

**ON POETRY, WAR AND TRAUMA:  
A PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION ON MEMORY,  
TRANSFORMATION AND AUDIENCES**

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With a reflection on issues on mourning and trauma, and within the domain of cultural memory, we take issue with war poetry as a prime exponent of cultural production where loss and its aftermath –crucial as well in subject formation– becomes constitutive of the aesthetic, formal, and material properties of a good number of poems in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This body of poetry manifests the various stages of psychological response to trauma. Drawing on recent theoretical and medical work on testimony, we claim that these texts demand we act as witnesses to their suffering.

*Keywords:* War poetry, mourning, trauma, cultural memory

In her important work on Trauma Theory, Cathy Caruth claims that one way to define trauma is to say that one is “possessed by an image or event” (1995: 5).<sup>1</sup> This definition echoes Freud’s earliest theorization of traumatic hysteria, “hysterics suffer from reminiscences” (1985 [1957]: 7). In cases of hysteria, Freud argues that the patient has been forced to repress the emotions which attended the traumatizing event so completely that the full affective intensity has remained attached to the memory of that experience, which likewise has been repressed from consciousness. Therefore, he argues, the patient needs to properly abreact the experience, by recollecting the memory and “put[ting] the affect into words” (Freud 1985 [1957]: 6). War trauma shares some of these features, as the soldiers repressed the intense affects of war, and later produced symptoms similar to those of hysterics. However, Freud himself observed a different operation that attended cases of war neuroses: nightmares and waking hallucinations of war. Freud associates this unconscious return to the site of trauma with the desire for mastery. Just as in his analysis of hysteria, Freud’s theorization of war trauma is based upon a problem with affect control; ‘mastery’, in this context, refers to mastering one’s emotions. According to Freud, in cases of war trauma, fear has taken the patient by surprise, creating a ‘fright-neurosis’. The unconscious returns repeatedly to relive the event, attempting to master its fright by first going through the mental preparation of anxiety (Freud 1975 [1920]: 12-14). This formulation seems problematic, however, as it appears to substitute anxiety for fright, rather than alleviating the psychological pain of the sufferer.

Although the current psychoanalytic models of trauma are greatly indebted to the Freudian schema, contemporary theorists have brought our understanding of trauma much further. As Freud posited with hysteria, trauma is understood to fragment and split off elements of experience from cognitive comprehension. This is one explanation

for the numbing effect produced by trauma: the affective response to trauma has been split off from the rest of the experience. However, many scholars refute the implication that the repression, or dissociation, which causes the psychical splitting is at all volitional. As van der Kolk and van der Hart explain, "Contemporary research has shown that dissociation of a traumatic experience occurs as the trauma is occurring. There is little evidence for an active process of pushing away of the overwhelming experience; the uncoupling seems to have other mechanisms" (1995: 168). For this reason, some theorists prefer to use the term 'dissociation' instead of 'repression' to describe the process of psychical splitting found in trauma. Current theorists also have refuted Freud's theory that the primary mechanism behind traumatic neuroses is fright, with its element of surprise. In fact, Krystal argues that, "The adult traumatic state is initiated by the recognition of inevitable danger, and the surrendering to it" (1971: 80). In other words, adult trauma comes with the recognition that one is in extreme danger and there is no opportunity for flight or avoidance; one's choices are either to die or to try to survive. Krystal, of course, is describing states of severe psychical trauma. However this is also an accurate description of what the soldiers faced in the trenches. In such cases, we can see how anxiety which Freud describes as the anticipation of danger (Freud 1975 [1920]: 12) would not only fail to protect against the formation of a neurotic reaction, it would exacerbate it. Krystal explains that the psychical numbing effect of trauma is accompanied by a regression in affect tolerance to an infantile state, where affect is not clearly delineated into different feelings, but primarily registers as intensity along the pleasure/pain continuum.

Two aspects of trauma that recent theorists agree upon are both effects of traumatic repression. First, the dissociation associated with trauma is at the heart of the involuntary return to traumatic memories. Secondly, because of the dissociation, a full understanding of a traumatic experience only comes belatedly to its participants. Van der Kolk and van der Hart explain that "When survivors later on suffer from flashbacks and related phenomena and subsequently become amnesic again for the trauma, they keep dissociating the traumatic memory" (1995: 168). Not surprisingly, then, recognizing the full impact of the traumatic events is an important aspect of working through trauma. The war poets' insistence upon displaying the suffering involved in warfare can be understood in this light.<sup>2</sup> The war poet sought to convey, as strongly as he could, the sensory impact of war to his readers. Along this line, Wilfred Owen's (1893-1918) Preface to his own poems suggests that, for him, recognition of what the war meant in terms of suffering precedes any impulse towards mourning: "Yet these elegies are not to this generation, / This is in no sense consolatory" (Owen 1920: 3).<sup>3</sup> The privilege Owen places on recognition before consolation is significant, pointing to an important aspect of working through trauma. Trauma inhibits the grieving process on two levels. First, its perturbations of memory interfere with the ability to recognize the extent of one's losses. The war poets frequently externalize these failures of memory as the failure of official cultural institutions, such as newspapers and War Office reports, to depict the war in a realistic manner. The second form of interference is an unconscious response to the first: the unconscious insists upon recognition of that which has been repressed. Hence, as Owen's Preface indicates, trauma survivors reject attempts at consolation, particularly when consolation seems to minimize the extent of their suffering. Many contemporary trauma theorists, including Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992) and Robert Jay Lifton (1986; 1991), claim that working through trauma requires a witness who can recognize the subject's suffering. For Felman and Laub, it is only through the complex exchange of witnessing that the survivor reconstructs his own narrative of the past (1992; see esp. 57-92). For Lifton, witnessing, "is a way of

transmuting pain and guilt into responsibility. ... [And] that responsibility [to the dead] becomes a very central agent for reintegration of the self" (1991: 138). In other words, the guilt and pain associated with having survived a massive trauma on the scale of World War I can be transformed by responding instead to the claims of those who also suffered. Through the sublimation of traumatic memories and painful affects, artwork becomes one means for responding to the claims of trauma. D.W. Winnicott (1993) provides us with a model for conceiving of art as a transitional object, that is, as an object which opens up a potential space for a playful exchange between artist and audience. The artwork, when seen as a transitional object, would be understood as a cultural experience which allows for the opening up of boundaries between the individual and the text.<sup>4</sup> Christopher Bollas's work on the transformational object suggests further implications for this model (1987).<sup>5</sup> He argues that the subject continues to search in adulthood for aesthetic objects which recreate an early affective experience in order to transform the self and repair damage to the ego. This model suggests an enormous therapeutic potential for art that sublimates a traumatic experience. The artwork as transformational object is one way to figure the function of art created through the sublimation of trauma: the artwork becomes a transformational space which brings both artist and reader into closer contact with a traumatic experience, allowing the opportunity for working it through. For the war poets, writing to an audience allows them to create that witness. There are limits, however, to the therapeutic potential of such art. In such an artwork, the reader is placed into the position of witness, a position which the reader may or may not accept. Rejecting the place of the witness would transform again the artwork into the re-enactment of the original trauma.<sup>6</sup>

The work of the trench poets alternately tries to make sense of the experience of modern war by associating it with a long-standing poetic tradition –mainly the lyric and pastoral elegy– ad it shows the inability of poetry to account for the shattering experience of modern warfare within a traditional framework. There are several ways in which their writing represents this inability. Siegfried Sassoon's "Repression of War Experience" illustrates a typical strategy of the war poets, it delivers a critique of traditional poetic representations of war by enacting the failure of the poetic lines to contain adequately the force of the emotions expressed in them. Another common trope is the use of ironic juxtaposition; realistic depictions of war's destruction are rendered more obscene through juxtaposition with the pastoral landscape of Belgium and France. And with expressions of patriotic fervour which are drained of meaning by the blood spilled by the young soldiers who died to uphold these beliefs. Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" employs both of these modes of ironic juxtaposition in order to level a devastating accusation against war. Owens poem also implicitly contains a critique of the lyrical elegy: in this poem, the poet reaches the limits of the elegy, finally eschewing the memorializing function of poetry in favour of confronting the nightmarish memories which haunt him.

The relationship between poetry and its audience is directly implicated in what is one of the most important questions raised by the war poets: how might poetry provide an adequate response to the tremendous trauma of the war and the loss of so many lives? The responsibility to find a way to represent that experience is one of their foremost concerns, dictating such formal considerations as diction, tone, imagery, and poetic form. More radically, many of them believed that this responsibility impacted, not only upon their own work, but upon the entire field of poetry in their contention that English poetry was not yet fit to speak of the war. This was also the case with the Generation of the 1930s, with poets like W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender and Louis

MacNeice who saw their own writing as an attempt to bridge that gap, by taking over from the previous generation of poets of the Great War and continuing to make English poetry speak to the soldier's experience. From early on in their careers, they recognized that the trauma of war would, through the writing of the soldier poets, leave its mark upon literature just as it had left its mark upon those who lived through it. Significantly, trauma and memorialisation are processes inscribed upon the field of poetry in the same way that those are experienced by an individual: as an irrevocable break. The writings of the war poets are positioned on the far side of the abyss of history. The war has forever sundered them from the tradition of war poetry that preceded them.

Up to the Great War, the primary function of war poetry was to record a self-authorizing history –that is, to narrate the events of battle so that they serve as their own historical justification. In such writing, war is represented as the guarantor of history and history as the fulfilment of war's promise. Instead, the poetry of the 1930s navigates a very different relationship to history, making its way through a course that has been ravaged by trauma. Their poetry emphasizes an experiential understanding of history over a comprehensive one; rather than record the outcome of important battles, presenting their experience of the war as overwhelming and difficult to comprehend cognitively, much less see it from an objective viewpoint situated somewhere outside of the unfolding of events.

In both cases, and similarly to what Dori Laub reports in her discussion of Holocaust testimonies, the events of the war made it impossible to act as a witness to what was happening as it historically occurred (1992: 80-84). The historical gap between the event and its witnessing lead to an inevitable gap between those attempts to testify to what was occurring and their reception. We find similar phenomena operating in the critical response to the trench poets. Wilfred Owen seemed to have understood this. He was aware that his contemporary readers would bring to their reading a desire for conciliation and healing that his elegies failed to provide. That is why in his "Preface" he warns, "Yet these elegies are not to this generation. / This is in no sense consolatory". In the following line, however, he reaches out hopefully, "They may be out the next". He saw that his testimony would have to speak to later generations if it could not reach his own. That is why in these lines, Owen posits a future reader who will act as a witness to his suffering. Through the transitional space of his poetry, Owen was able to call into being an imaginary reader who would act as his witness. This was not merely an imaginative act. Poetry has the capacity to open up a transformational space for the reader, allowing the reader to become, belatedly –if s/he is receptive– the witness to this testimony.

### Notes

1. This work is part of a research project which has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (MICINN FFI 2009-13454).
2. We can certainly identify an early generation of war poets who addressed the devastation and suffering of the Great War out of their own experience in which we should include Rupert Brooke (1887-1915), Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), Julian Grenfell (1888-1915), Herbert Read (1893-1968) and Robert Graves (1895-1985).
3. The "Preface", by Owen himself, was left unfinished at his death. Sassoon included it as it was in the 1920 volume he edited. In 1931, Owen's poems were re-issued, including the "Preface" with some minor changes.
4. Gabriele Schwab argues for such a reconceptualization of the function of literary texts in her book, *Subjects without Selves*. Schwab states that poetic language opens up a transitional space

in language, through which the subject finds access to the unconscious structures of the primary processes.

5. See *The Shadow of the Object*, especially the Introduction and chapter 1, "The Transformational Object", 1-29.

6. See David Aberbach, *Surviving Trauma*, particularly the first chapter on "Creativity and the Survivor", 1-22.

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