutes more of a "problem" for Rumfoord than the discursive silence of the twenty-seven volume Air Force History. Herman notes that "secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defence. [...] The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail" (*Trauma and Recovery* 8). While Rumfoord's status as a military historian enables him to manipulate history, Billy is powerless to do so, and must struggle to make himself heard:

There in the hospital, Billy was having an adventure very common among people without power in time of war: He was trying to prove to a wilfully deaf and blind enemy that he was interesting to hear and see. (166)

Arguably, this "adventure" constitutes Billy's primary psychic struggle.

Of course, the fact that Billy was present at the bombing of Dresden is the least controversial aspect of the story he attempts to relate. He believes that he has been abducted by aliens and taken to their planet, Tralfamadore. As Rumfoord begrudgingly accepts the truth of Billy's initial declaration, he quizzes him about the experience:

'You must have had mixed feelings, there on the ground.'

'It was all right,' said Billy. '*Everything* is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore.' (171, emphasis in original)

We do not hear Rumfoord's reaction to this startling news, but the passage serves to demonstrate the divergence and incommensurability of Billy's version of events and the official version of history symbolised by the military historian. Presumably, reading the volume would not enable Billy to make sense of his experience, and, conversely, Billy's story will not be related in the one-volume history

Later, Billy travels to New York and attempts to broadcast lessons about the "negligibility of death, and the true nature of time" (164) that he has learnt on Tralfamadore. He turns on a television,

looking for programs on which he might be allowed to appear. But it was too early in the evening for programs that allowed people with peculiar opinions to speak out. It was only a little after eight o'clock, so all the programs were about silliness or murder. (172)

The passage suggests the lack of discursive space open to voices which challenge or are dissonant with entrenched cultural norms and narratives, and again evokes Billy's impotence in the realm of discourse and culture. Later, he is briefly "allowed to speak" on radio before being "gently expelled from the studio during a commercial" (178). A

significant aspect of these episodes is their juxtaposition of the validity and earnestness of Billy's message with the violence and banality of the discourses he must contend with. Just as the prime-time "programs [are] about silliness or murder," the "news of the day" is "about power and sports and anger and death" (173). The radio show Billy intrudes on is a discussion of "whether the novel was dead or not," involving literary critics who argue that "the function of the novel might be [...] 'to provide touches of color in rooms with all-white walls,'" or "to describe blow-jobs artistically" (178). This satirical treatment of conceptions of "the novel" must be read in the context of Billy's own engagement with literature: the object of ridicule in this passage is not literature, but rather those who disregard its role in enabling individuals to question and transform their imagined relationships with society and history. I will examine the manner in which literature (and more specifically, the genre of science fiction) aids Billy's own transformation below.

Another episode in which Billy's earnest search for a discursive reflection of his own experience is contrasted with the violence and banality of mainstream cultural production concerns his visit to a "tawdry bookstore" on Times Square (172):

In the window were hundreds of books about fucking and buggery and murder, and a street guide to New York City, and a model of the Statue of Liberty with a thermometer on it. Also in the window, speckled with soot and fly shit, were four paperback novels by Billy's friend, Kilgore Trout. (172-73)

Kilgore Trout, "Billy's favorite living author" (87), produces works which depict time-travelling, abduction by aliens, and the oscillation between life and death, all phenomena which Billy believes himself to have experienced. For Billy, Trout's books constitute the most accurate reflection of his world and his psychic existence, the most sane representation of the relationship between humans, time and death available to him in a "ridiculous store" (175). However, his engagement with this cultural document once again

marks him out as pathological: when a store attendant notices Billy reading one of Trout's books, he "tell[s] the other clerks about the pervert who wanted to buy the window dressing" (176).

Billy's trip to the bookstore, with its competing and varying depictions of aspects of human existence, may be read as symbolic of his search for a narrative mode and framework in which to situate his trauma. The same argument can, of course, be made with reference to *Slaughterhouse-Five* itself, a novel which abounds with allusions to other texts and competing forms of discourse. In addition to the texts already discussed, it refers to a newspaper story, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, *Dresden, History, Stage and Gallery*, *Words for the Wind*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *The Execution of Private Slovik*, *Valley of the Dolls*, *Cinderella*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Destruction of Dresden*, a "monograph about [...] prisoners of war" by Howard W. Campbell, Jr. (139), "a copy of President Harry S. Truman's announcement to the world that an atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima" (159), several other Kilgore Trout novels, and, of course, *Slaughterhouse-Five* itself.

Slaughterhouse-Five can be read as an intertextual interrogation of a discursive field in which various competing and incommensurate texts reflect and construct reality, history and subjectivity in radically different ways. Truman's announcement, for example, is informed by an entirely different vision of time and history than *Cinderella*, with its mythic setting. Significantly, though, both texts are concerned with time. The two books about Dresden also tell vastly different stories; produced at different historical moments, their relationship resembles the discontinuity that Billy faces between his pre- and post-war lives. The various texts referred to in the novel present different levels of psychic existence and different forms of human experience: private and cultural, realistic and fantastic, utopian and dystopian, speculative and historical, conscious and unconscious. The novel,

then, can be seen to depict a set of competing discursive modes and interests, none of which corresponds entirely with Vonnegut's own fractured experience of history and trauma.

Science Fiction and "Reinvent[ion]"

Amidst the proliferation of cultural production alluded to in the novel, the vision of history and human existence that most resembles *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is, of course, the work of Kilgore Trout. One of Trout's books, *The Big Board* (173), closely mirrors elements of the plot of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and depicts "an Earthling man and woman who [are] kidnapped by extra-terrestrials [...] [and] put on display in a zoo" (174); this is, of course, precisely the fate of Billy Pilgrim. The title page of *Slaughterhouse-Five* also declares that it "IS A NOVEL SOMEWHAT IN THE TELEGRAPHIC SCHIZOPHRENIC MANNER OF TALES OF THE PLANET TRALFAMADORE, WHERE THE FLYING SAUCERS COME FROM." This, however, poses a problem: whereas the presence in *Slaughterhouse-Five* of historical facts—and tales of Vonnegut's own experiences—clearly aids its attempt to represent and make sense of history and trauma, the inclusion of science fiction elements is less easy to account for. What could the story of Billy's abduction by aliens possibly have to do with either the experience of trauma or its impact on subjectivity? If Vonnegut is attempting to report his experience in a truthful way, how is this attempt aided by the novel's diversion into the realm of the fantastic and the incredible? I will argue that Billy's belief in Tralfamadore should not be read purely as an indication of his loss of sanity. Rather, it attests to aspects of his traumatic experience which resist representation in realistic narrative modes. In order to approach the question of how *Slaughterhouse-Five's* use of science fiction enables its exploration of trauma,

memory, and history, it will be necessary to explore the role that science fiction (and concepts derived from it) plays in Billy's negotiation with his traumatic past.

In his struggle to find cultural texts which reflect his experience in any way, Billy turns to Trout's science fiction novels, "the only sort of tales he could read" (87). His engagement with these books is shown to be crucial to a renegotiation—with both culture and his own traumatic experience—which he must undergo upon returning from the war. Three years after returning to America, he commits himself to a "ward for nonviolent mental patients" (86). There, a fellow patient named Eliot Rosewater introduces him to Trout's work:

Rosewater was twice as smart as Billy, but he and Billy were dealing with similar crises in similar ways. They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war. [...] So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help. (87)

Significantly, literature functions for Billy and Rosewater as an aid in their reconceptualisation of both their own identities ("themselves") and the cultural and psychic spaces that they must inhabit ("their universe"). In the book store on Times Square, Billy peruses *The Big Board* and realises that "he *had* read it before—years ago, in the veteran's hospital" (173-74, emphasis in original). The fact that Billy's initial encounter with science fiction occurs in the context of a "ward for [...] mental patients" in a "veteran's hospital" suggests that Trout's novels function for him as a means of addressing psychic angst associated with the war, and also that they aid him in the healing process.

Crucially, Billy does not believe himself to have been abducted by aliens until after he has read *The Big Board*. When the abduction occurs—mirroring the plot of Trout's

novel—it provides him with a set of beliefs with which to make sense of his traumatic experience of temporal discontinuity:

Billy says that he first came unstuck in time in 1944, long before his trip to Tralfamadore. The Tralfamadorians didn't have anything to do with his coming unstuck. They were simply able to give him insights into what was really going on. Billy first came unstuck while World War Two was in progress. (26)

Billy's belief in Tralfamadore, then, provides a framework in which to situate his earlier traumatic war experience, an experience which, it is implied, has been responsible for him becoming "spastic in time" (20).

Although Billy's adoption of concepts from Trout's novel does not change his random experience of time and history (he still has "no control over where he is going next," 20), it does provide a means of accounting for it. Crucially, it also enables him to articulate his trauma for the first time. When Billy's wife asks him to "talk about the war," Billy replies that "it would sound like a dream," and responds to her further inquiries with monosyllabic answers before excusing himself and leaving the room (105). The only time that he relates his Dresden experience directly is on Tralfamadore. In an episode that resonates with the earlier passage, Billy again converses with a woman, "a mate [...] brought to him from earth" called Montana Wildhack (114). When Montana implores Billy to "tell [her] a story" (153), he actively chooses to relate his Dresden experience, even going so far as to recount a memory which had proved extremely difficult and painful for him to access in the context of his earthly existence. Indeed, the description of Billy's act of story-telling immediately follows an account of this traumatic experience of remembering. This fact suggests that Billy's belief in Tralfamadore plays a crucial role in his efforts to

confront the trauma of his past, and to somehow integrate that experience into his psychic framework.

An obvious and tempting interpretation of Billy's belief in Tralfamadore is that it represents nothing more than his descent into insanity and psychosis, his detachment from the realm of truth and reality. Indeed, in his work titled *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut*, Broer takes precisely this approach: "Billy is so crippled by the psychologically damaging blows he receives before, during, and after the war that he increasingly withdraws from reality and ultimately loses his sanity" (88). Of course, I would certainly not attempt to characterise Billy's belief that he has been abducted by aliens as evidence of a healthy and realistic psychic orientation to the world. However, there is an important sense in which Broer's dismissive reading of Billy's belief system fails to account for the fact that it is precisely this system which enables Billy to account for and communicate aspects of his psychic "reality" which had previously mystified and eluded him. By invoking a dichotomy between a world of objective reality and the realm of delusion and insanity, Broer denies the possibility of liminal states, and suggests that the engagement of individual subjects with history must always be conducted in the realm of the rational and the knowable if it is to be accorded the status of reflecting "reality."

Slaughterhouse-Five, however, represents Billy's statements about Tralfamadore as truthful declarations, which attest to aspects of his psychic existence that are denied representation in other narrative and discursive frameworks. Billy, of course, believes his statements to be a faithful description of reality. In the face of the disbelief of his family and community, he "insist[s] mildly that everything he had said on the radio was true" (22), and attempts to "persuade Barbara and everybody else that he was far from senile, that, on the contrary, he was devoting himself to a calling much higher than mere business" (25). More significantly, though, the veracity of Billy's statements is also implied in the novel

through the distinction it sets up between his belief in aliens, and his occasional forays into the realm of pure delusion. Lost behind enemy lines, Billy experiences “a delightful hallucination” (42), which the narrative voice explicitly contrasts with his real experience of temporal discontinuity: “this wasn’t time-travel. It had never happened, never would happen. It was the craziness of a dying young man with his shoes full of snow” (42). This delusional state is juxtaposed with Billy’s actual experience, as “the hallucination [gives] way to time-travel” (43). A later passage describes a dream that Billy has while “under morphine” (85), and again contrasts the content of the dream with his real experience of time travel. Lying unconscious after another traumatic incident, Billy “dream[s] millions of things, some of them true. The true things [are] time-travel” (135). While Vonnegut explicitly identifies false and fantastic beliefs, he at no stage refers to Billy’s statements about Tralfamadore as delusional. Indeed, in the introduction to the final chapter, Vonnegut expresses uncertainty as to whether or not “what Billy Pilgrim learned from the Tralfamadorians is true” (182).

Trauma and Transcendence

Billy is depicted in the novel as misinterpreted, and evidently Vonnegut sympathises with his inability to command belief through his unconventional account of history, time and trauma. However, reading Billy’s statements about Tralfamadore as expressions of his psychic reality gives rise to a further question: what truth could possibly be expressed in the form of concepts derived from science fiction such as abduction by aliens and time-travel? Through its exploration of the sense of removal and transcendence often associated with traumatic experience, Culbertson’s article on “Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling” suggests a possible approach to this problem. I noted that Billy’s rationale for refusing to relate his war experience to his wife concerns the fact that

“it would sound like a dream” (105). Hynes, too, suggests the incommensurability of civilian life and the experience of war; he argues that “war is so different from ordinary life as to seem, in recollection, *like a dream*; yet it makes that ordinary life feel somehow unreal” (*Soldiers*’ 282-83, emphasis added). One significant feature of Hynes’s statement is the implication that the qualitative difference between war and civilian life serves to problematise the latter; another is that Hynes’s reference to the dream-like nature of war memories suggests the foreign nature of the experience of war, its otherness, the sense in which it cannot be translated into the language of the civilian sphere.

Culbertson also employs the metaphor of the dream in her analysis of why trauma resists integration in narrative frameworks; she describes “the paradox of a known and felt truth that unfortunately obeys the logic of dreams rather than of speech [...]. It is a paradox of the distance of one’s own experience” (170). For Culbertson, the strange logic of trauma, and of a “sort of proto-memory” it gives rise to, cannot meet the “demands of narrative”; she goes so far as to characterise these demands as “cultural silencers to this sort of memory” (170). This incommensurability, she argues, is related to the fact that the experience of trauma is so radically different from normal experience as to constitute another kind of “reality”:

Thus the memory of trauma, or the knowledge of things past, is not merely of a wild and skewed time inaccessible except on its own terms, [...] but also the memory of other levels of reality [...]. This sort of memory is without language, perhaps without image. When such gross tools as language are brought to bear on the experience, the result appears to be metaphor, but it is not. (176)

Accentuating the mismatch between language and traumatic memories, Culbertson’s formulation alludes to the difficulty inherent in reading—or, more appropriately, translating—narrative or linguistic accounts of traumatic experience, which must inevitably

constitute distortions and transformations of an experience entirely other to language. For Culbertson, if a description of traumatic experience is couched in terms which render it seemingly fantastic or unrealistic, this attests not to the transformation and distortion of memory, but rather to its ability to preserve something of the original experience of otherness and detachment associated with trauma. Significantly, she characterises such experience as a form of transcendence. "Pain and extremity often lead to an experience of transcendence, of levels of experience beyond the ordinary," she argues (176), noting that the "the survival experience [...] involves states of consciousness, reported experiences, and visions that parallel those reported by mystics" (177). For Culbertson, the memory of trauma is of a foreign, strange place, of having "been removed at some point" from "the level of the everyday, functioning, speaking self" (176). "In short," she claims, "survivors are unwilling, uninitiated, unprepared, unschooled mystics" (178).

Culbertson's formulation of the transcendence associated with trauma enables an alternative reading of Billy's description of Tralfamadore: his apparently delusional assertion that he has been taken to another planet in fact constitutes an attempt to mimetically represent his experience of transcendence. There are at least two respects in which Billy's belief in Tralfamadore accords with Culbertson's account of trauma and transcendence. Culbertson argues that trauma may lead to a sense of having "been removed." Billy's description of his trip to Tralfamadore is also one of forced removal, of having been "kidnapped" (62), a term which suggests the passivity of the experience. This passivity is also apparent in the description of his "will [being] paralyzed by a zap gun" (65).

Culbertson characterises traumatic transcendence as the experience of another place, another level of "reality." Herman also argues that "people in a state of terror are not in a normal state of consciousness" ("Crime" 6). Caruth, arguing that trauma gives rise to

psychic states which cannot be easily accommodated within the framework of normal conscious experience, also employs a spatial metaphor:

The history that a flashback tells [...] is [...] a history that literally *has no place*, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood. ("Recapturing" 153, emphasis in original)

Billy's description of an *alien* planet that most humans cannot perceive may therefore be read as an attempt to describe his experience of a strange place and state of being which does not correspond with the "reality" experienced by his "everyday, functioning, speaking self" (Culbertson 176). While this planet is, of course, physically remote from Billy's normal experience, it also exposes him to an entirely different vision of "reality," an alternative conception of time, history, and mortality; this crucial point will be explored further below.

Tralfamadore, then, may be read as a description of a state of being that Billy experiences as a result of his trauma, a place which cannot be described in terms of the concepts normally employed to map out and describe human consciousness. Earlier, I quoted Culbertson's assertion that descriptions of trauma may appear to be metaphorical, whereas they in fact constitute accounts of transcendence. It is tempting, indeed, to read Billy's account of Tralfamadore as evidence of the fact that he has had an experience *like*, or *similar to*, being removed to another level of reality. Culbertson's insight suggests, though, that it may be read as describing an actual psychic event; for Billy, it was not *like* inhabiting another level of existence, but rather the experience of doing so. In remembering and recounting his extraterrestrial journey, Billy may be seen to be remembering a past experience of strangeness and transcendence, an experience which serves to undermine his engagement with both the present and the real; recall Hynes's declaration that war

memories may serve to make “ordinary life feel somehow unreal” (*Soldiers*’ 283). Framing his experience of transcendence in terms of his abduction by aliens enables Billy to access an inscrutable past. Culbertson’s description of “a wild and skewed time inaccessible *except on its own terms*” (176, emphasis added) is consistent with the fact that Billy is able to approach his traumatic history consciously only by situating it in a framework which reflects the very sense of estrangement associated with his original experience of trauma. His belief in Tralfamadore, then, enables him to recall actively and describe painful memories which had previously only surfaced unbidden and “unexpectedly” (148).

An important passage describes the emergence of one such reminiscence, as Billy is reminded by a barber shop quartet of four German guards surveying the wreckage of Dresden. Involuntarily reminded of “an association with an experience he had had long ago” (152), Billy realises that “he [has] a great big secret inside, and he could not imagine what it was” (149). “Affected” and unsettled by the association, Billy attempts to explore this secret, and is able to remember his experience “shimmeringly” (152). However, the description of this act of recall segues into the passage in which he more fully describes the experience to Montana on Tralfamadore. This suggests that he can actively access the “secret” of his painful memory only by framing it in terms of the traumatic transcendence associated with the original experience. The sense of removal and unreality which his description of Tralfamadore serves to represent is, then, essential to his act of recollection.

Culbertson’s argument also provides a means of accounting for the manner in which Billy’s descriptions of Tralfamadore are received and interpreted. Accounts of remembered trauma, she argues, are often “seen as pathological detachments from the real, rather than as remembered flights into the super-real, which is, of course, what they are” (188). Billy’s memories, of course, are viewed as pathological both by the other characters in the novel, and by Broer. Broer asserts that Billy “increasingly withdraws from reality”

(88), and that his “conversion to Tralfamadorian fatalism [...] assures his schizophrenic descent into madness” (87). His claims can be seen to rely on a narrow conception of trauma and psychic experience which is unable to allow for the very strangeness and otherness of Billy’s trauma. The fact that Billy is only able to express this trauma in unconventional terms ensures that his “super-real” experience is denied by those around him, who, ironically, are unable to read his account of Tralfamadore as signifying anything other than his inability to engage with “reality.”

“Random visits”: Caruth and the Atemporality of Trauma

I have argued that Billy’s belief in Tralfamadore serves to situate his traumatic experience in a framework that renders it accessible to consciousness, thereby facilitating his engagement with a previously inscrutable past. Once again, there are parallels between Billy’s situation and the narrative strategy of *Slaughterhouse-Five* itself. By juxtaposing passages describing Billy’s war experience and civilian life with accounts of his time-travel and encounter with aliens, the text is able to explore the manner in which history, trauma and the vicissitudes of memory may structure the subject in ways that cannot be easily accounted for either in the realm of consciousness or that of realist, linear narrative. In other words, the most radical, outlandish and apparently fantastic aspects of *Slaughterhouse-Five* may be precisely what enable its exploration of psychic phenomena which exceed the prescribed limits of historical and psychiatric discourse, both of which are depicted in the novel as being incommensurate with Billy’s experience.

Just as Billy’s belief that he has been abducted by aliens enables him to confront and represent his traumatic experience, so too the novel’s unconventional form is crucial to its examination of the impact of trauma on conceptions of time and reality. In this respect,

perhaps the most significant feature of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is its non-linear structure, the way in which the narrative itself is temporally discontinuous, leaping from one moment to another with no apparent logic or structuring principle. Rather than tracing Billy's story chronologically, the novel mirrors and resembles Billy's own experience of "pay[ing] random visits" to his "birth and death [and] [...] all the events in between" (20). I will argue that this narrative strategy serves to convey both the impossibility of locating trauma in any one moment alone, and the impact of this lack of temporal specificity on the traumatised subject's experience of time and history.

Broer argues that "the horrors of war that prove most traumatic of all to Billy are the destruction of Dresden and the death of his best friend" (92), but it is difficult to find any textual evidence to support this claim. Indeed, Billy "first [comes] unstuck in time" (37) long before either of these two incidents, shortly after he survives the "famous Battle of the Bulge" (28), an experience which is alluded to only briefly and elliptically. Billy's presence at the Dresden bombing is certainly depicted as traumatic, but the novel never explicitly identifies the experience as the source of either his psychic disturbances or his temporal wanderings. Indeed, it is not even possible to claim that Billy's war experience is solely responsible for his traumatised state; Broer is right to characterise Billy's life as "a continuity of terror stretching all the way back to childhood [...] and forward in time to his death" (88-9), although "continuity" seems a singularly inappropriate description of Billy's disjointed series of traumatic experiences. It is futile, then, to attempt to trace Billy's problems to any one specific traumatic moment. This fact suggests that the novel represents trauma not as a terrifying, momentary experience that can be identified and recalled, but as something else entirely.

Caruth's work provides a useful model with which to trace *Slaughterhouse-Five's* representation of trauma. I noted earlier that much of the existing writing on trauma

displays a concern with time, and quoted LaCapra's assertion that "trauma brings about a lapse or rupture in memory that breaks continuity with the past, thereby placing identity in question" (*History* 9). Caruth, too, accentuates trauma's impact on identity, but her work is distinguished by its focus on two notions: that trauma derives its disruptive power precisely from the manner in which it exceeds specific moments, and that traumatic reminiscences attest to events which, paradoxically, have never been fully experienced. "What causes trauma," she argues, "is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat, but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time" ("Traumatic Departures" 32). Importantly, Caruth argues that this break ensures that trauma is itself not located in time, but rather in a temporal aporia which resists relegation to the realm of chronology and history. In other words, trauma is a phenomenon that is literally without a time, a precise temporal location that might serve to facilitate its identification.

Caruth argues, drawing on Freud, that trauma exists instead as a form of dialectic between moments, or, more precisely, as the lack of any such relationship. "Freud's temporal definition of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*," she argues, "seems to be an extension of his early understanding of the trauma as not being locatable in one moment alone but in the relation between two moments" ("Traumatic Departures" 41, n8). This insight informs her argument that trauma manifests itself not in moments or even the memory of moments, but rather in the way it resists comprehension and integration into consciousness. She claims that

trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on. (*Unclaimed* 4, emphasis in original)

Caruth suggests, then, that traumatic memories attest not to painful knowledge, but to the absence of any such conscious processing of experience. Crucially, she explicitly attributes the inscrutability of trauma to its lack of a temporal location:

The shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced *in time*, it has not yet been fully known. ("Traumatic Departures" 32, emphasis in original)

Caruth characterises trauma, then, as a rupture in time and consciousness which attests to an absence of conscious experience. Her allusion to the significance of "the threat of death" will be explored below.

Caruth's formulation accords with the manner in which *Slaughterhouse-Five* depicts trauma both through its juxtaposition of experiences and moments, and through its examination of the psychic mechanisms employed by Billy in his attempt to make sense of their apparent lack of cohesion and continuity. Trauma is not located in Billy's violent past, but rather permeates his entire existence, a "great big secret" (149) which structures and undermines his experience of time and identity. In keeping with Caruth's assertion that "trauma is not locatable in [a] simple violent or original event" (*Unclaimed* 4), *Slaughterhouse-Five* accords the same significance to Billy's pre- and post-war existence as it does to his Dresden experience. While the bombing of Dresden undoubtedly functions as the text's central episode, it is primarily explored through its psychic "effects and traces" (LaCapra *History* 21). Once again, this narrative approach mirrors the manner in which Billy's trauma is manifested as an elusive absence which is perceived only indirectly.

Death and the Trauma of Survival

In my summary of Caruth's position, I noted briefly the significance she accords to an encounter with mortality which she associates with trauma. Such encounters, of course, also play a crucial role in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The phrase that occurs most frequently in the text, "so it goes" (1), appears on the majority of the novel's pages, and in each instance immediately follows a reference to death of some kind. This fact alone proves that death is one of the text's central concerns. Caruth's work again proves useful in tracing the text's exploration of how traumatic near-death experiences serve to problematise acts of recall and narration, and even survival itself. Indeed, the most significant shared concern of Caruth's work and *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the idea that traumatic encounters with mortality may serve to taint and complicate the very act of survival, of living beyond the experience of apparent death.

Again, Caruth first explores this concept through a reading of Freud:

What is enigmatically suggested [by Freud] [...] is that the trauma consists not only in having confronted death, but in *having survived precisely, without knowing it*. What one returns to, in the flashback, is not the incomprehensibility of one's near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one's own survival. ("Traumatic Departures" 34, emphasis in original)

For Caruth, the act of survival may serve as a source of trauma precisely because of its "incomprehensibility," the fact that it cannot be grasped or known; anticipating death "too late" (32), consciousness fails to process the ongoing experience of life, which therefore constitutes a source of trauma. Once again, Caruth characterises trauma as residing in a problematic relationship, that between "destruction" and "survival." She argues that

trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival. It is only in recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience. ("Traumatic Departures" 29)

A significant feature of Caruth's argument is her insistence that trauma is manifested as "incomprehensibility" precisely because of the manner in which it confounds any sense of continuity between experiences of near-death and experiences of life. She suggests, in other words, that trauma constitutes an impassable breach in consciousness between the encounter with death, and the survival beyond that encounter.

Several passages in *Slaughterhouse-Five* either depict Billy's encounters with mortality or represent him as occupying liminal states. As a child, Billy experiences total darkness in a cave, and doesn't "even know whether he [is] still alive or not" (77). Importantly, this incident is juxtaposed narratively with his experience of a similarly tenuous distinction between death and life. As a prisoner of war, his "name and serial number" is recorded: "everybody was legally alive now. Before they got their names and numbers in that book, they were missing in action and probably dead. So it goes" (78). Later, two fellow prisoners discuss Billy's condition as he lies sedated under morphine. They describe him as "dead to the world ... but not actually dead" (91). "How nice," one of them muses, "to feel nothing, and still get full credit for being alive." The historian Rumfoord also characterises Billy's later experience in hospital as a form of death, describing him as "not a human being anymore" (164): "that's life," he claims sarcastically, "according to the medical profession. Isn't life wonderful?" Taking part in a military exercise, Billy and his fellow soldiers are "spotted from the air by a theoretical enemy. They were all theoretically dead now. The theoretical corpses laughed and ate a hearty noontime meal" (27).

These episodes do not explicitly relate Billy's encounters with mortality to his experience of temporal discontinuity. However, a crucial account of the beliefs he acquires while on Tralfamadore—contained in a letter he sends to a newspaper—does precisely this:

The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at this funeral. [...] It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever. (23)

This passage supports my earlier argument that Billy's belief in Tralfamadore enables him to articulate his experience of temporal discontinuity. Crucially, though, it is also an explicit demonstration of the manner in which this discontinuity is related to his encounters with mortality, his experiences of "appear[ing] to die." Later, recalling his experience of virtual death in military manoeuvres, "Billy [is] struck by what a Tralfamadorian adventure with death that had been, to be dead and to eat at the same time" (27). This incident, too, suggests that Billy's Tralfamadorian beliefs concerning the discontinuity of time primarily address his traumatic experiences of survival, of living in the face of apparent death. Of course, this notion may also be read in the structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five* itself. The text's primary narrative technique, juxtaposition, enables it to explore precisely the spaces and rifts between Billy's encounters with death, and his experience of continued existence and traumatic survival.

Just as Billy's belief in Tralfamadore enables him to express and contain his experience of traumatic transcendence, so too it enables him to account for the trauma of his survival, the inexplicability of his continued existence. Caruth notes that the need to account for such survival motivates "many traumatic narratives" (*Unclaimed 7*):

At the core of these stories, I would suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival. (*Unclaimed* 7)

Caruth here characterises narrative accounts of trauma in terms of the tension between survival and mortality that they address.

This tension between survival and mortality informs two crucial, resonant passages in *Slaughterhouse-Five* which exhibit its own competing imperatives, and which explore its self-declared “failure” (19) to meet those imperatives. The passages suggest that the inability to process consciously the experience of survival in the face of death leads to a gap in experience and knowledge, which in turn serves to problematise the narrative process. In the introductory chapter, Vonnegut addresses his publisher, suggesting that the experience of trauma resists narrative containment:

It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. (17)

Once again, Vonnegut’s situation mirrors that of Billy, who is silent upon witnessing the “destroyed” (154) city of Dresden:

There was nothing appropriate to say. One thing was clear: Absolutely everybody in the city was supposed to be dead, regardless of what they were, and that anybody that moved in it represented a flaw in the design. (154-55)

These excerpts, then, explore the experience of traumatic survival, of living in a time and place in which “everybody is supposed to be dead.” By juxtaposing descriptions of this inexplicable survival with assertions that there “is nothing intelligent to say” about it, they suggest that traumatic survival constitutes a form of psychic experience alien to both consciousness and discourse. With their emphasis on death and destruction, these passages can certainly be read as evidence of “the unbearable nature of an event” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 7). However, they can also be seen to attest to “the unbearable nature of its survival,” the manner in which the experience persists in the life of the witness, paradoxically demanding explanation while resisting any conscious processing. In their exploration of this bind, the passages serve as exemplary models of *Slaughterhouse-Five* itself, a text which depicts the incommensurate experiences of mortality and survival in its attempt to resolve a seemingly irreconcilable contradiction.

Conclusion

This chapter began by examining Hynes’s ambivalence with respect to the historical status of war narratives, which, he argues, reflect history only through the distortions of memory and language. It concludes with an assessment of *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s own ambivalent engagement with—and depiction of—the traumatic violence of history. I want to suggest that the structure and content of the novel raise questions about the relationship of the individual to history, and about the role played by narrative and discourse in structuring and dictating that relationship.

The first sentence of the novel's final chapter re-introduces Vonnegut's narrative voice, as he foregrounds the temporal and spatial context in which his act of writing occurs.

Robert Kennedy, whose summer home is eight miles from the home I live in all year round, was shot two nights ago. He died last night. So it goes. Martin Luther King was shot a month ago. He died, too. So it goes. And every day my government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes. (182)

While the passage again reveals the novel's concern with mortality, it also attests to Vonnegut's own participation in history, the manner in which he himself is subject to both its violence and its discursive distortions. Of course, this self-reflexivity also serves implicitly to insert the text itself into the realm of history. Paradoxically, however, *Slaughterhouse-Five* itself also constitutes a historical document of sorts, a representation of a past structured by trauma and absence. This double role resonates with the vision of history conveyed in the Borges quote which serves as an epigraph to this chapter: "In 1833, Carlyle observed that the history of the universe is an infinite sacred book that all men write and read and try to understand, and in which they are also written" (*Labyrinths* 231).

Slaughterhouse-Five can be read as an examination of these acts of reading and writing, of the way in which individuals interpret and translate historical forces which also serve to structure them. It suggests, however, that traumatic experiences of the violence of history may inscribe inscrutable traces in consciousness and memory, thereby rendering the past illegible. Through its intertextual interrogation of other forms of historical discourse, the novel also explores the way in which the traces and effects of trauma may exceed historical accounts and therefore escape representation. This discursive absence, it

suggests, arises precisely from the fact that trauma exists in the spaces and tensions *between* moments and places. In attempting to depict forms of psychic experience which have no time or place within consciousness, *Slaughterhouse-Five* attempts to give historical shape and narrative representation to phenomena alien to the very realm of historical knowledge, a discursive field which is structured and defined by its references to temporal and spatial locations.

Although the novel contains its own verdict that it is a “failure” (19), its non-linear narrative and its inclusion of concepts derived from science fiction arguably serve to represent the experience and effects of trauma in ways that other forms of more ‘realistic’ historical discourse could not hope to. In doing so, it presents a challenge to conceptions of history and truth. Caruth argues that this is true of all accounts of trauma:

I would propose that it is here, in the [...] encounter with trauma—both in its occurrence, and in the attempt to understand it—that we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history which is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference). Through the notion of trauma, [...] we can understand that a re-thinking of reference is not aimed at eliminating history, but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, of precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not. (“Unclaimed” 182, emphasis in original)

In arguing for the need to reconceptualise the relationship between history and knowledge, Caruth posits the notion that literary discourse provides a realm in which the “incomprehensibility” of trauma may attain representation. “If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience,” she argues, “it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (*Unclaimed* 3). Literature is able to explore this relationship, she suggests, by disregarding the demands of

direct historical reference. In proposing “a new mode of seeing and listening—a seeing and a listening *from the site of trauma*,” she argues that “the interest of [some literature] lies in how it explores the possibility of a faithful history in the very indirectness of [its] telling” (*Unclaimed* 27, emphasis in original). Caruth’s argument resonates with Hynes’s proposal that the literature of soldiers may be able to preserve or convey the history of trauma despite the fact “that is quite often ahistorical, even anti-historical” (*Soldiers*’ 11).

Just as the fantastic concepts of science-fiction enable Billy Pilgrim to reconceptualise his past, the fractured and tangential narrative approach of *Slaughterhouse-Five* enables its representation of the timelessness and placelessness of trauma. Acknowledging that “Freudian speculation [...] may not be scientific,” Harold Bloom nevertheless applauds Freud’s “refus[al] to be silent in the face of the unsayable” (113). Jonathan Rutherford proposes the necessity of developing a discourse “through which speech [might] address what does not belong to speech” (87). *Slaughterhouse-Five* attempts to represent one man’s traumatic experience of a history marked by gaps and rifts. If it succeeds in doing so, it is precisely because of its own narrative engagement with these forms of absence, its refusal to relegate the irrational, the unconscious and the unspeakable to the margins of history.

Chapter Six

“Explaining things to an absent judge”: Storytelling and The Naming of Bodies in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*

[A] book is more than a verbal structure or series of verbal structures; it is the dialogue it establishes with its reader and the intonation it imposes upon his voice and the changing and durable images it leaves in his memory. This dialogue is infinite [...]. A book is not an isolated being: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships.

Jorge Luis Borges¹

The more we try to animate books, the more they reveal their resemblance to the dead—who are made to address us in epitaphs or whom we address in thought or dream. Every time we read we are in danger of waking the dead, whose return can be ghoulish as well as comforting.

Geoffrey Hartman²

Because of what writing counters, parallels, responds to, repeats, negates, and affirms, even if writing does not mark any event external to itself, but solely itself, we who read and write are marked by what text, writing, and language carry over: an (unremembered) memory.

Petar Ramadanovic³

In the last chapter, I noted that a central theme of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the difficulty for war trauma victims of eliciting belief and empathy. In attempting to convey the strangeness and otherness of trauma, I argued, they are faced with the dilemma that their own experiences of history and time are incommensurable with wider cultural

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 248-49.

² Geoffrey H. Hartman, “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies,” *New Literary History* 26.3 (1995): 548.

³ Petar Ramadanovic, “When ‘To Die in Freedom’ is Written in English,” *Diacritics* 28.4 (1998): 65.

narratives and conceptions of history. Tim O'Brien's Vietnam war novel⁴ *The Things They Carried* is another text which accentuates the importance of the relationship between trauma victims and witnesses to traumatic testimony. Just as *Slaughterhouse-Five* explores the difficulty of narrativising war trauma, *The Things They Carried* addresses the nature of the storytelling process explicitly. In this chapter, I argue that both the metafictionality and the dialogic form of O'Brien's text facilitate its exploration of the otherness and difference of trauma. I want to suggest that as "absent judge[s]" (*Things* 169), readers of the novel undergo a form of epistemological displacement which is a necessary condition of sharing in the act of testimony.

"Start here: a body without a name": this statement appears in the second paragraph of "The Lives of the Dead," the final story in *The Things They Carried* (221). Paradoxically, in the very act of framing and situating the narrative, this point of departure also confounds the notion of a bounded, finite narrative structure: evidently the statement constitutes an address of sorts, but to whom is it addressed? In attempting to answer this question, the ambiguity of the statement becomes apparent. We may read it as a textual signpost ('this is the start'), as an instance of the narrator's self-address ('I should start here'), or even as an indication that the catalyst for the story, the primal scene which informs and structures it, concerns an encounter with an as-yet unnamed corpse ('this is where it all started'). Of course, yet another interpretation of the statement is that it assumes and addresses readers, participants in a dialogue between the text and the extra-textual space in which it implicitly anchors itself ("I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now," the narrator informs us on page 221; the same phrase appears on pages 32 and 179).

⁴ Steven Kaplan notes that "the reviewers of [*The Things They Carried*] are split on whether to call it novel or a collection of short stories," and claims that O'Brien "preferred to call it a work of fiction" (n1, 52); Kaplan himself refers to it somewhat vaguely as a "book" (50). While the text does indeed consist of a collection of stories, they are all inextricably linked, and their combined effect is that of a coherent work greater than the sum of its parts. I therefore refer to the text as a novel throughout this chapter.

As readers we cannot help but heed this address, and must proceed from the point it designates. However, this is but one in a series of beginnings and departures which litter the text, and as it occurs in the novel's final chapter it can also be seen to constitute a conclusion, an arrival of sorts. Thus we cannot really "start" at the designated point, and must instead bring our history of reading to bear on what follows. Nevertheless, the shock of the statement effectively challenges and brings into question any knowledge or truth that we may suppose we have gleaned from the preceding chapters. It therefore demands that we begin again the process of engaging with the text. The statement alerts readers to our ambiguous, liminal position, simultaneously finishing the novel while beginning—as if for the first time—to explore the themes which recur throughout it: death, memory, and the nature of stories.

The statement "start here" can be seen to address either the narrator or potential readers of the text. However, by implying the correspondence of their respective situations, it also serves to undermine the distinctions between them. In locating any reader of the text, and its protagonist and narrator—an author named O'Brien⁵—in the same state of chronological displacement and liminality, the statement accentuates the performative aspects of the text, the manner in which it embraces and explores explicitly dialogic aspects of the storytelling process. Steven Kaplan observes that in the novel "representation includes [...] questioning the accuracy and credibility of the narrative act itself" (48), and notes that one consequence of this metafictionality is that the reader is forced to undertake the same departure as the narrator:

The reader is thus made fully aware of being made a participant in a game, in a 'performative act' [quoting Iser], and thereby also is asked to become immediately involved in the incredibly frustrating

⁵ Unless specified, subsequent references to "O'Brien" refer to this figure, rather than the novel's author.

act of trying to make sense of events that resist understanding. The reader is permitted to experience at first hand the uncertainty that characterized being in Vietnam. (48)

Kaplan suggests here that any reader of *The Things They Carried* must engage with the novel's interrogation of truth and memory. Rosemary King notes that the "title of [the] short story 'How to Tell a True War Story' is a pun," arguing that "the reader is drawn into the role of story teller" (182). Catherine Calloway, too claims that "shifts in character and events tempt the reader into textual participation" (251). Common to all these formulations is the notion that the reader of the novel is confronted by the same epistemological concerns that occupy the narrator, concerns which dictate both the content and the contradictory, repetitive structure of the text.

Uncertainty and Metafictionality

I have traced the way in which readers of *The Things They Carried* are enticed into the same condition of uncertainty as O'Brien in order to introduce the following argument: the dialogic and discursive nature of the text is a function of its concern with war trauma. More specifically, its dialogic structure is informed by the idea that knowledge of war trauma may arise only ephemerally, and only then through the play of difference, the movement and instability characteristic of dialogue. I will argue that the narrative emphasis on knowledge, memory, and language is an essential component of the novel's approach to trauma. By calling the very act of storytelling into question, *The Things They Carried* traverses the ruptures which prevent traumatised subjects from attaining knowledge of their inscrutable traumatic experience *on their own*; the significance of this last point cannot be overstated.

In exploring these issues, *The Things They Carried* constitutes both an instance and a metafictional exploration of the *process* of storytelling and reading. The novel repeatedly accentuates the importance of dialogue, of the very act of bearing witness and testifying to trauma in the presence of another. It thereby suggests that knowledge concerning trauma—however tentative or provisional—may be produced only through and in the *act* of storytelling itself, a practice which depends, of course, upon the presence (whether actual or imagined) of a witness, a participant in the process of speaking and listening that constitutes testimony. Dori Laub speaks of the experience of “being a witness to the testimonies of others” (61), and Shoshana Felman (whose work informs this chapter) characterises testimony “not as a mode of *statement of*, but rather as a mode of *access to* [...] truth” (“Education” 24, emphasis in original). Felman’s formulation accords with the manner in which “statement[s]” of truth are continually undermined and revised throughout *The Things They Carried*, and provides a model with which to account for the text’s dialogic approach to questions of truth, memory, and trauma.

Paradoxically, if readers of *The Things They Carried* invariably encounter epistemological and chronological displacement, the novel suggests that this is an essential condition for the production of truth. In order to take part in the act of traumatic testimony, the reader must be forced to embrace the irrationality, ambiguity and provisionality through which trauma speaks, to encounter the text on the grounds of its own skewed logic. Arguably, in so doing, the reader becomes a member of a shared discursive space, a polyphonic community of sorts in which the articulation and production of knowledge is enabled by the very dialogue and discourse which constitutes that community. Kali Tal argues that “literature of trauma [...] is the product of three coincident factors: the experience of trauma, the urge to bear witness, and a sense of community” (“Speaking”

217-18).⁶ Tal alludes here to the fact that such acts of testimony cannot occur in isolation, but rely instead upon the existence of receptive environments. Kaplan argues that by establishing a dialogue with its readers, *The Things They Carried* creates precisely such a “community” (51):

By constantly involving and then re-involving the reader in the task of determining what ‘actually’ happened in a given situation, in a story, and by forcing the reader to experience the impossibility of ever knowing with any certainty what actually happened, O’Brien liberates himself from the lonesome responsibility of remembering and trying to understand events. He also creates a community of individuals immersed in the act of experiencing the uncertainty or indeterminacy of all events. (51)

Kaplan here characterises “remembering and trying to understand [traumatic] events” as a “lonesome responsibility.” I want to suggest that *The Things They Carried* implies the impossibility of achieving such recall and comprehension without a social context in which testimony may be heard and valued; as Felman notes, “the *appointment* to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak *for* others and *to* others” (“Education” 15, emphasis in original).

“Nobody in town want[s] to know”: Dialogue and Community

The concept of a social context (or the lack thereof) which enables (or precludes) acts of storytelling and testimony also constitutes one of the major themes of *The Things They Carried* at the level of content. The novel’s first story, “The Things They Carried,” concludes with an account of a soldier burning letters which have symbolically linked him

⁶ The “urge to bear witness” is well documented in recent critical work on trauma; in his discussion of Holocaust testimonies, for example, Laub argues that “survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive” (63).

to his country and community. The last, "The Lives of the Dead," outlines O'Brien's attempts to communicate with and speak for the dead, to frame the memory of loved ones in the context of the present. Crucially, O'Brien notes that in order to produce "the illusion of aliveness" it is essential that "others might dream along with you" (225). This theme is most explicitly explored in a story set in a post-war civilian environment, "Speaking of Courage," in which a traumatised soldier's inability to find a receptive audience for his "war stories" is ironically juxtaposed with a celebration of national pride and community: on the Fourth of July, "nobody in town wanted to know about the terrible stink" (148). The significance of the presence or absence of a listener, a witness to testimony, is a theme which permeates the text at every level: that of content, that of structure, and that of narrative strategy.

The novel's primary theme, then, is the struggle—both epistemological and practical—that confronts those whose "urge to bear witness" to trauma must compete with both the vicissitudes of memory and the difficulty of eliciting empathy. One of the ways this theme is manifested at the level of narrative strategy is the fact that framing devices structure most of the stories. The first, eponymous story appears to constitute a traditional realist narrative. Related by an apparently disinterested, omniscient narrator and devoid of any contextual information that would serve to foreground the act of storytelling, the story produces the illusion of certitude and veracity. However, this verisimilitude is immediately undercut in the following story, "Love," where O'Brien describes the context in which "The Things They Carried" was produced. It becomes apparent that "The Things They Carried" is based on O'Brien's experience, and that his viewpoint is informed by both his friendship with the story's protagonist, and his assurance that he will omit some (unspoken) aspect of the story in order to "make [his friend] out to be a good guy" (27). "Love" itself largely consists of the description of a dialogue between two veterans—the protagonist of "The Things They Carried" and O'Brien—and describes their eventual

communication after “a long time [when] neither of [them] could think of much to say” (25). “Speaking of Courage” is also followed by a chapter (“Notes”) which foregrounds the authorial manipulation and autobiographical experience which structure the story.

Many of the stories in *The Things They Carried* are framed by a description of circumstances in which they are being told. Some chapters, for example, take the form of dialogues between men, in which they themselves exchange stories. In “The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” the characters even debate the storytelling process, and the veracity of the tale is explicitly questioned. O’Brien claims that he “heard [the story] from Rat Kiley,” but notes that “Rat had a reputation for exaggeration and overstatement” (87); the other characters, too, question aspects of the story. Rat admits that the final part of his tale is based on “thirdhand” information (104), and concedes that it constitutes “speculation” (105). These framing devices serve to accentuate the dialogic aspects of the storytelling process, and to foreground the context in which stories are received and interrogated. They suggest, that is, that the process of attempting to “access” the “truth” (Felman “Education” 24) of trauma is necessarily discursive and social.

Such framing devices also accentuate the significance of the role played by listeners (or readers) in the process of testimony. A crucial feature of “Sweetheart” is that Rat maintains that his story is true and cannot “tolerate [...] disbelief” (93). Similarly, in “How to Tell a True War Story” O’Brien describes how a soldier named Mitchell Sanders is concerned with soliciting his belief. Although Sanders admits that certain details of his story have been fabricated, O’Brien senses that Sanders “wanted [him] to feel the truth, to believe by the raw force of feeling” (72): “I could tell how desperately Sanders wanted me to believe him” (73). For Rat and Sanders, testimony is productive only insofar as it constitutes a dialogue, an interaction based on shared participation in the act of storytelling. The significance of such interaction is repeatedly explored throughout “How to.” The

chapter begins with a story in which a soldier lovingly pens a “very personal and touching” (67) letter to the sister of a dead friend, but receives no reply. It concludes with the statement that “a true war story is [...] about sisters who never write back and people who never listen” (80). The chapter posits the notion that the trauma of war may consist largely in the fact that it gives rise to incommunicable experiences and states of being. By alluding to the gulf that exists between the bearers of trauma and those who are unwilling or unable to share in their acts of testimony (Tal speaks of “the unbridgeable gap between writer and reader,” “Speaking” 218), the chapter suggests the impossibility of ever telling “a true war story.”

Nevertheless, *The Things They Carried* surely attempts to speak the truth of war trauma, and therefore may be characterised as an address, an act of testimony. Such a formulation enables us to read the entire text itself—even those chapters which do not contain explicit framing devices or allusions to storytelling—as a form of dialogue and interaction, an attempt to solicit belief. Such a reading is supported by two of O’Brien’s frequent references to his motivations for writing. One of these reasons, he suggests, is the importance of sharing both his history and his experience of epistemological displacement: “telling stories was a way of grabbing people by the throat and explaining exactly what had happened to me” (157). The violence of this metaphor suggests both the necessity and the difficulty for O’Brien of sharing his history. It suggests, too, that as readers, we ourselves are the subject of this address. The short chapter “Good Form” conveys this notion even more explicitly. The reader is asked to “listen,” and O’Brien claims: “I want you to feel what I felt” (179). Significantly, he also suggests that in order to share “what [he] felt,” readers must be drawn into the same ambiguous relation to facts that characterises his experience of war and trauma: “I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth,” he claims (179). In its address to the reader, its allusion to trauma, and its interrogation of “truth,” this statement usefully summarises the elements that make up

traumatic testimony: the experience of trauma, dialogic interaction, and epistemological disruption.

Trauma and Narrative

The Things They Carried is structured by the tension between the desire to participate in a shared act of remembering and testifying, and the seeming impossibility of achieving such a task. In order to trace this textual dialectic, it will be necessary to examine at greater length the account of storytelling, language, and testimony that is explored in the novel. *The Things They Carried* is, of course, highly metafictional; Catherine Calloway characterises the stories in the novel as “epistemological tools, multidimensional windows through which the war, the world, and the ways of telling a war story can be viewed from many different angles and visions” (249-50). I will argue that if the novel is indeed “as much about the process of writing as it is the text of a literary work” (Calloway 251), then this is necessitated by war trauma’s disruptive impact on memory and epistemology, or, in other words, by the ways in which trauma resists representation. The idea that war trauma does not conform to the logic of narrative is evident in the fact that *The Things They Carried* consistently foregrounds its own shortcomings, repeatedly scrutinising its reasons for engaging in such an apparently futile process.

In exploring the incommensurability posited in *The Things They Carried* between war trauma and narrative, it will be necessary to examine not only the text’s account of storytelling, but of war trauma as well. In doing so, I will once again draw on some recent critical writing on trauma, elucidating the many resonances between the conceptions of trauma contained in this critical work, and the novel’s depiction of the inscrutability and illegibility of war trauma. I will argue that in examining the “urge to bear witness” to

trauma (Tal “Speaking” 217), it is necessary to evaluate the ambiguous status that language occupies with respect to trauma, both in critical writing and in the novel itself. This emphasis will ultimately lead me to a consideration of the fact that in *The Things They Carried*, the encounter with death plays a central role in problematising the traumatised subject’s engagement with language and memory.

I have noted that O’Brien repeatedly addresses—both directly and implicitly—the question of why it is that he feels compelled to return to the site of trauma through the act of producing stories. He acknowledges that he “should forget it” (33), but implies that the act of writing is motivated precisely by the fact that trauma gives rise to instances of involuntary recall, to the impossibility of “forget[ting].” Lawrence Langer notes in this regard that “only that which has been inscribed or represented (in word or image form) can be forgotten” (17). Introducing a story he claims he has “never told before” (39), O’Brien alludes to the way in which trauma exceeds the realm of conscious, rational thought:

For more than twenty years I’ve had to live with it, feeling the shame, trying to push it away, and so by this *act of remembrance*, by putting the facts down on paper, I’m hoping to relieve at least some of the pressure on my dreams. (39, emphasis added)

This passage depicts war trauma as a force which invariably manifests itself, regardless of O’Brien’s willingness to confront his traumatic history consciously. It therefore accords with the definition of trauma proposed by Cathy Caruth, who claims that “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (“Trauma and Experience” 4-5).

In positing a distinction between “act[s] of remembrance” and “dreams,” the passage also contrasts involuntary recall with the agentic, active aspects of storytelling. It suggests, that is, that the production of stories serves to bring trauma into the realm of

conscious control, thereby negating the potentially disruptive effect of unconscious psychic events. This notion also informs O'Brien's claim that "the act of writing had led [him] through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse" (157). O'Brien suggests that the conscious confrontation with trauma enabled by the act of writing may serve to lessen the potentially disruptive power of trauma. This idea is also proposed by the clinicians Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, who claim that "by imagining [...] alternative scenarios, many patients are able to soften the intrusive power of the original, unmitigated horror" (178). In short, *The Things They Carried* suggests that the "urge to bear witness" is partly a function of the desire to draw insistently recurring traumatic "remembrance[s]" into the realm of consciousness and agency.

"Sacrilege of the traumatic experience": The Necessary Failure of Testimony

Another motivation for the storytelling process that is explored in *The Things They Carried* centres on the way war trauma confounds chronology and temporal continuity. Like *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *The Things They Carried* posits the idea that the need to testify to trauma may arise from a temporal disruption, a rift initiated by trauma's refusal to be relegated to the past. "Much of [the war] is hard to remember," O'Brien observes: "as I write about these things, the remembering is turned into a kind of rehashing. [...] The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives *in its own dimension*, replaying itself over and over" (32, emphasis added). This observation suggests the tendency of traumatic histories to permeate the present. It also represents trauma as residing neither completely in the present nor the past, but rather somewhere between, in a "dimension" that confounds such categories. As such, it accords with Caruth's exegesis of "the central Freudian insight into trauma, that the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal

to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (“Trauma and Experience” 8-9). O’Brien also notes that “what sticks to memory, often, are those odd little fragments that have no beginning and no end” (34). “Forty-three years old, and the war occurred half a lifetime ago, and yet the remembering makes it now,” O’Brien claims in another crucial passage (35); the disruption of the present by a traumatic past is also suggested here. Continuing, O’Brien observes that “sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That’s what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future” (35).

By characterising the act of producing stories as a device for situating traumatic experience in a chronological framework, O’Brien accentuates the disjunction between the timelessness of trauma and the chronology of narrative. Van der Kolk and van der Hart also identify this disjunction, arguing that trauma does not conform to the logic of narrative: “traumatic experience/memory is, in a sense, timeless. It is not transformed into a *story*, placed in time, with a beginning, a middle and an end” (177, emphasis added). Significantly, both O’Brien and van der Kolk and van der Hart feel obliged to distinguish between traumatic memory and narrative, which they characterise as qualitatively different phenomena. This distinction is crucial, and alerts us to the paradox that O’Brien’s claim about the power of stories may also allude to their impotence: although he claims that “stories” may serve to connect “the past to the future,” this does not necessarily imply that stories may successfully represent the nature of trauma. Indeed, it suggests precisely the opposite: the chronological consistency of narrative contains trauma in a way that memory cannot, thereby ensuring that narrative must invariably fail to represent an essential quality of traumatic recall. In other words, by imposing a temporal framework on trauma, testimony precludes the possibility of capturing the distinctive nature of trauma. The very atemporality which distinguishes trauma—the fact that it occurs “in its own dimension”—

eludes narrative representation, thereby ensuring an epistemological rift between traumatic experience and any “stories” produced about it.

O’Brien implicitly concedes that narrative must—by its very nature—fail to capture an essential quality of trauma. This admission raises the question of whether the very attempt to impose understanding and chronology on an irrational, atemporal phenomenon may serve to obstruct access to the “truth” of trauma. Indeed, Culbertson argues that “we lose [...] certain dimensions of the truth in the telling of it” (191). Appropriately, Culbertson’s choice of the term “dimensions” resonates with O’Brien’s description of the inaccessible “dimension” in which trauma is incessantly played out. Her formulation of the “truth” inevitably lost in the act of “telling” also mirrors O’Brien’s approach, and provides a concise summary of the dilemma which provokes and sustains the novel’s obsession with the process of “groping after the unaccountable, the unthinkable, and the unsayable” (Jarraway 700). The concept that testimony must fail to represent distinctive qualities of trauma is also explored by Caruth, who argues that conscious recollection may often constitute a form of manipulation and distortion:

[T]he capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort, and in other cases [...] may mean the capacity simply to forget. Yet beyond the loss of precision there is another, more profound disappearance: the loss, precisely, of the event’s essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*. (“Recapturing” 153-54, emphasis in original):

Caruth’s argument here is instructive, as it accentuates the mismatch between the conscious disruptions occasioned by trauma—which may be characterised as absences of knowledge—and the psychic and narrative structures which may be employed to cover over such epistemological rifts.

In examining O'Brien's "urge to bear witness," it becomes apparent that paradoxically, the desire to tell stories may be fuelled by the very failure of narrative and writing to capture the essence of traumatic experience. O'Brien must constantly return to the site of trauma through writing precisely because of the way in which writing fails to relegate traumatic history to the past, to negate its repetitive, relentless disruption of the present. "You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end. Not then, not ever," he claims in "How to" (73). O'Brien suggests here that if stories are to remain faithful to the "truth" of trauma (rather than becoming what van der Kolk and van der Hart call "sacrilege of the traumatic experience," 179), they must be characterised by the very provisionality, repetition and insistent return that define trauma. Tina Chen notes that O'Brien's "work [...] insists upon multiple returns" (81), and Kaplan claims that in the novel "the act of telling a given story is an on-going and never-ending process" (51). The significance of such repetition is also emphasised by van der Kolk and van der Hart:

Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language. It appears that, in order for this to occur successfully, the traumatized person has to *return* to the memory *often* in order to complete it. (176, emphasis added)

Significantly, van der Kolk and van der Hart imply that this process of repetition may be "complete[d]", that it may give rise to the eventual integration of trauma within consciousness. O'Brien's insistence that "a true war story [...] never seems to end" (73) appears to deny the possibility of such completion and closure (Laub describes the "process of testimony" as "a ceaseless struggle," 61). However, O'Brien also claims that "you can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it" (80). Of course, one way of interpreting this declaration is that O'Brien is merely referring once again to the fact that a "true war story" may be recognised by its very lack of completion. As King points out, though, the

word “tell” here is ambiguous (182), and O’Brien’s declaration may be read as an assertion of the possibility of speaking the truth of trauma through repetition. “All you can do is tell it one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth” (80), O’Brien claims, once again hinting that it is indeed possible to speak the “truth” of trauma.

Nevertheless, while O’Brien appears at times to endorse the ability of narrative to capture trauma (he notes, for example, that “stories can save us,” 221), his ambivalence regarding the issue attests to an awareness of the way in which trauma may exceed testimony. “In [some] cases,” he notes, “you can’t even tell a true war story. Sometimes it’s just beyond telling” (70). In “Speaking of Courage,” we are told that the protagonist “could not describe [his trauma], not ever, but he would’ve tried anyway” (148). This statement can be read as an allegorical condensation of O’Brien’s dilemma: aware that he may never convey completely the truth of his traumatic history, he is nevertheless compelled to try. This awareness and this compulsion inform the narrative strategy of *The Things They Carried*, a text which repeatedly traverses the distance between the experience of trauma and representations of such experience.

“You tend to miss a lot”: Trauma as Absence

These considerations give rise to a further question: If, as *The Things They Carried* repeatedly suggests, narrative and language cannot mimetically represent the actual experience of trauma, what other functions might they possibly serve? In exploring this question I shall trace yet another aspect of the storytelling process that is acknowledged and explored in *The Things They Carried*: the manner in which stories and language may serve as metonymic substitutes for a *lack* of experience and knowledge occasioned by trauma. I

will argue that the novel's privileging of language and narrative is offset by two other features of the text: firstly, its awareness that language may serve to stand in for memory and experience; secondly, its exploration of the possibility that such acts of metonymic substitution may serve to further alienate the traumatised subject from an already inscrutable history. In other words, the text challenges us to consider the paradoxical notion that the narrativisation of trauma may serve to enable the process of recall, while concurrently increasing the gulf between the speaking, testifying subject and the object of their testimony (namely their insistent but elusive traumatic experience). I want to suggest that language and stories may actually constitute barriers to the possibility of perceiving history, veils clouding the perception of trauma and self. In tracing the novel's account of the epistemological gaps and rifts that characterise both the experience and the memory of trauma, Caruth's work once again proves useful. In different ways, Shoshana Felman and Kaja Silverman also explore the problematic status that language may occupy with regard to traumatic recall; their work will be invoked in my analysis of the relationship between language and memory (or, more precisely, the lack of memory) in *The Things They Carried*.

A theme which runs through the novel is the idea that traumatic experience is difficult to process at the time of its occurrence, and that this leads to a breach in consciousness. This breach may be manifested in the form of remembrances which lack the concrete shape or specific details which might mark them out as truthful. This concept is neatly summarised by O'Brien's account of the formlessness of a traumatic recollection: "it's a blur now, as it was then" (44). In attempting to describe the past, O'Brien is consistently faced with the difficulty of attempting to describe experiences which might more accurately be characterised in terms of the absence of experience and memory. A crucial passage explores the process whereby, confronted by the death of a friend, a soldier may fail to face the source of trauma directly, instead having to "look away" (70). This

instinctive disavowal gives rise to a rupture in experience which serves to structure the memory of the incident:

When a guy dies, like Curt Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*. (70, emphasis in original)

In this passage, trauma takes the form of “surreal seemingness,” a level of experience and memory which cannot be translated easily into the language through which the subject must seek to “tell about” the experience. The attempt to “represent[...] the hard and exact truth” is therefore problematised by the fact that the allegiance to “truth” also implies an allegiance to the absence which characterised the original encounter.

The passage quoted above constitutes *The Things They Carried's* most explicit assertion that the inability to process trauma may lead to a corresponding gap in memory. There are several other attempts, though, to describe a state of uncertainty, absence, and unreality associated with traumatic experience, and several other metaphors for this state of “surreal seemingness.” Attempting to describe a shocking experience, Rat Kiley notes that “the images came in a swirl [...] and there was no way you could process it all” (102). Another passage outlines a man’s memories of witnessing (and perhaps even contributing to) the death of a friend, and again describes a gap in experience associated with the encounter with death: “then for a long time there were things he could not remember” (170). Recalling the experience of terror, O’Brien employs two more metaphors in an attempt to convey the sense of unreality associated with trauma: “you wonder if you’re dreaming. It’s like you’re in a movie” (204). Significantly, he also notes that “a story [...]

is a kind of dreaming” (221). He later describes terror in terms of an enforced flight from identity and subjectivity:

Together we understood what terror was: you’re not human anymore. You’re a shadow. You slip out of your own skin, like molting, shedding your own history and your own future, leaving behind everything you ever were or wanted to believe in. (207)

The passage once again alludes to the temporal dislocation associated with war trauma, and again suggests that this rupture in experience confounds memory, chronology, and identity.

In each of the passages quoted above, a crucial feature of the description of trauma is the fact that it constitutes a different level of being, one which does not correspond to the logic of memory or normal experience (this notion, of course, also informs *Slaughterhouse-Five*). The various metaphors employed in the attempt to describe this phenomenon attest to its elusiveness, to the fact that it constitutes a rupture in knowledge and memory. The idea that trauma may be characterised in terms of epistemological absence is proposed by Caruth, who notes that “what returns to haunt the victim [of trauma] [...] is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (*Unclaimed Experience* 6). For Caruth, traumatic recollection is evidence not merely of a buried or repressed memory, but rather of precisely the absence of any such psychic event:

[W]hat returns in the flashback is not simply an overwhelming experience that has been obstructed by a later repression or amnesia, but an event that is itself constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness. (“Recapturing” 152)

Caruth argues that the insistent, involuntary return of traumatic reminiscences attests to the “*the truth of an event, and the truth of its incomprehensibility*” (“Recapturing” 153, emphasis in original). For Caruth, then, trauma’s tenacious hold on the psyche is related to the fact that it resists “integration into consciousness”: the traumatised subject must repeatedly return to an experience he has never really “known.”

Caruth’s account of trauma as a form of history which both possesses and eludes the traumatised subject corresponds in significant ways with Felman’s work. Examining Freud’s “discovery” of a form of “unconscious, unintended, unintentional testimony” (“Education” 24), Felman argues that the fact that a subject speaks of traumatic experience cannot be read as evidence of his knowledge of that experience; rather, it may attest to his very alienation from it. “For the first time in the history of our culture,” she argues, “psychoanalysis recognised

[That] one does not have to *possess, or own* the truth in order to effectively *bear witness* to it; that speech as such is unwittingly testimonial; and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, *not available* to its own speaker. (“Education” 24, emphasis in original)

Common to the work of Caruth and Felman is the notion that traumatic testimony cannot be equated with knowledge of trauma.

Alienation, Exile and the “Diasporic Subject”

Caruth and Felman suggest that the traumatised subject may be the bearer of a form of knowledge which he does not have—and has never had—access to. They therefore

imply that the victim of war trauma may be alienated or exiled from his own history. Laub also discusses this form of alienation, and argues that it may contribute to the dissolution of identity; he claims that “when one’s history is abolished, one’s identity ceases to exist as well” (67). Petar Ramadanovic identifies the notion of alienation and exile from self as the central thrust of Caruth’s work. She claims that in Caruth’s writing, the traumatised subject “is recognized by its inextricable ties to what cannot be experienced or subjectivized fully,” and concludes that “the subject of trauma is thus, for Caruth, culturally and politically a diasporic subject, *en route* toward subjectivity” (55). In focusing upon the notion of exile, Ramadanovic evokes the sense in which the traumatised subject must constantly attempt to return to the site of trauma, only to find he has no knowledge or map to guide him there.

In a striking parallel, Tina Chen reads *The Things They Carried* as an exploration of “a psychology of exile and displacement” (77). She argues that “exile as a fluid and inescapable experience resulting from immersion in the moral ambiguity of the Vietnam War inflects all aspects of the stories in *The Things They Carried*” (80). Curiously, Chen does not draw upon any recent critical writing on trauma, but rather invokes post-colonial theory. Nevertheless, she focuses on the fact that O’Brien’s war experience “demands a reconceptualization of exile: O’Brien is alienated from his nation, his friends, himself, and, however counterintuitively, *Vietnam*” (80, emphasis added). She argues that “the displacement O’Brien experiences stems from his inability to access the ways in which Vietnam acts as both home and land” (94). Mirroring Caruth and Felman, Chen here addresses the manner in which the traumatised subject may be cut off from their own history, from even those experiences (like “Vietnam”) which most insistently dictate the structures of their memory and identity. I shall return to my exploration of the role of language and narrative in *The Things They Carried* by considering the double role that language may play in attempts to breach the psychic ruptures occasioned by trauma. I will

suggest that in *The Things They Carried*, language addresses the condition of exile and displacement characteristic of trauma, but also increases the extent of this alienation.

Language's double role is apparent in the short chapter titled "Good Form," in which O'Brien asserts that "it's time to be blunt" (179). Noting that he is indeed a writer who once "walked through Quang Ngai province as a foot soldier," O'Brien concedes that "almost everything else is invented" (179). In emphasising the fictive components of the narrative, this declaration suggests another line of questioning: Why has it been necessary for the author Tim O'Brien (as opposed to *The Things They Carried's* narrator and protagonist) to produce *fiction* about his traumatic war experience? Why would a straightforward autobiographical account not have sufficed? This issue is addressed as O'Brien (the narrator) explores a crucial feature of his memories of the war, one which again suggests a form of absence lying at the heart of his traumatic experience. "Here is the happening-truth," he claims:

I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with *faceless responsibility and faceless grief*.
(179, emphasis added)

O'Brien here implies that the tenacity of his traumatic recall is related to its very amorphousness, its lack of detail and clarity, which is in turn a product of his inability to process and confront the experience at the time of its occurrence. Trauma's tenacity stems, in other words, from the fact that he has never fully experienced or known his own history. Just as he had earlier claimed that the tendency to "look away" gave rise to "surreal seemingness" (70), he here describes a form of absence which structures both traumatic experience and recall. In this respect, his account of trauma mirrors those of Caruth and Felman.

These considerations refer me back to my initial point of departure: “start here: a body without a name” (221). The parallels between a nameless body and “faceless responsibility and faceless grief” are clear. In both cases, O’Brien alludes to a level of experience and memory which is characterised by absence, by its lack of detail and certainty. Recalling another traumatic incident, O’Brien again accentuates the fact that it does not correspond with language: “for a time no one spoke. We had witnessed something essential, something brand-new and profound, a piece of the world so startling that there was not yet a *name* for it” (76, emphasis added). The insistence and formlessness of such traumatic recall confounds consciousness and undermines O’Brien’s access to his own history, rendering him an exile from his own past. In a crucial statement, O’Brien suggests that his act of writing is related directly to those ruptures in memory and consciousness which ensure the inscrutability of his history: “what stories can do, I guess, is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again” (179-80, emphasis added). This formulation of the power of fiction and narrative implies that in making trauma “present,” O’Brien is able to experience his history as if for the first time; he is able to inhabit his traumatic past in a way not possible prior to the act of storytelling.

Language enables O’Brien to engage with a traumatic past marked out precisely by its lack of structure and chronology. However, this account of the function of “stories” suggests that although language may enable him to engage with his traumatic past, it nevertheless must remain other to the experience of trauma. By naming bodies and “attach[ing] faces to grief,” O’Brien’s stories ascribe qualities to trauma which do not accord with its essential strangeness and otherness. Again, Caruth’s account of testimony’s “loss [...] of the event’s essential incomprehensibility” is apposite here (“Recapturing”

154); so too is Culbertson's declaration that "we lose [...] certain dimensions of the truth in the telling of it" (191).

Metonymy and the Play of Difference

If O'Brien's stories cannot hope to represent trauma mimetically, "Good Form" suggests that they may play another role. By providing the names and faces missing from O'Brien's traumatic past, they serve to stand in for a psychic aporia, plugging the ruptures in experience and knowledge which problematise O'Brien's history and identity. O'Brien even observes that stories may serve to take the place of an absence of memory, noting that "stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story" (35). O'Brien implies here that by replacing traumatic recall, stories may indeed serve to distance the traumatised subject from knowledge of his history. The notion that stories may serve to take the place of a gap in experience is also implicit in O'Brien's claim that "by telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others" (157). By conceding that it is essential to "make up" aspects of his traumatic experience, O'Brien once again alludes to the manner in which fiction and narrative may serve to stand in for an absence of memory and comprehension. With their precision and presence, the "ma[d]e up" names and faces that people O'Brien's stories paradoxically attest to—without representing directly—those aspects of traumatic experience which elude consciousness and memory.

In Chapter Four I examined Silverman's argument that linguistic structures produced in the attempt to "bind" traumatic memories constitute something radically different from memory. Her position is again relevant here:

The memories in question are totally transformed by this binding operation; indeed, it might be more accurate to say that something else is put in place of the original hallucinatory mnemonic traces. That 'something else' is a signified, or rather a cluster of signifieds. (64)

Silverman's argument complicates further the status of O'Brien's stories. If the stories can be understood as something entirely alien to memory, how might they be anchored to trauma? A possible response is that as linguistic substitutes for an absent history, they constitute metonyms. Chen adopts this position, claiming that in the novel "stories act as substitute terms for Vietnam" (84); she also declares that O'Brien uses "the art of storytelling as [a] metonym[...] for Vietnam" (87).

Following Silverman, it may be claimed that the bodies (and parts of bodies) in *The Things They Carried* which stand in for the elusive spectre of trauma are so transformed by their naming and narrativisation as to no longer refer to or signify the original trauma. Chen addresses this gulf between trauma and its metonymic substitutes in *The Things They Carried*. A crucial aspect of Chen's argument is her emphasis (informed by her reading of Bhabha) on the manner in which metonymic substitution gives rise to the play of difference:

Homi K. Bhabha asserts that metonymy 'must not be read as a form of simple substitution or equivalence'; rather, '[i]ts circulation of part and whole, identity and difference, must be understood as a *double movement*' (54-55).⁷ In this way, metonymy, even while substituting one term for another, also insistently engages and provokes the recognition of a lack, the replacing term only partially signifying the replaced term. (84, emphasis in original)

⁷ Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Chen suggests that the act of metonymic substitution also involves a transformation, which in turn gives rise to a “double movement” between the original lack of experience and the terms employed in its place. Referring to the “semiotic space between the two signs,” Chen implies that in attempting to pin down and freeze trauma, metonymy may in fact give rise to the play of difference, to the creation of a hybrid form of knowledge and memory “beyond the capacities of either figure” (96).

O’Brien’s act of storytelling arguably leads to the production of an epistemological event which can be characterised as neither identical to trauma nor identical to knowledge; rather it may be seen to oscillate between these poles, existing precisely in their incommensurability, the space between them. If the act of metonymic substitution gives rise to the play of difference, *The Things They Carried* suggests that this is an essential component of any narrative structure produced in the attempt to attain knowledge of trauma, a phenomenon which itself implies irreconcilable ruptures and unbridgeable spaces. In exploring these spaces, the novel employs a dialogic narrative structure which attempts to reflect the difference characteristic of trauma.

The idea that *The Things They Carried* constitutes an exploration of difference is apparent in the text at several points. In “Notes,” O’Brien claims that he had originally intended the story “Speaking of Courage” to appear in an earlier novel. It did not, he claims, because it “had no proper home in the larger narrative. *Going After Cacciato* was a war story; “Speaking of Courage” was a postwar story. Two different time periods, two different sets of issues” (158). Of course, *The Things They Carried* contains stories from both “time periods,” a fact which reflects its implicit assertion that “a true war story” must explore the dialogue between past and present in order to address trauma’s “refusal to be simply located” (Caruth “Trauma and Experience” 9). In another crucial reflection, O’Brien notes that “the stories that will last forever are those that swirl back and forth across the

border between trivia and bedlam, the mad and the mundane” (87). This statement’s emphasis on the mobility of narrative—its potential to oscillate between opposing terms—resonates with another passage in which trauma is described in terms of its dissolution of binary structures: in war, O’Brien claims, “right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery [...] the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity” (78). Taken together, these two observations suggest that only narrative strategies which embrace the play of difference may hope to capture something of the nature of war trauma.

Exploring difference through a narrative strategy based on oscillation, dialogue, and provisionality, *The Things They Carried* confounds the idea that narrative merely records (or mimetically represents) previously existing knowledge. Felman proposes an alternative conception of traumatic narratives and testimony:

This knowledge or self-knowledge is neither a given before the testimony nor a residual substantial knowledge consequential to it. In itself, this knowledge *does not exist*, it can only *happen* through the testimony: it cannot be separated from it. It can only unfold itself in the process of testifying, but it can never become a substance that can be possessed by either speaker or listener, outside of this dialogic process. (“Education” 53, emphasis in original)

Felman suggests here that knowledge of trauma is inextricably imbricated with the process of storytelling. This notion is also evident in Kaplan’s claim that “the truth [...] is clearly not something that can be distinguished or separated from the story itself” (50), and Claude Lanzmann’s assertion that “no intelligibility, that is to say no true knowledge, preexists the process of transmission” (204). Felman highlights the fact that the language of traumatic narratives cannot be equated with understanding or certainty; she claims that “in the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as

the constation of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge" ("Education" 16-17). Felman's argument sheds light on the ambiguous function of language in *The Things They Carried*, a novel which espouses the power of narrative while simultaneously exhibiting distrust of its capabilities.

Surviving "the otherness of death"

The language of *The Things They Carried* attests not to knowledge of trauma, but rather to the incessant play of difference occasioned by it. Furthermore, the novel implies that the problematic status of its language may be traced to a specific instance of difference: the encounter with death. In a telling statement, O'Brien posits the notion that "at its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death" (77). Death features in every chapter of the novel. Four central stories structure the text and are told several times, each version differing slightly from the last. In each instance, the story concerns O'Brien's witnessing of the death of another. Robert Lifton argues that "when one witnesses the death of people, that really is the process of becoming a survivor" (Caruth "Interview" 138). Lifton accentuates the importance of the death encounter in traumatic experience, and argues that "survival" may be a more appropriate term for this encounter than "trauma":

Focusing on survival, rather than on trauma, puts the death back into the traumatic experience, because survival suggests that there has been death, and the survivor therefore has had a death encounter, and the death encounter is central to his or her psychological experience. (Caruth "Interview" 128)

Lifton's observations accord with the ubiquity and centrality of death in *The Things They Carried*. Indeed, the novel may be read as an attempt to come to terms with survival, or more precisely with what Caruth calls "the very incomprehensibility of one's own survival"

("Traumatic Departures" 34). One character implies that this traumatic survival resists representation: "it's almost like I got killed over in Nam" he claims, noting that this liminal state is "hard to describe" (155). This formulation mirrors *Slaughterhouse-Five's* account of the difficulty of narrativising the experience of survival beyond the encounter with death.

Clearly, death informs the novel's approach to language and memory. Implying that the encounter with death must be disavowed, O'Brien claims that "in Vietnam, [...] we had ways of making the dead seem not quite so dead. [...] By slighting death, by acting, we pretended it was not the terrible thing it was" (231). An essential component in this act of disavowal is the use of "language trick[s]," which "made things seem tolerable" (215). Again, O'Brien accentuates the importance of naming, of ascribing the characteristics of language to a phenomenon which confounds understanding: "they called it by other *names*," he notes, "as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself" (17, emphasis added). The attempt to "destroy the reality of death" may also be characterised as the attempt to negate its difference, its uncanny otherness. In the course of a breakdown, Rat Kiley implies that death constitutes a form of untenable difference, "rambling" about "how *crazy* it was that people who were so incredibly alive could get so incredibly dead" (218, emphasis added). Kiley's statement suggests that the very proximity of death serves to taint both the concept and the experience of life. It suggests, too, that this proximity threatens a radical rupture in identity and sanity.

Another passage explores the notion that language may be employed in order to cope with the proximity and difference of death. "There it is, they'd say. Over and over—there it is, my friend, there it is—as if the repetition itself were an act of poise, a balance between crazy and almost crazy, knowing without going" (17). Language is presented here as a device for processing difference, a tool which serves to bridge a rupture in experience and identity. In this respect, it ascribes a role to language which is remarkably similar to

that identified by Laub. Like Felman, Laub challenges the notion that traumatic testimony constitutes a vehicle for pre-existing knowledge:

The testimony in its commitment to truth is a passage through, and an exploration of, difference, rather than an exploration of identity, just as the experience it testifies to [...] is unassimilable, because it is a passage through the ultimate difference—the otherness of death. (73)

Laub's assertion that death constitutes "the ultimate difference" suggests one possible explanation for the prevalence of death in O'Brien's stories: as an exemplary instance of incomprehensible difference, death eludes consciousness and representation. O'Brien's repeated, repetitious attempts to process the encounter with death through the telling of stories attest to its radical otherness, a strangeness which permeates and dictates the structures of memory and language. In short, the encounter with death may become a logocentric principle of sorts, a term whose incessant presence is paradoxically a record of difference and absence.

Conclusion

"Start here: a body without a name." Once again this statement serves as a useful condensation of the themes and structure of *The Things They Carried*, encapsulating both the disjunction between language and death, and the notion that this difference lies at the very heart of traumatic experience. *The Things They Carried* may be seen to stem from and be structured by difference. Traversing the spaces between past and present, life and death, presence and absence, knowledge and incomprehensibility, truth and fiction, and sanity and madness, the novel also accords a great deal of significance to another form of relationship: that between speaker and listener, author and reader, those who tell stories and

those who listen to them. This chapter concludes with some observations regarding this relationship. I will argue that the interaction intrinsic to dialogue, and the fact that dialogue constitutes a *process*, enable the exploration and the tentative, provisional understanding of traumatic difference that *The Things They Carried* enacts.

In “On the Rainy River,” O’Brien relates his encounter with “the hero of [his] life,” “the man who saved [him]” (45), Elroy Berdahl. “On the Rainy River” does not seem to be a war story, and Berdahl does not perform any acts that might easily be recognised as heroic. Rather, he is simply present in a time of crisis: “He was there at the critical time—a silent, watchful presence” (45). Berdahl’s significance lies in his engagement with O’Brien, in the fact that his silence facilitates O’Brien’s own act of testimony. O’Brien later explores this role further, explicitly identifying Berdahl as a witness: “He didn’t speak. [...] And yet by his presence, his mute watchfulness, he made it real. He was the true audience. He was a witness, like God, or like the gods” (54). Berdahl’s attention validates and affirms O’Brien, allowing him to situate his experience within the realm of reality. The role played by the addressee in the process of testimony is stressed by Laub, who argues that the precise lack of such potential listeners ensured that the Holocaust “*produced no witnesses*” (65, emphasis in original):

To understand it one has to conceive of the world of the Holocaust as a world in which the very imagination of the *Other* was no longer possible. There was no longer an other to which one could say ‘Thou’ in the hope of being heard, of being recognized as a subject, of being answered. (66, emphasis in original)

Laub’s formulation suggests the basis of O’Brien’s admiration for Berdahl, whose silence constitutes a form of recognition of O’Brien and his plight. Of course, in the majority of the stories in *The Things They Carried*, no such witness is present. As I noted earlier,

“Speaking of Courage” explicitly foregrounds the lack of anyone prepared to hear its protagonist’s story. “In the Field” also explores this absence by tracing the unspoken address of two of its characters, Jimmy Cross and a “boy” soldier. Describing this “boy” (the preceding chapter suggests that it may be O’Brien himself), O’Brien notes that “his lips were moving. Like Jimmy Cross, the boy was explaining things to *an absent judge*” (169, emphasis added).

In its dialogic form and its commitment to the logic of difference, *The Things They Carried* suggests the impossibility of testifying to trauma without a “point of reference” (Laub 66). In exploring the ramifications of the absence of witnesses to trauma, the text explicitly addresses readers, “absent judge[s]” whose engagement with the text is crucial to the process of testimony it enacts; Caruth argues that “the history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another” (“Trauma and Experience” 11). In attempting to “tell a true war story,” O’Brien relies on the participation and reflection of others, whose acts of listening produce a dialogic relationship in which “truth” may arise. The idea that truth or understanding may emerge only through the dialogic process of storytelling informs Kaplan’s claim that in the novel “what actually happened, the story’s truth, can only become apparent for the fleeting moment in which it is being told” (50). If *The Things They Carried* successfully speaks the truth of trauma, it is a truth possessed by neither its author nor its readers. Instead it resides somewhere between, in an epistemological space that conforms to the logic of dialogue and difference rather than statement and identity. By inviting readers to share this liminal space, *The Things They Carried* is able to (re)enact the imbrication with difference characteristic of war trauma. In the conclusion to this thesis, I examine further the relationship between writers and readers of war trauma narratives. Through a reading of Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “The Other Death,” I explore the notion that the act of engaging with war trauma narratives

implicates readers in a set of incommensurable histories which confound notions of truth, chronology and historical reference.

Conclusion

“A sort of outrage to rationality”:

History, Epistemology and “The Other Death”

The phenomenon of trauma [...] both urgently demands historical awareness and yet denies our usual modes of access to it. How is it possible [...] to gain access to a traumatic history?

Cathy Caruth¹

The history of pain becomes the writing of silence—of many silences. This is one of the ways in which novels and stories may get history to think again. Everything depends on the tone and the timing with which a silence is broken and on the writer’s fidelity to what words can’t reach. But then what of the reader? Doesn’t something happen to his or her comfort in the process?

Michael Wood²

Reading six novels about war trauma, we frequently encounter the notion that the phenomenon must remain forever unspeakable and forever inscrutable, and yet each novel seems to constitute an appeal of sorts, a desperate cry for empathy. In grappling with the novels, we are therefore challenged to consider difficult questions: If war trauma constitutes such a private experience, why is it necessary for survivors to bear witness to their painful histories? On what grounds could the survivor of war trauma and the reader of trauma narratives possibly hope to meet? Lastly, what is at stake in the process of engaging with traumatic narratives, and why should such a process necessarily have a profound impact on our own conceptions of identity and history? In addressing these questions, I

¹ Cathy Caruth, “Recapturing the Past,” introduction to part 2, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Caruth (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1995) 151.

² Michael Wood, *Children of Silence: On Contemporary Fiction* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988) 200.

will propose that the elusive nature of war trauma complicates notions of history, reading, and representation.

Paradoxically, although I have stressed the difficulty of narrativising war trauma, another recurrent theme in this thesis is the notion that the literary realm provides a cultural site which enables the articulation of war trauma to at least some extent: recall the significance of Sassoon's and Owen's poetry in *Regeneration*, Prior's identification with the fictional Jekyll/Hyde in *The Eye in the Door*, and the fact that science fiction is the only discourse in *Slaughterhouse-Five* which reflects Billy Pilgrim's experience of temporal dislocation. It seems apposite, then, to explore the disruptive force of war trauma narratives through a reading of one final story, an older text which anticipates many of the themes explored in this thesis: Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Other Death." Whereas the realist style and omniscient narrative voice of the *Regeneration* trilogy serve to obscure somewhat the difficulties inherent in seeking to produce knowledge about traumatic histories, such problems constitute the central concern of "The Other Death" (Borges, of course, did not go to war, though it is surely significant that the story was first published in 1949). Whereas Barker's novels imply the possibility of representing "Other People's Trauma," Borges's tale suggests that the very act of attempting to engage with the traumatic histories of others is fraught with complexities. Crucially, it suggests further that those seeking to speak the truth of "Other People's Trauma" may be irrevocably transformed by their encounter with divergent histories, and their own conceptions of memory and truth thereby undermined.

"The Other Death"

At the heart of "The Other Death" is an episode of traumatic reenactment. The narrator of the story learns indirectly that an acquaintance, Pedro Damián, has recently

died, his final moments occupied with the memory of a traumatic past; “he’d been ravaged by fever, Gannon said, and in his delirium had relived that bloody day at Masoller” (*Collected Fictions* 223). The narrator initially considers the news “predictable and even trite (223), but the incident suggests to him “a tale of fantasy based on the defeat at Masoller” (224). Conducting research for this story, he meets with Damián’s former colonel, who tells him that Damián had behaved in cowardly fashion. Disappointed, the narrator notes the unreliability of the colonel’s testimony: “I realized that he’d told these same stories many times before—indeed, it all made me fear that behind his words hardly any memories remained” (224). The observation implies the non-identity of language and memory, and resembles Silverman’s argument that linguistic structures may come to stand in for and ultimately displace traumatic recollections (64); it resonates, too, with *The Thin Red Line*’s declaration that “none of them would remember it” like “a book.” Researching the history of a trauma, the narrator encounters the first of many epistemological difficulties: the disparity between testimony and memory. Of course, this disparity is a recurrent theme in the novels examined in this thesis.

The narrator’s attempt to identify the truth of Damián’s traumatic history is hindered by the colonel’s unreliable testimony, and his tale “stubbornly refuse[s] to find its proper shape” (225); this description is redolent of Vonnegut’s inability to frame his traumatic Dresden experience. The narrator’s quest is further complicated when he returns to speak with the colonel in order to ascertain “one or two details” (225), but encounters instead an entirely different and incommensurable history. On this occasion the colonel completely fails to remember the soldier, and “swear[s] that [it] is the first time [he’s] ever heard mention of any Damián” (225). Another veteran of the war is present at the meeting, though, and he informs the narrator that Damián “died as any man might wish to die” (225), bravely leading the charge at Masoller before dying of a bullet wound. Later, the colonel writes to inform him that he now “remember[s] quite well the Entre Ríos boy

who'd led the charge at Masoller and been buried by his men at the foot of the hill (226). Disturbed by the "truly enigmatic part of it all: the curious comings and goings of Col. Tabares' memory" (226), the narrator visits Damián's home town, only to find that all traces of his existence have disappeared, and that "nobody remember[s] him anymore" (226).

In his search for the facts of Damián's history, the narrator is frustrated constantly, both by the elusiveness of any evidence, and by the contradictory nature of the few traces he does manage to uncover. What has begun as a simple narrative metamorphoses into a metaphysical consideration of the nature of history and memory, as the narrator concedes that he "pass[es] [...] to hypotheses" (226). Dismissing the possibility of "two Damiáns" (226), he considers briefly the idea that Damián had existed beyond his death in the form of a ghost:

That hypothesis is not correct, but it ought to have suggested the true one (the one that today I *believe* to be the true one), which is both simpler and more outrageous. [...] This is the way I imagine it: Damián behaved like a coward on the field of Masoller, and he dedicated his life to correcting that moment of shameful weakness. [...] In his dying agony, he relived his battle, and he acquitted himself like a man—he led the final charge and took a bullet in his chest. Thus, in 1946, by the grace of his long-held passion, Pedro Damián died in the defeat at Masoller, which took place between the winter and spring of the year 1904. (227, emphasis in original)

Crucially, the narrator can resolve the epistemological inconsistency of Damián's traumatic history only by positing the existence of "two histories of the world. In what we might call the first, Pedro Damián died in Entre Ríos in 1946; in the second, he died at Masoller in 1904" (227).

Resorting to a supernatural explanation in order to account for “a sort of outrage to rationality” (228), Borges’s narrator exemplifies the difficulty of situating war trauma with respect to linear temporal or historical structures. In other words, the “outrageous” hypothesis forwarded by the narrator attempts to redress trauma’s affront to historical understanding. In this respect, “The Other Death” addresses the same dilemma that is explored in the work of Cathy Caruth. Like the narrator, Caruth observes that trauma cannot be situated in any one single historical location:

The history that a flashback tells—as psychiatry, psychoanalysis and neurobiology equally suggest—is [...] a history that literally *has no place*, neither in the past [...] nor in the present [...]. In its repeated imposition as both image and amnesia, the trauma thus seems to evoke the difficult truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence. (“Recapturing” 153)

Caruth’s formulation of the “incomprehensibility” of a “difficult truth” resembles the narrator’s claim that he has uncovered “a sort of outrage to rationality.” Of course, the narrator of “The Other Death” responds to this impasse through reference to supernatural processes, whereas Caruth argues that encounters with paradoxical histories should encourage us to scrutinise our own conceptions of history and truth:

I would propose that it is here, in the equally widespread and bewildering encounter with trauma—both in its occurrence, and in the attempt to understand it—that we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history which is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference). Through the notion of trauma, [...] we can understand that a re-thinking of reference is not aimed at eliminating history, but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, of precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not. (*Unclaimed Experience* 182, emphasis in original)

Caruth's formulation of the relationship between trauma and historical understanding is radically different to that of Borges's narrator, but in their different fashions each illustrates the same concept: that trauma is incommensurable with existing notions of truth and history.

Just as Caruth's analysis of the mechanisms of traumatic recollection precipitates her interrogation of the very nature of "history" and "understanding," so too the narrator comes to doubt his own access to historical truth. Although he claims to have identified the "true" story of *Damián's* elusive histories, he stresses that he merely "*believe[s]*" it to be true, and can describe only the way he "*imagine[s]* it" (227, emphasis in original). In concluding, he concedes the unreliability of his own testimony, and reveals the extent to which his interaction with a fractured traumatic history has transformed him: "for the moment," he admits, "I am not certain that I have always written the truth. I suspect that within my tale there are false recollections" (228). The fragile distinction between truth and falsity is further problematised by his claim that "in 1951 or thereabouts [he] will recall having concocted a tale of fantasy, but [he] will have told the story of a true event" (228). Foregrounding the manner in which narratives themselves enter the stream of history, the observation again implies that the relationship between narratives and historical truth is difficult to trace. It suggests, indeed, the impossibility of verifying the extent to which traumatic narratives conform to historical events.

While the narrator of "The Other Death" may "believe," "imagine," and ultimately "suspect" the truth, his encounter with another's trauma implicates him in a set of incommensurable histories which serve to undermine his conceptions of truth, memory and history. In its exploration of the epistemological disruption occasioned by encounters with "Other People's Trauma," "The Other Death" is as much about the difficulty of producing knowledge about war trauma as it is about the nature of the experience itself; arguably the

central figure of the tale is not Damián, but the narrator. The story may therefore be read as an allegorical account of the role played by witnesses to traumatic testimony, and of the transformations and “suspension[s] of disbelief” (Hartman 541) demanded of such witnesses.

As readers of war trauma narratives, we may be characterised as witnesses to “Other People’s Trauma,” and clearly there are parallels between our situation and that of Borges’s narrator. In reading the works of Barker, Jones, Vonnegut, and O’Brien, we too encounter the themes of historical dislocation, the cowardice/manliness binary, the strangeness of traumatic reenactment, and the disturbing oscillation between death and survival. Like the narrator, we must reconsider our notions of history and truth if we are to engage these texts on their own terms, as paradoxical and irrational as they may seem at times. Lyotard proposes “an aesthetics of the memory of the forgotten, an anesthesics” (xxii). Examining this concept, Lawrence Langer argues that

as anesthesia is the medical means for making one insensible, anesthesics deals with the art of the insensible (and in a related way, with the non-sensible), plunges us into the non-sense (not the nonsense) of the disaster, reminds us that no ordinary feelings will make us sensitive to the appeal of such an unprecedented catastrophe. (15)

Arguably, in dealing with narratives of war trauma we do not encounter “the forgotten,” but rather that which can be neither forgotten nor remembered completely. Nevertheless, Langer’s comments suggest once again that if narratives of war trauma may convey anything of the nature of the experience, and if we are to be “sensitive to the[ir] appeal,” it is essential that we consider precisely those aspects of the stories which resist rational explanation.

Conclusion

I have argued throughout this thesis that narratives of war trauma confound notions of history and truth. Furthermore, I have insisted that the epistemological disruption occasioned by such narratives constitutes the only ground upon which meaningful dialogues between readers and writers of trauma narratives may take place. These arguments imply a set of questions which remain open: How might testimony serve to ameliorate the isolation occasioned by trauma, to lessen the burdens of traumatic histories? If dialogic acts of testimony somehow enable the articulation of trauma, what exactly might they be said to articulate? How might we characterise a form of knowledge which is manifested not as fact or even ambiguous statement but rather as something wholly different, something elusive and evanescent? Of course, we must consider the possibility that these questions may never be answered, that to seek to pin down the nature of war trauma is to ignore the lessons of a set of novels which insist upon the radical otherness and intangibility of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, the appeal implicit in trauma narratives demands that we struggle with such questions; if we are to respect the call of these (hi)stories, it is essential that we attempt to reconcile them with our own.

A common feature of *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, *The Ghost Road*, *The Thin Red Line*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *The Things They Carried* and "The Other Death" is that each explores the historical traces which structure the identity of the traumatised long after the initial traumatic experience. Ultimately, each of these stories addresses the epistemological and ethical difficulties implicit in the very act of *surviving*, of continuing to exist in a historical framework whose logic is confounded by recurrent, involuntary reminiscences which threaten the fragile distinctions between past and present, fact and fiction, self and other, and even life and death. In engaging with such narratives, we learn

that the competing demands of cultural histories and private experiences of trauma ensure that each survivor is called upon to be the author of his own personal history, which is to say his own story of the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between past and present, public and private. A character in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Crossing* describes "the history that each man makes alone out of what is left to him. Bits of wreckage. Some bones. The words of the dead. How make a world of this? How live in that world once made?" (411). The novels examined in this thesis suggest that in order to "make a world" which may accommodate the burden of trauma, it is essential for survivors to share their intrusive histories, to legitimate their survival by involving others in the process of reenactment.

Shoshana Felman contends that "by virtue of the fact that the testimony is *addressed* to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or dimension *beyond himself*" ("Education" 15, emphasis in original). Like Felman, Petar Ramadanovic suggests that testimony may provide a "vehicle" for a form of historical truth which exceeds both writer and reader. She argues that "traumatic history is lived in its return" (58):

In [Caruth's] terms, history arises where immediate understanding 'may' not arise. This history is not a substitute for an understanding of the [...] past but rather an event that we may witness *at the moment of its repetition*. (58, emphasis added)

Ramadanovic implies here that what we encounter when we take part in the dialogic process of testimony is not knowledge or memory, but rather "history" itself. We may inquire how it is possible that history should arise through the act of testimony: if memory and narrative may claim only a tenuous link to the past, how might the language of testimony serve as a receptacle for history? An answer to this final question is suggested by Michael Wood's assertion that "as both readers and writers keep learning, there is a silence

in words as well as beyond them” (205). Paradoxically, in order to speak the truth of war trauma, writers must remain faithful to the very “unspeakabilities” (Norris 509) which characterise the experience, but this bind is not entirely irresolvable; language may convey absence and silence as surely as it may attest to presence. If we are indeed able to witness history through the act of reading war trauma narratives, we perceive it in the enduring shock of what must remain unspeakable.

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