

02/2012

War veteran trauma in English literature



The haunting memory of the Great War in Britain is captured in the literary representation of the traumatised soldier returning home from war. Drawing on trauma theory and taking the figure of the shell-shocked soldier as a point of departure, Cristina Pividori, researcher at the Department of English and German Studies at UAB suggests that, unlike most of its contemporaries, the responses to war trauma posed by Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) are not only the enactment of Freud's theory of the death drive, but part of a peculiar experience of survival.

The trope of the return of the soldier is a recurrent and controversial presence in the literature of the Great War. The physically and mentally wounded soldier, the veteran as the victim, appears to be the most symbolic visual reminder of the Great War, a war that is revealed precisely as a wound inflicted on humankind. Although narrated in the first person by his cousin, *The Return of the Soldier* tells the story of Chris Baldry, an officer of the British army sent home from the Western Front because of shell-shock. The only allusion to trauma is the devastating amnesia that has wiped out the last fifteen years of the character's life. Chris has been made to forget the death of his only son, Oliver, and his unhappy marriage with the selfish Kitty. Instead, he has regressed to the time of his young manhood in Monkey Island in which he was in love with Margaret. Even if West repeats some of the fixed patterns around the representation of the soldier as victim which are characteristic of the literature of

the Great War, particularly in relation to the compulsive repetition of the nightmares of war and the vicissitudes of representing the elusiveness of death, the writer achieves a clear move beyond current beliefs, suggesting the search for survival beyond trauma.

Groundbreaking work on trauma in literature and critical theory by Felman, Laub and Caruth has reformulated Freud's ideas arguing that to the extent trauma produces a violent paradigm shift, a break between life and death, it also opens up a new potential for perception and understanding. This way, it is possible to reinterpret Freud's analysis of repetition compulsion as a new relationship between consciousness and life. In the traumatic encounter with death, life itself witnesses that which consciousness cannot apprehend. Not having being able to come to terms with the past, West's soldier is immersed in the incomprehensible act of surviving that he repeats by bearing witness to what remains ungrasped from his encounter with death. As Caruth writes, "the witness of survival itself – the awakening that constitutes life – lies not only in the incomprehensible repetition of the past, but in the incomprehensibility of a future that is not yet owned." West's novel aims at the future with shyness and distrust; the problem the writer faces is how to have her soldier narrate a past that he is still unable to consciously remember. For that, West resorts to Margaret, rescuing an ideal past that connects Chris to life. Desire is used as the framework for healing after loss and the reunion with the lost love becomes essential to the soldier's bearing witness to trauma. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that Chris Baldry is made to survive because there is a person – Margaret – that justifies his living.

Particular attention is paid to the active role of Margaret as listener-companion and to the function of testimony as a mode of access to the truth. Far from playing the traditional passive role of the nurse and mother figure to which women tended to be drawn after the Great War, Margaret is placed in the unique situation of witness – and protagonist – of the soldier's pain. Chris' story of trauma – the very process of bearing witness to it – does indeed begin with his testifying to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence. To Margaret, then, it was a call to becoming a blank sheet on which the event would be written for the first time, to experience trauma in herself.

In the context of the literature of the Great War, West's novel can be read as an alignment between witnesses. Trauma, thus, becomes a record that has to be made with the aid of the witness, the listener and the teller. Despite the difficulty to access a reality that seems to exist before or beyond representation, the text, either directly or indirectly, strives to construct the truth from the encounter and interplay of these three levels of witnessing. Margaret, on one hand, as the first listener of the soldier's story, relives trauma even before Jenny the narrator does. Jenny, in turn, being a witness of the process of witnessing itself, seems to move closer but then retreats from the experience itself, with the certainty that there is a truth that should be reached, but with the awareness that words do not seem to be reliable or adequate enough to verbalize it. Moreover, the voices of the three witnesses – the soldier's, Margaret's and the narrator's – are woven in an attempt to repossess the past and situate it with respect to a reality which, in its elusiveness, is yet to be apprehended. Through this dialogic interplay, the text emerges as both testimony and act of survival and attempts a response to a crisis of representation which results from trauma itself.



Meninsky, Bernard. Victoria Station, District Railway, 1918. Imperial War Museum.
<http://www.iwmprints.org.uk/>

Cristina Pivodori

MariaCristina.Pivodori@uab.es

References

"Eros and Thanatos Revisited: The Poetics of Trauma in Rebecca West's The Return of the Soldier" *ATLANTIS*. 32.2 (December 2010): 89–104
<http://www.atlantisjournal.org/ARCHIVE/32.2/2010Pivodori.pdf>

[View low-bandwidth version](#)