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Traumatic Re-enactments: Portraits of Veterans in Contemporary British and Canadian First World War Fiction

Anna Branach-Kallas
Nicolaus Copernicus University
anna.branach-kallas@umk.pl

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the portrait of the First World War veterans in selected British and Canadian novels published at the turn of the twenty-first century. The authors use various means to depict the phenomenon of trauma: from flashbacks disrupting the present, through survivor guilt, nightmares and suicide, to aporia and the collapse of representation. The comparative approach used in the article highlights national differences, yet also shows that the discourse of futility and trauma provides a trasnational framework to convey the suffering of the First World War. As a result, although resulting in social castration and disempowerment, trauma serves here as a vehicle for a critique of the disastrous aftermath of the 1914-1918 conflict and the erasures of collective memory. Re-enacting traumatic plots, the British and Canadian novels under consideration explore little known facets of the 1914-1918 conflict, while simultaneously addressing some of our most pressing anxieties about the present, such as social marginalization, otherness, and lonely death.

Keywords: veterans, First World War Fiction, Britain, Canada, trauma

In the recent decades the First World War has become an increasingly important literary theme in Britain and Canada, a "cultural touchstone" to which we compare later military engagements, and a catalyst for exploring (post)modern identities (Ouditt, 2005: 246). At its centenary, the Great War continues to inspire new political, social and cultural interpretations, which expose its haunting absurdity, liminality, and ambivalence (see Sokołowska-Paryż and Löschnigg, 2014).[1] The purpose of this article is an analysis of the portraits of First World War veterans in selected British and Canadian novels published at the turn of the twenty-first century: Louisa Young's *The Heroes' Welcome* (2014), Helen Dunmore's *The Lie* (2014), Jane Urquhart's *The Underpainter* (1997), Allan Donaldson's *Maclean* (2005) and Frances Itani's *Tell* (2014). The five texts under

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scrutiny engage with aspects of post-war reality which have not, perhaps, been sufficiently examined. Faced with rigid standards of manliness, as well as doctrines of industrial efficiency and adaptability, the First World War veterans were frequently considered "inferior men" (Montgomery, 2017: 48). While in Britain they had to rely on charity, the Canadian government created a system of pensions, but was determined to save public money whenever possible[2]. The article aims therefore to demonstrate how the veterans' experiences, often ignored in the past, become the object of fascination today, and thus "provide an inroad into how national identities and social memories are shaped" (Montgomery, 2017: 10).

Depicting the difficult reintegration of traumatized men, the five novels under consideration question or reinforce popular master narratives of remembrance. In the British context, collective memory of the First World War has been marked by the *futility myth*, the tropes and despair and disillusionment, shaped, to a large degree, by the poets-combatants (see Hynes, 1990: 407-463). In the post-war years, literature engendered images of "radical emptiness—as a chasm, or an abyss, or an edge—[…], all expressing a fracture in time and space that separated the present from the past" (Hynes, 1990: xi). The conflict was conceptualized as a bloody catastrophe, caused by ill-considered tactics of frontal attacks on enemy lines, which led to the death of thousands of men. In popular memory, the suffering of the shell-shocked infantry officer, haunted by images of his comrades climbing 'over the top' to be mowed down by machine guns, is sacrosanct (Wilson, 2014: 43; 49). As Ross J. Wilson suggests, in spite of the efforts made by historians to demonstrate that the war was a huge success of the British army, which provided opportunities for loyalty and camaraderie within the ranks, the "rats, gas, mud and blood" image persists in literature, films and television programmes (2014: 42; see also Todman, 2005: xii).

By contrast, in Canadian memory, the Great War has been represented as a foundational myth; the sacrifice of sixty thousand Canadian soldiers proved that Canada was not only a dominion at the service of the British Empire, but an independent nation. The war was also to help transcend ethnic, social and religious differences among the Canadian people within a homogenous Anglo-Canadian culture (Vance, 1997: 260-261). However, apart from these emancipatory and assimilationist overtones, central to Canada's memory of the Great War was also the parallel between Canadian soldiers and Jesus Christ; the combatants, fighting in a sacred crusade in defence of Christianity and Western civilization, formed a community of sacrifice, which had the power to atone for the sins of the world (Vance, 1997: 40-41). In this context, it was difficult to accept that the Great War crusaders had become broken men, unable to provide for themselves and their families (Vance, 1997: 53)

Referring to the British and Canadian historical contexts, the five texts under analysis depict veterans suffering from war-related psychological disorders and thus echo the phenomenon of shell shock, its cultural perception and contestation. Soldiers and veterans with wounds of the minds were stigmatized during and after the First World War and their symptoms, such as memory disorders, tremor, paralysis, mutism, panic attacks, were often seen as evidence of moral weakness.[3] It is important to remember, however, that, as Jay Winter suggests, in the Great War shell shock was not what we refer to as trauma nowadays, but rather "a category taken at the time to be analogous to surgical

shock, a life-threatening condition" (2015: 317). Our contemporary understanding of trauma has been shaped by Holocaust studies, the Vietnam War and feminist movements of the 1970s (Luckhurst, 2008: 59-76). Key to the analyses of trauma today is the concept of aporia, promoted by the deconstructive approach of Cathy Caruth. In this perspective, trauma is an event that

> is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. […] Its very unassimilated nature—the way it is precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on. (1996: 4)

Trauma involves therefore a delay in seeing, an incompletion in knowing, and a haunting residue. The unassimilated event possesses its victim, yet remains beyond verbalization. Consequently, it is not so much the moment of psychic injury, but the survival of it, that becomes traumatic (Caruth, 1995: 7-10). This aporetic paradigm is challenged by trauma therapists, among others Judith Lewis-Herman (1992) and Dori Laub (1992a), who insist on the necessity of testimony and verbalization. In this perspective, memory work can help the victim to depart from the traumatic moment and to reintegrate the traumatized self. This controversy is mirrored in contemporary fiction, which has "developed a repertoire of plots that explore both traumatic disruption and the possibility of release into narrative" (Luckhurst, 2008: 80).[4] In the historical novels below, memory of the First World War is filtered through the contemporary trauma discourse; they employ various literary technique to illustrate psychological breakdown and the traumatic aftermaths of industrialized warfare, oscillating between attempts to explicate trauma and the impossibility of its representation.

In her novel *Tell*, published in 2014, set between 1919 and 1921 in the fictional town of Deseronto (Ontario), Canadian author Frances Itani portrays a veteran who lost half of his face in an explosion in France, and suffers from mutism and partial paralysis. In many ways, *Tell* is a classic trauma narrative, as Itani employs here several interruptive, non-linear techniques to illustrate the disruption of the returned soldier's memory and identity (Coates, 2016: 52). Kenan has not left his house since he came back to Canada in the winter of 1918. "[H]aving brought the battelefield home with him" (Itani, 2014: 10), he considers it safer to stay indoors and isolates himself from his wife and the Deseronto community. Unable to re-enter the structures of his previous existence, he spends his days alone, imprisoned in his memories of war. The war comes back to him in terrible nightmares, in which, together with his comrades, he is exposed to extreme danger. Paralysing flashbacks also interrupt his daily routine and cause him to shake uncontrollably:

> Those imaginings—what he saw in his mind, what he dreamed and felt and tasted and smelled—were not imaginings at all. They were real, *had* been real the entire time he was overseas. He had never put any of this into words and did not want memories to start tumbling out now. Better to hold the lid on what was behind his eyes. Memory saw with two eyes, no matter if one eye was blind or not. (Itani, 2014: 135)

The protagonist's strange behaviour is a form of *acting out*, which Domnick LaCapra (2001: 142-143) identifies as a compulsive tendency to repeat the traumatizing events; instead of directly confronting the past, Kenan's psyche re-enacts the brutal scenes of death in violent intrusions, which are destructive to the self. His behaviour oscillates between numbing, the absence of feelings, and vigilance, hyperalertness to stimuli, which scholars identify as polar symptoms of trauma (Herman, 1992: 49). The reader does not learn about the source of Kenan's trauma until midway through the novel, thus sharing the protagonist's feelings of loss and uncertainty. The memory that haunts Kenan with a particular intensity is that of the barrage during which he was wounded, and his friend Bill, who calls to him for help in his nightmares, was annihilated. Because of its sudden and overwhelming character, the veteran is unable to assimilate the terror of massive, premature and absurd dying. Kenan cannot remember, for in order to survive, his psyche severed emotions from awareness of what was happening by dissociating itself from reality (see Lifton, 1996: 169-175).

Nevertheless, *Tell* also illustrates the process of *working through* trauma, which functions as a countervailing force to acting out, and might help the survivor to distinguish between present and past, and thus disengage from trauma (LaCapra, 2001: 58). As indicated in its title, the *telling* of trauma plays a most important function in Itani's novel. Silence might seem to protect the traumatized person, however, although muted and deeply hidden, the traumatic events continue to have a destructive impact on their life (Laub, 1992a: 58). This is illustrated in *Tell* by the story of Am and Maggie, who have never spoken about the tragic death of their children, which occurred years ago, but still disrupts their existence. According to Dori Laub, trauma survivors must "tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life" (1992b: 78-79). Kenan is anxious to speak, yet is paralysed by fear. Only at the end of the novel, when talking to Am, who confesses his tragic story to him, does he become able to verbalize his memories of the fatal barrage.[5]

This exchange of traumatic memories is intriguing in Itani's novel. On the one hand, it creates an ethically disturbing parallel between the death of soldiers in war and the accidental demise of children in peacetime. On the other hand, Itani explores the concept of *asymmetries as similarities* (see Rothberg, 2011: 528) by juxtaposing stories that are not identical to each other but similar, yet in being entirely different. While I am sceptical whether each of these experiences can be better understood by being confronted with the other, the juxtaposition highlights the necessity to *tell* in order to heal from trauma. Shell shock is therefore placed in a specific historical context, but also a more universal light, within the range of other traumatic encounters with death. Ultimately, having told his story, Kenan is able to see that he is loved and needed by his family and friends; this sense of empowerment allows him to break his isolation and re-gain control over his life.

In *The Heroes' Welcome* (2014), set in-between 1919 and 1927, British author Louisa Young employs more disruptive techniques that mirror the effects of trauma on the veteran's psyche. One of the protagonists of the novel, Peter Locke, is unable to reintegrate his life and to reassume the duties of a husband and father. He remains imprisoned in the past and relives ceaselessly the horrors of the front. He can find solace

only in alcohol and drugs. It is also an escapist tactic, which allows him to evade his responsibilities, for Peter's intimate life is damaged by his war experience, too. His wife, Julia, a conventional, upper middle-class lady, irritates him because of her expectation that he should automatically re-enter his pre-war existence. Significantly, in the *The Heroes' Welcome*, the traumatic knowledge that the protagonist has acquired at the front interferes with the present, renders the future impossible, and prevents him from coming back home from war:

> Constant, lethal danger of death, at all times. They had breathed it, swam in it, drunk it, eaten it, been it—ferocious, insidious, perpetual danger; drowning in the constant threat—an extraordinary way to live! Immersed in danger, soaked through, inseparable. How can a man ever rinse that out of his psyche? Were we not leached and warped by that toxic bath? Our chemistry changed, our joints rusted and corroded, our hearts scorched? (Young, 2014: 246).

This lived, corporeal knowledge proves "disjunctive" and makes reintegration impossible (Leed, 1979: 75). Having become an other to himself, the protagonist perceives his wife and son as strangers, incapable of understanding his suffering. He is unable to work and isolates himself by avoiding the company of people who knew him, as a refined gentleman, before the war. In fact, Peter feels responsible for the loss of men who died under his command during the battles of Loos and the Somme. He suffers from survivor guilt, an aspect of war trauma, which Robert J. Lifton defines in terms of self-blame for participation in unjust slaughter and the combatant's identification with the dead (1996: 115-179). Peter either wishes he had died with his men, or comes to the conclusion that he did not deserve to die with them. He believes that he deserves to be punished for his incompetent decisions and the betrayal of those who were under his care.

Peter's condition improves during his wife's pregnancy, yet the intense experience of her labour triggers the flow of traumatic memories. It is as if the distress of the present was conflated with the traumatic experience of the past. During Julia's labour, Peter is overwhelmed by the hallucination that he has brought a comrade to a casualty clearing station at the front. He confuses the doctor with the MO, the assisting female friends with nurses, and his wife with an injured soldier:

> He just sat there, and smoked. He wasn't going to leave the poor fellow alone. *Is is Purefoy? Ainsworth? Who is it?*
>
> They were doing some kind of emergency surgery. Evidently it went well, though it seemed to take some time. After a while—a long time—*hours?*—the soldier's crying out and gasping and weeping stopped. The women stepped away from the bed. The angle of the doctor's shoulders changed—there was a kind of rolling back, an assumed uprightness. He turned, carrying something: *It'll be whatever they just amputated*. It was wrapped in cloth, and looked like some kind of small limb—half an arm, perhaps. Lower leg. *Poor bastard*. (Young, 2014: 187-188).

When the doctor wants to hand the new-born infant to him, Peter believes he tries to give him the soldier's amputated limb. Only when he hears that it is his daughter, he "snaps back" to the present (Young, 2014: 188). Whether this representation of traumatic

memory is psychologically correct is irrelevant, for the combination of direct speech and free indirect speech creates a most powerful effect on the reader. The birth of his daughter gives Peter hope for the future. Tragically, Julia dies of a haemorrhage at night, while Peter is uncertain whether the blood all over him belongs to her or his dead comrades. He also has strong suspicions that he has killed his wife himself.

Subsequently, considering himself accountable for the horrors of the past and the present, Peter abandons his children to the care of his friends and isolates himself in a country cottage. However, in the last part of the novel, set eight years later, in 1927, Young illustrates, somewhat abruptly, Peter's partial recovery. With the help of his former comrade Riley Purefoy, Peter eventually comes back home. Together, they travel to Ypres to pay tribute to the departed at Menin Gate; the novel closes with a promise of peace and redemption. Like Itani's *Tell*, *The Heroes' Welcome* is a harmonizing narrative, which, by illustrating the process of healing from trauma, provides the reader with a spiritual uplift (LaCapra, 2001: 13).[6]

By contrast, Canadian author Allan Donaldson and British writer Helen Dunmore insist on the deathly power of war that continues to exclude the veteran from the world of the living many years after the conflict. In *Maclean,* a short, ironic and little-known novel from 2005, Allan Donaldson draws a portrait of a despaired and disillusioned First World War veteran in a small New Brunswick town in the 1940s. For the protagonist, the war is a caesura that separates the pre-war world of hope, opportunities and youth from the post-war realities of frustration and ageing, "that fork in the road of time where [he] could make the turn towards the li[fe] [he] ought to have had" (Donaldson, 2005: 95). Rather than with glory and heroism, his memories of war are filled with mutilated bodies and absurd deaths resulting from the irrational decisions of incompetent staff. The horrible battles he took part in are only mentioned as "brisk skirmishes" in the histories of the war, and remain beyond his comprehension (Donaldson, 2005: 56). In Maclean's memories, some of the Canadian soldiers were brutal, mean-spirited and dishonest, which clashes with the glorification of Canadian volunteers in the collective imagination. He could not believe his lack when he was gassed and, deemed "no longer healthy enough to be killed" (Donaldson, 2005: 99), was sent back home. Yet, after he returned to Canada, Spanish Influenza ravished the community, killing the girl he might have married. With "more and more boys dragging home with their wounds, outer and inner, from the trenches" (Donaldson, 2005: 80), the borderline between the hell of military front and the peace of home front is increasingly blurred.

A quarter of a century after the war, the veteran is still haunted by unwanted memories of the past. Donaldson smoothly integrates his protagonist's traumatic memories in long descriptive passages, sometimes separated from the rest of the text by a pause. The flashbacks come unexpectedly every time when "Someone, something, sneaking past the sentries he had posted, had thrown wide the gates of memory" (Donaldson, 2005: 98). A powerful example is Maclean's reaction to the deafening noise of a passing train that he has almost collided with on a shaking bridge. Although he knows that he is safe, his body reacts, shivering, and brings back the memory of a young boy in panic during his first barrage:

> "Jesus. Jesus," the boy beside him kept shouting. "Make them stop. Make them stop."
>
> "Keep down, you god-damned fool! Keep down!"
>
> He looked up, at the water falling through the sluice gates silently, at the traffic going back and forth on the other bridge silently, at the people leaning calmly on the rails talking to each other, as if they were in another world form him here bent over the edge of the truss, terrified, shivering, the wheels pounding relentlessly beside him, shaking the bridge under his feet.
>
> The earth shook. The earth shook and erupted and stank of explosive, and the almost naked body of a man, spilling blood and guts, its legs blown to tatters, came tumbling end over end down over the parados. (Donaldson, 2005: 110)

Another interesting aspect of the novel is Donaldson's use of similes that refer to the world of war to depict Canadian every-day life, e.g. a man in mourning looks "like a man with a mortal wound"; the sky shimmers with northern lights "like the flickering of a distant barrage" (Donaldson, 2005: 117; 141). As Kali Tal suggests, "Traumatic experience catalyzes a transformation of meaning in the signs individuals use to represent their experiences" (1996: 16). The accumulation of similes referencing front life in *Maclean* serves the translation of trauma into textual means, but also renders the metamorphosis of the protagonist under the influence of war, which clearly affects the way he perceives and frames his existence.

In Donaldson's novel, Maclean and other veterans drift on the margins of respectable society, addicted to alcohol, getting involved in street fights, and stealing from one another. With his damaged lungs and the economic depression, the protagonist can barely survive on his meagre pension. Because of his irregular life style, he has been shunned by his family, who, blame him for his inability to adapt. He has the bitter feeling that "There isn't any decent life" available for the likes of him (Donaldson, 2015: 97). Maclean shows anger and resentment towards the ones who stayed at home and were thus saved from the destructive effects of war trauma: "Old vets, like himself, on street corners coming to see that in the years they had been away the ones who had stayed home, the smart ones, light-footed, had been making money and getting ahead, and they, the heroes, the stupid ones, were never going to catch up" (Donaldson, 2005: 86). Donaldson thus illustrates the veterans' "demotion from 'heroes' to eminently superfluous men used up by an industrialized war" (Leed, 1979: 196). His protagonist's disillusionment involves a feeling of *proletarianization*, experienced by many veterans after the First World War (see Leed, 1979: 75-6). This loss of dignity makes him "unfit for active service in the world" (Donaldson, 2005: 92). After his childhood sweetheart is killed by influenza, he gets involved with a war widow, a simple but decent woman. However, unemployment, destitution, loss of opportunities precipitate him into "dank despair" (Donaldson, 2005: 91) and ruin the relationship.

The final scene in the novel replays ironically the lines from Laurence Binyon's "For the Fallen": the intoxicated veteran walks to the Great War cenotaph, conversing with the soldiers at the top, while a stranger, looking at him from an upstairs window, "draws down the blind" (Donaldson, 2005: 161-162). Donaldson thus exposes the hypocrisy of

commemoration rituals, such as Remembrance Day in Canada, which promise immortality to the First World War fallen, while the living are relegated to oblivion. Although Maclean cannot forget the death of the men who were "his pals" and whose names are engraved on the monument, he cannot relate to the cenotaph. The living memory of war enacted daily by his traumatized mind is incompatible with this grandiose and impersonal structure. The novel's ending raises important questions about the relation between trauma and collective remembrance, as well as the social neglect of veterans in the aftermath of wars.

In *The Lie* (2014), Helen Dunmore relies on temporal disruption to illustrate war's tragic aftermath, yet she also uses Gothic means to represent the power of traumatic memory. Daniel, the protagonist of the novel, is literally haunted by the ghosts of soldiers dead in the war, particularly the spirit of his beloved friend, Frederick. In spite of the difference in class—Daniel was a farmer's son, Frederic belonged to the upper middle class—the two Cornish boys became close friends before the war and their relationship flourished when they were reunited in the war zone, with homoerotic overtones. As in *Tell* by Itani, the sources of trauma are gradually revealed to the reader, who thus witnesses the protagonist's memory work. Daniel's first-person-narrative, filled with ellipses and flashbacks, stages the play of victim/victimizer with an ambivalence characteristic of the Gothic convention. The eponymous lie has a double meaning in the novel, fusing the distress suffered by the soldier after his return home with his limit experience at the front. Daniel hides from the community that Mary Pascoe, the old woman who invited him to live with her after he came back, is dead and that he buried her in the garden. At the same time, he cannot remember the circumstances of Frederick's death at the front; he fights to keep these memories at bay, which can only aggravate his trauma (see Laub, 1992: 85-6). When neighbours question him about Mary Pascoe's whereabouts, he panics because he knows he might be punished for hiding her demise, but also because of the tormenting secret of Frederick's death.

The symptoms displayed by Daniel illustrate the pervasiveness of trauma and demonstrate vividly that the brutalization suffered by the soldier in the war zone was traumatic in itself and makes a return to ordinary life impossible. The protagonist has terrifying visions of violence, against innocent children and animals, in which the brutality he perpetrated and witnessed at the front permeates the calm Cornish countryside. He suffers from nightmares and hallucinations, as the ghosts of Frederick visits him at night and in daytime. On the one hand, he dreads these apparitions, on the other hand he longs for them, because they bring his beloved friend back. Significantly, however, it is not only Frederick who haunts Daniel, but also other men dead in war:

> Men are rising lazily out of their beds. They stretch their limbs, and the soil falls off them. The uniforms are unmarked. Their faces are round, and tanned with living in the open air. They stare about them. […] They don't know this place. I want them to go back. I want the earth to cover them. I want them to be blown to bits again if it only stops them coming on. (Dunmore, 2014: 259).

In *The Lie* Dunmore therefore engages with the theme of the return of the dead, reminiscent of Abel Gance's famous 1919 film *J'accuse*[7], to demonstrate the

impossibility of surviving mass death, of transcending the cruelties and brutal separations witnessed by the survivor in the frontlines. Daniel remains viscerally connected to the mass of corpses buried haphazardly in No Man's Land. His visions, disrupting the present, point to a number of transgressions embodied by the traumatized veteran, who remains in the world of war/death, although he has returned to the world of peace/the living. He is a figure of abjection, questioning ontological boundaries between the living and the dead, and blurring the sanitized borderline between the horrors of war and the realities of peacetime. The recurring Gothic images of *the underground*, (un)burying corpses or being buried alive during explosions, also point to the power of the dead over the living and the problematic aspects of unfinished mourning, rendered impossible by the brutalities of front-life.

For the protagonist of *The Lie*, "The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of 'normal' reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after" (Laub 1992a: 69). Fragments of the past are ceaselessly restaged in the novel until, eventually, a flash of traumatic memory in the presence of Felicia, Frederick's sister, allows the reader to discover, together with the protagonist, what really happened at the front:

> I see it then. The squat bundle of his kit, by the end of the bed. That's what the smell was. Everything that's been near that mud smells of death. [...] Raw mud, old gas, cordite, shit, rotting flesh. […] I sink to my knees and cover my head with my arms and rock myself to stop the trembling. I think that I cry out. [...]
>
> 'Can you get up now?' she asks me.
>
> *Can you get up now? Can you move your arms? Your legs?*
>
> The stretcher party came for me, but not for Frederick. There was no sign of him anywhere. Only blown, sticky mud over everything. A shudder takes hold of me again, as if I'm a child being shaken by a grown man. (Dunmore, 2014: 154-156)

During a trench raid, Frederick was seriously wounded and, after Daniel left him unconscious in a shell-crate to look for help, his body was annihilated in an explosion. Daniel blames himself for his friend's death; he is convinced that he should not have abandoned him and should have died with him. The distrust or even open hostility the veteran shows to his neighbours after he returns home signals that trauma might result in social alienation, particularly when the victim believes fundamental human bonds were violated during the catastrophe (Herman, 1992: 54).

In Daniel's view, he remains an outsider, haunting the margins of the community; the dead are more real to him than the living. Using Gothic means, Dunmore highlights "one of the greatest points of the abject: that of being fully whole while not fully there or acknowledged as belonging, being, or a being" (Fitzsimmons and Reynaud, 2014: 195). The protagonist is unable to connect with Felicia and her daughter, or to start a new life in London. When a group of neighbours comes to his house, he believes that they are

pursuing him to punish him for Mary Pascoe's death. Therefore he runs to avoid being caught and eventually jumps from a cliff. The Gothic indeterminacy of the narrative makes it uncertain whether all of this is real or imagined by Daniel's traumatized mind. The suggested reunion with Frederick in suicide reaffirms that the veteran belongs to the world of the dead, separated forever from the living.

In *The Underpainter* (1997), winner of the Governor General's Literary Award, Canadian writer Jane Urquhart also depicts the suicidal death of two survivors of the First World War, George Kearns and Augusta Moffatt. Interestingly, the narrator is a self-centred American abstract painter, Austin Fraser, an outsider who was never really affected by the war. The reader learns about the Canadian couple's war experience from Austin's re-narrativization of Augusta's long 1937 monologue. For George, an art lover and china painter from a modest family in Ontario, it is the annihilation of European culture that was a particular source of trauma. He lost his bearings during the battle of Passchendale, when in a ruined house he found a piece of broken china, a symbol of the apocalypse. Augusta in turn was a nurse at the Number One Canadian Hospital in Étaples, exhausted by the ceaseless work and deeply traumatized by the injuries of the soldiers, as well as her inability to relieve their pain. After a bombardment and the loss of her dearest friend Maggie, she developed a complex dissociative disorder. Eventually, George and Augusta met at a hospital for shell-shock victims.

Almost two decades after the war, both the protagonists of *The Underpainter* still suffer from flashbacks and nightmares. Apparently, they have reconstructed their lives, but their existence is founded on a wound which cannot be healed (Laub, 1992a: 73). While George refuses to talk about the war, desperate to move beyond the trauma of the past, Augusta tries to neutralize the memories that haunt her by using morphine. Her world suddenly collapses in 1937, when Austin brings George's first sweetheart to Davenport. She then questions her relationship with her lover and the sense of survival itself: "What were any of us to do with the rest of our lives anyway? After all that. We were only in our early twenties and our lives were finished. And yet here we are, George and me, right in the middle of the aftermath. What makes it just continue and continue?" (Urquhart, 1998: 34). The *imperative to live*, inherent in survival, is thus questioned in the novel, as life beyond trauma proves unbearable (see Caruth, 2013: 6-7). Subsequently, the female protagonist confesses to Austin what happened to her and George during the war. However, in *The Underpainter,* the telling of trauma is catastrophic. As Laub emphasizes, "The act of telling might itself become severely traumatizing, if the price of speaking is *re-living*; not relief, but further retraumatization" (1992a: 67). In his egotism, Austin remains too impassive and unwilling a listener to empathically restrain the flow of memories and maintain emotional boundaries, when the process of testimony becomes too intense (Laub, 1992a: 71). As a result Augusta commits suicide; upon discovering her body, George also kills himself.

Nevertheless, what is of central importance in *The Underpainter* is metafiction, and more specifically *ekphrasis*, the literary representations of, and comments on, visual works of art. It is Austin, the painter and the novel's narrator, who is the hero of the story; Augusta and George function only in the background of his narrative. The Canadian setting of their lives, as well as their stories, provide an inspiration for the artist, and the creative process is crucial in Urquhart's text. In his series of abstract paintings, Austin

creates a realistic representation, which he then covers with several layers of paint, thus erasing the initial image. The technique of pentimento he employs results in an abstract collage, a palimpsest, which, however, remains undecipherable. The *Erasure* series thus metaphorically illustrates the tension between the witness's desperate efforts to construct a fragmented narrative of the traumatic past and the artist's representation of war trauma as aporia, a catastrophic rupture of meaning. The paintings and the narrative simultaneously enact and erase the traumatic past, Augusta and George thus becoming "self-erasing inscription[s] of history" (Caruth, 2013: 78). In a more general sense, *The Underpainter* therefore addresses the crisis in representation engendered by trauma, by illustrating "narrative *possibility* just as much as *impossibility*" (Luckhurst, 2008: 83).

Importantly, however, Urquhart also engages in a critique of trauma art, which "does not simply supplement the witness's account but manages, in the operation, to annihilate the witness" (Gordon, 2014: 107). War insiders might wish to protect their intimate experience or forget about it; in this sense, the artist, who grants superiority to artistic reconstruction over traumatic experience itself, is only an intruder in their damaged lives (Gordon, 2014: 86). Nevertheless, in *The Underpainter*, many years after his friends' tragic suicide, a depressed, ageing Austin cannot find any solace in his paintings, the same works of art that had won him enormous success. As a result, he tries to atone for his sins by re-narrating, among others, the First World War stories Augusta told him in the past. He then confesses the emotions he felt, or allowed himself to feel much later, in response to her narrative. When accompanied by empathy, art therefore helps create a bond with the trauma victim. As Sherill Grace contends, "Austin first listens to Augusta's story, then he relays the story to us; by telling us, he performs his role as secondary witness inside the text and constructs […] us as listening-readers with the potential to perform as secondary witnesses outside the text" (2014: 113). This complex process of mediation signals, however, that the witness's experience cannot be *fully* recovered. Austin's technique of erasure also mirrors the framing process in the novel, the shift from direct testimony to its literary representation. *The Underpainter* therefore raises the larger question of the ethical ambivalence of art—painting, writing—in relation to traumatic experience.

Taking into account the social marginalization of First World War veterans who suffered from wounds of the mind, the novels analyzed above give voice to silenced victims of the 1914-1918 conflict and, through their focus on traumatic memory, reclaim important aspects of the historical past. While Itani and Young stress healing and redemption, Donaldson, Dunmore and Urquhart highlight the tragic dimension of a war that never ends. The five novelists use various literary means to represent traumatic disruption—from realist description, through Gothic ambivalence, to sophisticated devices such as *ekphrasis* and the suspension of representation. The fictional reiteration of the death encounter, an experience that the soldiers are unable to grasp, suggests here "a form of memory that, in enacting what it could not recall, also passed on a historical event that this memory erased" (Caruth, 2013: 78). The novels under consideration thus oscillate between the re-enactment of history and its evasiveness and ineffability, engaging with a conception of the First World War as a "history constituted by the erasure of its own memory" (Caruth, 2013: 81)[8]. The historical background is particularly significant in Young's *The Heroes' Welcome* and Donaldson's *Maclean*, while in

Urquhart's *The Underpainter* the war provides a pretext for a more generic reflection on war trauma and the limits of its representation. Notwithstanding the differences in contexts and rhetoric, the figure of the traumatized veteran becomes a metaphor of utter devastation—social, economic, spiritual and ethical—caused by the First World War in different communities across the Atlantic Ocean.

A comparative analysis of recent British and Canadian First World War fiction reveals striking analogies. Young and Dunmore reinforce and transform the traditional British tropes of despair and disillusionment; they redefine the meanings of "apocalypse" in terms of survivor guilt (*The Heroes' Welcome*) and an abject crossing of the boundaries between life and death (*The Lie*). In an age of pacifism, however, the British tropes of futility and trauma seem to appeal to Canadian writers as well. The radical departure from the Canadian myth of war in Itani's, Donaldson's, and Urquhart's fiction questions the excess of meaning in the national story. In *Tell, Maclean*, and *The Underpainter*, the Great War is a "a mechanized factory of death" (Luckhurst, 2008: 51), a catastrophe that brings only anguish, ruin and despair.[9] Informed by twentieth century trauma studies, the five novels under consideration represent the war in ways more understandable to "generations shaped by the knowledge of the Holocaust and subsequent genocides, as well as various politically and ethically questionable military conflicts (Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan)" (Sokołowska-Paryż, 2015: 98–99). Importantly, the continuity between British and Canadian fiction allows the reader/critic to see the aftermath of the First World War in a transnational perspective.

As Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone remind us, "Contests over the meaning of the past are also contests over the meaning of the present and over ways of taking the past forward" (2003: 1). A hundred years after the conflict, the First World War is the object of new political, social and ethical interpretations, which risk to be read as slightly anachronistic or a-historical. Factual accuracy is less important here, however, than the powerful aesthetic and ethic effects this fiction has on its readers. Our sympathy with the mentally wounded soldier mirrors late twentieth century reconceptualization of human rights as well as the current oversensitivity to the abuses of institutions of power. In this sense, recent First World War fiction might "reflect more about those engaged in the process of remembering than it does about the events of 1914 to 1918" (Wilson, 2014: 44). Although resulting in social castration and disempowerment, trauma also serves here as a vehicle for a critique of the disastrous aftermath of the First World War, and the veteran's shattered body/mind functions as a reminder of dangerous military operations. Re-enacting traumatic plots, the British and Canadian novels discussed in this article explore little known facets of the 1914-1918 conflict, and address some of our most pressing anxieties about the present, such as social marginalization, otherness, and lonely death. At the same time, they express and elicit profound empathy for the First World War veteran who thus becomes an iconic victim of our violent, catastrophic times.

Notes

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1. See Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski (2018: 1-11) for an analysis of the multiple reasons for the "return" of the First World War as an important cultural source of inspiration at the centenary of the conflict.
2. See Cohen (2001) and Morton and Wright (1987) for a discussion of official policies towards returning soldiers in Britain and Canada.
3. It is estimated that 200,000 British men were discharged because of psychological injuries (Luckhurst, 2008: 50); 9,000 to 15,000 First World War Canadian soldiers were diagnosed with shell-shock (Montgomery, 2017: 34).
4. See Luckhurst (2008) for a discussion of contemporary cultural narratives that illustrate traumatic disruption and the possibility of narrativization.
5. For an extended analysis of Itani's *Tell*, see Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski (2018: 30-35).
6. For an extended analysis of Young's *The Heroes' Welcome*, see Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski (2018: 96-104; 124-134).
7. Winter (1996: 15-18) discusses Gance's film and the theme of the return of the dead in relation to the cultural consequences of the First World War.
8. This search for a post-modern aesthetics to convey the catastrophe of war can also be placed in continuity with the efforts of experimental artists in the wake of the conflict. See Winter (1996) for a discussion of the tension between more traditional ways of apprehending war trauma and modernist experimentation. While the former stressed a desire for healing and consolation, the latter provided ways of remembering that emphasized anger, despair, and ethical dissent (Winter, 1996: 5). In this light, the First World War can be interpreted as a turning point in the history of trauma aesthetics.
9. My intention is not to draw overgeneralized conclusions. The selected Canadian novels depart most radically from the initial myth of nation building. A number of recent Canadian novels still approach the war as "a site of cultural progression" (Gordon, 2014: 14) by "decrying the horrors of war while still making use of its productive cultural effects" (Gordon, 2014: 15). Most reaffirm distinctively Canadian values (Gordon, 2014: 15) and urge "us to reflect upon what it means today to be Canadians" in relation to the nation's military history (Grace, 2014: 16).

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