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The Trauma of Loss in the American Fiction about the Spanish Flu

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Introduction

When I started doing researches for my thesis, I was shocked to find out how the Spanish influenza pandemic was a subject not sufficiently dealt with, despite the countless, and horrible deaths and the sorrow it unquestionably caused at the time. Even from a literary point of view, I was surprised in learning that American fiction and non-fiction works dealing with the 1918 pandemic were very few, and that many who lived through that strenuous historical moment sort of refused to write down their experiences, as writing meant reliving in their memories what had happened. For years Spanish influenza pandemic had been little studied or barely mentioned. More recently – and I am referring to the last forty years – literary scholars persevered in thoroughly analyzing the small number of American fictional works about the 1918 pandemic. For instance, Catherine Belling in "Overwhelming the Medium Fiction and the Trauma of Pandemic Influenza in 1918" studied the correlation between the trauma evoked by the 'close contact' with the virus and the difficulties to express it through fiction; Caroline Hovanec in her "Of Bodies, Families, and Communities: Refiguring the 1918 Influenza Pandemic" focused instead on the impact the Spanish flu had; as Hovanec pointed out, the re-emergence of the interest in the 1918 pandemic is strictly associated with medical discoveries and the appearances of diseases comparable to the Spanish influenza. What is more, the pandemic was 'brushed up' in 2020 and used as a reference by historians – like John Barry in an article he wrote for the New York Times dated March 17 titled "The Single Most Important Lesson From the 1918 Influenza" – to illustrate how to handle the Covid-19 outbreak. Charles De Paolo did yet another thing in his 2014 book titled *Pandemic Influenza in Fiction: A Critical Study*. In his book, De Paolo discussed the American fiction about the

Spanish influenza pandemic, dividing it into two distinct periods – the 'Recovery period' and the 'Recursion period' – so as to distinguish the books written by authors who lived during the 1918 influenza pandemic, and those by writers who did not experience the pandemic at all. De Paolo dedicated the first chapter of his study to those scientific investigations that led to discoveries concerning the virus that caused Spanish influenza. Out of the fiction works De Paolo discussed in his book, I chose to focus on *They Came Like Swallows* (1937) by William Maxwell Jr., the short story "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (1939) – included in the collection of the same name – by Katherine Anne Porter, and *The Last Town on Earth* (2006) by Thomas Mullen. The choice fell on those three texts not just because their protagonists get infected with the flu and survive it, but mostly because they flawlessly present the trauma of loss generated by the pandemic in three distinct ways. My thesis contributed to expand De Paolo's work since his study is a collection of all those fictions that have the Spanish influenza pandemic as a theme. De Paolo believed that the 1918 pandemic was a matter needed to be studied by more than a branch of knowledge only, and that science and literature did the exact same thing in trying to chronicle it – what caused it, and its short- and long-term consequences. On the contrary, I concentrated on the three fiction works which De Paolo listed as significant in his overview, providing an in-depth analysis for each of these texts. The Spanish influenza pandemic – like any other pandemic, to be more precise – was a catastrophic event that unequivocally led to a radical, and unanticipated upheaval in everyday life. The upheaval I am referring to was mirrored in fictions published shortly after the pandemic (*They Came Like Swallows* and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider") but also many years later (*The Last Town on Earth*). Examining these works helps us highlight how the representation of the pandemic has changed over time.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. 'Chapter One' focuses on the historical and social contexts of the United States during the outbreak of Spanish influenza. The disease was at

first believed to have originated in Europe, but subsequent studies highlighted how in reality there was the possibility that it had developed within the United States. The chapter deals, too, with how the American government reacted to the biological hazard while still fighting in World War I, and which were the social and cultural consequences for the American population. 'Chapter Two' examines the literary context of the fiction concerning Spanish influenza pandemic, and the reason why many celebrated American novelists preferred not to delve into the topic, mostly drawing on De Paolo's study. 'Chapter Three' is dedicated in its entirety to *They Came Like Swallows*. Its three main characters – Bunny, Robert, and James Morison – have to deal with the loss of the core member of their family, Elizabeth. The unanticipated death of Elizabeth creates a 'chasm' in the Morisons, and it is used by the author to reflect both on his own condition – as he lost his mother when he was young – and the condition of countless American families in that period. "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" is thoroughly analyzed in 'Chapter Four.' The main character of the short story faces the loss of Adam – the man she is in love with – due to Spanish influenza. As she is eventually infected with the terrible disease – Miranda loses a piece of herself because her body has been attacked by the virus. Miranda being a journalist, the book demanded the analysis to the mass media's reaction to the pandemic as well. In Porter's short story the newspapers have the role of 'gutter press,' in the sense that they exaggerate the news in their articles, grounding them on rumors rather than actual facts. 'Chapter Five' is devoted to Thomas Mullen's *The Last Town on Earth*. Its characters have not only to cope with the deaths of friends and family members – which in itself is already something shocking and distressful – but with the loss of their entire community. The author of this novel did not experience the 1918 pandemic. Far from being a mere historical reconstruction, his novel needs to be interpreted also as a reflection on contemporary America, since similarities with the situation in the United States after 9/11 are

abundantly evident, especially regarding the relationship with foreigners and the fear connected to them.

Chapter One

The Spanish Influenza Pandemic in the USA

1.1 The Spread of the Spanish Flu

As of 2020, the Spanish influenza pandemic continues to be one of the deadliest pandemic ever occurred in the history of humanity: "as many as one-third of humans around the globe […] were infected by this new incarnation of influenza."[1] Wrongly believed to have originated in 1918 in Spain – where newspapers were able to report on [its] devastating effects due to the country's non-belligerency during World War I[2] – it approximately provoked 50 million deaths worldwide[3]. Despite the immeasurable damages it brought, the pandemic did not really gain public attention until autumn 1918 as people were focused on the war and what was happening on the Western Front.

Of course at the time, doctors were taken aback by this new and appalling disease: some of the symptoms, such as "high fever, earaches, body fatigue, diarrhea and occasional vomiting,"[4] were exceedingly similar to those of the common flu, but the majority of those who fell ill presented complications caused by pneumonia and subsequently died because of it. Some medical practitioners guessed this novel sickness could be "pneumonic plague,"[5]

1 Bristow, Nancy K., *American Pandemic – The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic*, Oxford University Press, 2017, 3.
2 Nickol, Michaela E.; Kindrachuk, Jason, "A year of terror and a century of reflection: perspectives on the great influenza pandemic of 1918-1919", BMC Infectious Diseases, 2019, 3.
3 *American Pandemic – The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic*, 3.
4 Penton, Bailey, *THE SPANISH FLU OF 1918: What Is The Spanish Flu? Symptoms, Causes, Origin Of The Pandemic Flu, Complications, Lessons From The Influenza, Prevention Measures And Economic Consequences Of The Disease*, independently published, 2020, 2.
5 Crosby, Alfred W., *America's Forgotten Pandemic – The Influenza of 1918*, Cambridge University Press, 2003(second edition), 9.

basing the hypothesis on their knowledge of the Black Death; others linked it with the war[6], as the influenza had first hit soldiers and then had abruptly spread across civilians. Needless to say, mortality rate was high for children under 5 years of age and for the elderly people over 65, but what shocked even more was that the flu killed young and healthy people between 20 and 45 years of age,[7] too, making it the first – and only, so far – pandemic to have hit this specific group of people.[8]

The origin of the Spanish influenza pandemic is uncertain, as epidemiologists are still trying to trace its genesis. Some theories considered France, Vietnam and China as places of inception, but "Frank Macfarlane Burnet, a Nobel laureate […], later concluded that evidence was 'strongly suggestive' that the 1918 influenza pandemic began in the United States and that its spread was 'intimately related to war conditions and especially the arrival of American troops in France'."[9]

Haskell County, Kansas, is regarded to be the area where the influenza virus – infamously referred to as Spanish influenza – started early in 1918[10]. Doctors visited patients that apparently had common flu, but with more violent, and often lethal, symptoms. As influenza "was neither a 'reportable' disease – not a disease that the law required physicians to report – nor a disease that any state or federal public health agency tracked"[11], there was hardly any reference to it on medical publications: local doctor Loring Miner, worried about the conditions of the people he visited, was the only doctor to chronicle cases to *Public Health Reports*, a journal that the U.S. Public Health Service used to "alert health officials to outbreaks of all communicable diseases […] anywhere in the world."[12]

6 Ibid., 9.
7 *America's Forgotten Pandemic – The Influenza of 1918*, 27.
8 *THE SPANISH FLU OF 1918: What Is The Spanish Flu? Symptoms, Causes, Origin Of The Pandemic Flu, Complications, Lessons From The Influenza, Prevention Measures And Economic Consequences Of The Disease*, 4.
9 Barry, John M., *The Great Influenza – The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, first published by Penguin Books in 2005, 2018, 98.
10 Ibid., 92.
11 Ibid., 94.
12 Ibid., 94.

Four hours away from Haskell County there was Camp Funston, the second largest training camp of the U.S. army. Those men enlisted in Haskell County were sent to that camp. The 1917-1918 winter was one of the coldest ever registered and the base was overcrowded with soldiers: "[…] army regulations […] detailing how much space each man should have were violated, and men were stacked in bunks with insufficient clothing and bedding and inadequate heating."[13] These strenuous conditions favored the virus' transmission: the first reported case of influenza came on March 4, 1918 and, over the following three weeks, the number of men who fell ill with influenza exponentially increased, but not enough to highlight the threat of the disease.[14] In the meantime, soldiers who completed their training at Funston were sent overseas to fight in Europe, where the virus spread like wildfire among the different armies.

While in 1918 in the United States the first wave of the pandemic was apparently vanishing, in the Old World the situation was drastically changing, and not for the better: in April it appeared in the British Expeditionary Force and later in May in the French infantry.[15] Some blamed the Germans for it – but Germans got influenza, too – others "malnutrition and 'the general weakness of nerve-power known as war-weariness'."[16] The virus obviously had an impact on the war, as soldiers were too weak to fight: this happened – for instance – to German troops as they were preparing for one of their last offenses.[17]

While the first wave did not cause many victims, the second was the deadliest: the virus had drastically mutated trying to better adapt to its hosts. But it did not hit all at once, it was more of a progressive expansion, as there were different bursts of deadliness all around the world: it exploded in Brest (France), Freetown (Sierra Leone), and Boston in late August 1918. The health authorities in Boston were worried because "[a] sudden and very significant increase

13 Ibid., 96.
14 Ibid., 96.
15 *America's Forgotten Pandemic – The Influenza of 1918*, 25.
16 Ibid., 27.
17 *The Great Influenza – The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, 171.

reported the third week of August in the cases of pneumonia occurring in the army cantonment at Camp Devens in the district [seemed] to justify a suspicion that an influenza epidemic [might] have started among the soldiers there."[18] Camp Devens was situated less than forty miles away from the city. Its full capacity was supposed to be of thirty-six thousand men, but in September 1918 it "held just over forty-five thousand men,"[19] allowing a faster transmission of the virus. The medical personnel inside the camp – one of the best at that time – was not ready at all for what happened: thousands of men fell ill with influenza and by the end of September "the […] staff was so overwhelmed, with doctors and nurses not only ill but dying, [that] they decided to admit no more patients to the hospital."[20] Nurses had a key role in those circumstances: there were no antibiotics or advanced medical techniques that were able to cure influenza or pneumonia, so "[warm] food, warm blankets, fresh air and […] TLC – Tender Loving Care – to keep the patient alive until the disease passed away"[21] were the only medicines of 1918.

Even though the influenza had started to kill soldiers on the American soil, some weeks passed before actions to protect civilians against the spreading of the pandemic were introduced, as

> […] influenza seemed unimportant compared with the news of the front pages of the city's newspapers in August and September. Suffragette agitation was rising as a Senate vote on the franchise for women drew near. Eugene V. Debs (a political activist) was on his way to conviction and jail under the Espionage Act. The carmen of the Middlesex and Boston Street Railway struck at the end of August, leaving thousands to walk. Congressman James A.

18 Ibid., 186.
19 Ibid., 186.
20 Ibid., 187.
21 *America's Forgotten Pandemic – The Influenza of 1918*, 7.

> Galivan accused his opponent in the primaries […] of having accepted thousands of dollars from the former German ambassador. Russia […] was in the news every day.[22]

Influenza proliferated from Massachusetts to other states in the U.S., starting from Pennsylvania, when the first week of September hundreds of sailors reached the Philadelphia Navy Yard. As soldiers started reporting influenza symptoms and the navy hospital began running out of beds, some sailors were necessarily transported to civilian hospitals, favoring the contagion. Despite knowing what was happening in Boston and Europe – thanks to medical bulletins and news – and despite "practicing physicians, public health experts at medical schools [and] infectious disease experts"[23] pushed for some kind of serious measures, no preventive actions were made: for instance, the Liberty Loan parade – a march to raise money for the overseas war effort – took place anyways on September 28. After that, the number of civilians sick with this new strain of influenza grew so exponentially that Philadelphia had to be divided into seven different sections and "physicians were classified by location"[24] to help decrease the pressure on hospitals: each section was asked to make it on its own and "emergency squads of doctors were sent to the [districts] most in need."[25] Volunteers, too, were of the utmost significance. When the shortage of expert personnel became critical, people with no professional training – they were mainly women, as "Doctor Krusen of the Department of Health and Charities proclaimed: 'It is the duty of every well woman in the city who can possibly get away from her other duties to volunteer for this emergency'"[26] – showed up to help, even knowing that they were risking their lives by exposing themselves to

22 Ibid., 45.
23 *The Great Influenza – The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, 208.
24 *America's Forgotten Pandemic – The Influenza of 1918*, 80.
25 Ibid., 80.
26 Ibid., 82.

a lethal illness. Over a matter of few weeks, the number of "new cases and deaths fell off as precipitously as they had risen"[27] and the situation went back to an almost normal state.

The pandemic did not stop American war effort, as soldiers continued to sail from the major East Coast ports to reach the European battlefields. President Woodrow Wilson did not even make a statement about the Spanish flu outbreak: "[from] neither the White House nor any other senior administration post would there come any leadership, any attempt to set priorities, any attempt to coordinate activities, any attempt to deliver resources;"[28] therefore the army, as a result of the pressure received from its medical corps, had to make decisions on its own to subdue influenza. Soldiers showing the slightest flu symptoms were quarantined, but that did not stop the circulation of the virus on boats. The situation quickly became critical and countless soldiers died on board before reaching European shores.

Soldiers and sailors were not the only ones spreading the virus; civilians caused its advancement across the whole nation thanks to their movements: their

> long-rage transportation could transmit flu with an efficiency almost equal to that of the military. […] The pandemic started along the axis from Massachusetts to Virginia […], bypassed backwaters like northern Maine, leaped the Appalachians and touched down at […] Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit and Chicago on the Great Lakes system and Minneapolis, Louisville, Little Rock, Greenville and New Orleans on the Mississippi system. [It] jumped clear across the plains and the Rockies to Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. Then [it] took its time to steep into every niche and corner of America.[29]

27 Ibid., 85.
28 *The Great Influenza – The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, 302.
29 Ibid., 63-64.

The United States Public Health Service (abbreviated to USPHS) was the main governmental organization "responsible for maintaining the levees against infectious disease,"[30] but it was not at all prepared for a catastrophe of those proportions; the dominant issue was that of coordination: in spite of the fact that the USPHS had informative posters about influenza and how to recognize its symptoms printed to be dispatched to the entire national territory in order to reduce panic, confusion and the "proliferation of quack remedies,"[31] there was no unified action because "[public] health departments and bureaus had never been organized"[32] for that. It did nothing to reassure citizens, quite the opposite. One of the first warnings of the disease was staggeringly generalized, with advice such as

> Avoid needless crowding…
>
> Smother your coughs and sneezes…
>
> Your nose not your mouth was made to breathe thru…
>
> […] Wash your hands before eating…
>
> […] Avoid tight clothes, tight shoes, tight gloves – seek to make nature your ally not your prisoner…
>
> When the air is pure breathe all of it you can – breathe deeply.[33]

That was of no comfort to the people and warnings like this fomented the fear of the virus. Fear spread as fast as the virus itself and communities started breaking down already on the first week of October: there was a general lack of confidence and trust towards the government. What is more, media made it even more terrifying; every day newspapers

30 *America's Forgotten Pandemic – The Influenza of 1918*, 46.
31 Ibid., 49.
32 Ibid., 49-50.
33 *The Great Influenza – The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, 311.

constantly repeated and paraphrased in some way through their articles Surgeon General of the United States Rupert Blue's words: "There is no cause for alarm if precautions are observed."[34] Some newspapers tried to belittle the danger of the pandemic, stating that it was "nothing more or less than old-fashioned grippe,"[35] others did not write anything about it at all in an attempt to mitigate people's terror, obtaining instead the opposite effect.

News were "diluted with lies"[36] so – while Blue's sentence continuously resounded on each and every publication – civilians felt powerless: they were conscious that the virus was moving "toward them as if it were an inexorable oncoming cloud of poison gas."[37] When the war ended on November 11, 1918 there was the bizarre hope that the pandemic would simultaneously come to an end. But it went on, and fear was so present among people that even the American Red Cross in an internal report communicated that "[a] fear and panic of the influenza, akin to the terror of the Middle Ages regarding the Black Plague, [had] been prevalent in many parts of the country."[38]

As the second wave of the pandemic – which lasted in the United States until Spring 1919 – continued its killing course – not only in the U.S., but in the rest of the world – several medical experts promoted the apocalyptic hypothesis that "civilization could easily disappear […] from the face of the earth."[39] But that supposition was not correct, as Spanish influenza virus did not need human beings for its own survival because others organisms (mainly birds) functioned as 'homes' for the infection.[40] In addition, nature itself had to be taken into consideration; initially the virus's transformation – the second wave of late 1918 – had more lethal consequences. But "once [the virus] achieved near-maximum efficiency"[41] people

34 Ibid., 335.
35 Ibid., 335.
36 Ibid., 340.
37 Ibid., 340.
38 Ibid., 350.
39 Ibid., 365.
40 Ibid., 369.
41 Ibid., 370.

started to get some kind of immunity to it and therefore its mortality rate rapidly and irretrievably dropped. By Spring 1919 Spanish influenza had faded away in the United States, but its aftermath was far from vanished.

1.2 The Spanish Influenza Pandemic in American Scientific Literature

Since the last decade of the 19th century, doctors had been interested in finding the microorganism responsible for the common influenza. German bacteriologist Richard Pfeiffer thought to have discovered it in 1892 and called it 'Bacillus influenzae' – or Pfeiffer's bacillus – and "the scientific community would accept this as a valid conclusion for nearly two decades."[42] The reason behind the longevity of Pfeiffer's theory was that "the experimental technology needed to invalidate it was unavailable"[43] at that time.

When Spanish flu started taking its toll in the United States and the rest of the world, medical practitioners clearly wanted to understand how the disease functioned. As of October 1918 what caused Spanish influenza was yet to be discovered. This is evident in an editorial published in the *Journal of American Medical Association*, where it was stated – in capital letters – that

> THE PRECISE CAUSE OF THE PRIMARY
>
> ACUTE RESPIRATORY INFECTION IS NOT
>
> KNOWN – IT MAY BE THE INFLUENZA
>
> BACILLUS; AS YET DEFINITE PROOF IS
>
> WANTING – BUT THE MOMENTOUS

42 De Paolo, Charles, *Pandemic Influenza In Fiction: A Critical Study*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014, 13.
43 Ibid., 16.

> PERIL SO FAR IS THE DEVELOPMENT OF
>
> PNEUMONIA, AND THIS APPEARS TO BE
>
> ASSOCIATED WITH AND IN ALL
>
> BACTERIA, OF WHICH THE INFLUENZA
>
> BACILLUS, HEMOLYTIC STREPTOCOCCI,
>
> AND PNEUMOCOCCI ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT.[44]

Doctors practicing in the army where the first to face the devastating effects of the disease: for instance Dr. Roy Grist was on duty at Camp Devens when the second wave hit. While there he wrote to a colleague in a letter about the situation. The vocabulary he used was obviously extremely specific, as he was astonished by

> "the most viscous type of pneumonia that [had] ever been seen". It was typical for a patient's skin to take on a mahogany discoloration, with cyanosis "extending from their ears and spreading to their face." In a matter of few hours, soldiers in this condition perished. Grist watched them die without being able to do anything: "it [was] simply a struggle for air until they [suffocated]."[45]

Medical researcher Victor Clarence Vaughan meticulously recalled what he came across in Camp Devens, too: patients' "faces soon [wore] a bluish cast; a distressing cough [brought] up blood-stained sputum. In the morning the dead bodies [were] stacked about the morgue like cord wood."[46]

44 Ibid., 18-19.
45 Ibid., 18.
46 Vaughan, Victor C., *A Doctor's Memories*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1926, reprinted by Vaughan Press, 2007, 383-384.

Given the complexity of identifying anything useful for their studies from a merely superficial analysis, doctors were forced to perform autopsies on soldiers. Pathologist and bacteriologist William Henry Welch described Spanish influenza victims' lungs he inspected as "two sacks filled with a thin, bloody, frothy fluid."[47]

Research immediately moved to all the main and more technologically advanced laboratories around the country such as the ones at Johns Hopkins, Rockefeller Institute, and Harvard, where groups of scientists – a small number, owing to the ongoing war – attempted at isolating the bacillus causing influenza. They were carefully looking for Pfeiffer's bacillus, persuaded that it was the pivotal pathogenic agent responsible for the disease. Each laboratory carried out their researches, but documented different conclusions, as some found an abundant number of influenza bacilli, while others found none. Thanks to these conflicting results, in 1919 William Park and Anne Williams – two of the most prominent scientists in the U.S. – determined that "[the] influenza bacilli, like the streptococci and pneumococci, [were] in probability merely very important secondary invaders."[48]

The discovery paved the way for further scientific analyses; in the following years medical scientists ran experiments and redacted reports highlighting the presence of both bacterial and viral pathogens. The research then continued – "[gaining] momentum after 1931"[49] – and moved to other medical fields, such as the veterinary one. As a matter of fact, joint studies by doctors and veterinarians led to the discovery of a link between the second wave of the pandemic and the sudden appearance of a disease among animals – swine, to be more accurate.

While scientists and doctors gathered and chronicled objective data about the Spanish influenza, the same cannot be said about those same scientists and doctors' personal reactions.

47 *America's Forgotten Pandemic*, 8.
48 *The Great Influenza – The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, 415.
49 *Pandemic Influenza In Fiction: A Critical Study*, 26.

Medical practitioners who saw at first hand what the disease was capable of refused to share their thoughts and what they felt. Victor Clarence Vaughan – for example – refused to say anything about his time at Camp Devens in 1918, stating that he was "[…] not going into the history of the influenza pandemic. It encircled the world, visited the remotest corners, taking toll of the most robust, sparing neither soldier nor civilian, and flaunting its red flag in the face of science."[50] Apparently, the memories were too awful to be brought back.

1.3 Social and Cultural Consequences

The Spanish influenza pandemic is considered to be "one of the great forgotten episodes of American history."[51] In reality, it is more complicated and it is of the utmost importance to distinguish between collective and individual experience:

> Americans barely noticed and didn't recall [the pandemic] – that is exasperatingly obvious to anyone examining the histories, popular magazines, newspapers […] – but if one turns to intimate accounts, to autobiographies of those who were not in positions of authority, to collections of letters written by friend to friend and husband to wife […] and, if one [asked] those who lived through the pandemic for their reminiscences, then it becomes apparent that Americans did notice […] and often acknowledge it as one of the most influential experiences of their lives.[52]

The question, then, is: how is it possible that such a huge catastrophe was completely obliterated from American culture when in reality so many people remembered it? Some asserted that it was because of the rapidity with which the virus appeared and eventually

50 *A Doctor's Memories*, 432.
51 *American Pandemic – The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic*, 6.
52 *America's Forgotten Pandemic – The Influenza of 1918*, 322-323.

disappeared – concerning the second wave in Autumn 1918 – others blamed it on account of the fact that the flu predominantly caused deaths among the youngest, limiting "its impact on the nation's leadership class, which allowed it to be easily forgotten."[53]

Even so, there is no doubt that the 1918 influenza pandemic stressed some issues on cultural and social levels, too. First of all, the pandemic did not simply affect those who were sick, but their families, too: many were not able to see their loved ones before they passed away because they lived far from each other and at the time there was no possibility of moving quickly – and faster than the virus itself – from place to place. Furthermore, they had to use an unreliable postal service to keep in touch and have any kind of information. To make matters worse, the growing shortage of medical personnel and hospital beds forced people to try and take care of themselves in their own homes; in the worst cases the sick had to take care of the other sick, aggravating an already woeful situation. If losing a child to disease was an unimaginable agony, losing a parent was even tougher to handle: in addition to the unbearable loss, orphaned children were frequently left on their own with nowhere to go because the closest relatives were unable to look after them.

No one had ever faced such extraordinary circumstances and Americans tried to do their best to lend a hand: so many – coordinated by the American Red Cross – volunteered, "providing assistance in countless ways to friends and strangers alike and helping sustain their community's stability."[54] The tasks were various, "from establishing and provisioning emergency hospitals to driving ambulances, from delivering fresh meals to nursing the sick in their homes, from creating and circulating educational pamphlets to surveying and serving community social need in the aftermath."[55] A part of the population – for sure – did not offer their service out of fear of being infected, but the majority did whatever they could.

53 *American Pandemic – The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic*, 8.
54 Ibid., 53.
55 Ibid., 54.

In order to cope with what was happening, "to regain a sense of control over their lives [,] to imbue their experiences during the crisis with meaning, even purpose"[56] and considering that the Spanish influenza pandemic hit during a specific historical event – World War I – people tried to find some meaning behind such a tragedy: several turned to religion and its symbols in order to detect the pandemic's motives and others "found democratic meaning in the crisis."[57] Many compared the Spanish flu to the Black Death and antecedent plagues, but also compared them to atmospheric events such as storms, cyclones and forest fires[58] because they wanted to explain through the simplest and most recognizable images what the pandemic was like and how it felt living in that precise historical moment.

It was almost predictable that Americans availed themselves of war-related terms, too, to describe the pandemic: but it was surprising the literal – and not metaphorical – use of those expressions, since the disease was regarded as an enemy to defeat like the rivals on European battlefields and as a weapon Germans used to ease their war effort. The language employed by Americans transformed nurses, doctors, surgeons, hygienists into an army fighting a war against an invisible and terrible foe. And when the war in Europe was won, American people were sure that they were equally able to defeat the virus as they did with the Central Powers. Nurses and doctors who perished because of the Spanish Flu were commemorated as heroes dead in combat and civilians were celebrated as martyrs. World War I gave a key to explain the unfathomable.

If just one year after the second wave had ended some experts recognized that at the time medicine was not advanced enough – like Professor of Preventive Medicine at the University of Missouri Mazyck P. Ravanel, who stated in a lecture that

56 Ibid., 74.
57 Ibid., 75.
58 Ibid., 76.

> […] no measures adopted controlled the course of the pandemic. It spread with lightning like speed, went where it listed, and ceased its ravages only when available material was exhausted. If any preventive measures prevailed they were local. We must confess that on the whole we made a dismal failure in our attempts to control the spread of influenza [,][59]

and concluded his intervention by acknowledging the struggle caused to American public health – the perception among health care professionals changed a couple of years later, when the narrative around the pandemic got brighter. In spite of the damages brought about by the Spanish flu, it was believed that medicine could advance thanks to it. But the public's response was more intricate than the one of doctors, nurses, and physicians. For those who survived the disease and those who lost family members or friends, the Spanish influenza only meant grief, and despair. American public culture neglected almost immediately the sufferings of the people, while, on the contrary, civilians in the private sphere were haunted by memories for the rest of their lives. Some who survived the illness had to deal with debilitating physical repercussions, too. While delirium during a high fever was – and still is – common, it seemed that Spanish Flu could cause alterations in the mental processes. Doctors highlighted in some reports that patients did not fully recovered on a psychological level: they presented signs of dementia, restlessness, depression, agitation, melancholia, and hysteria, among other symptoms.[60]

It is clear – but not at all shocking – that American culture left out the traumatic experiences of the individual in favor of a more positive and optimistic view of what had happened, showing "a profound tendency to evade […] those parts of its past that are difficult, that do not fit somehow with their view of themselves."[61] The United States rewrote the actual facts: for instance, the number of deceased due to influenza during the war were often reduced in

59 Ibid., 155.
60 *The Great Influenza – The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, 378-379.
61 *American Pandemic – The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic*, 192.

the official army statistics; the poor and immigrants – economically struggling, relegated to the margins of society and bad care – were entirely excluded from the picture.[62] This tendency to revise the events led to the belief that recovery was a certainty and that healing would "produce a 'closure'."[63] Obviously, that is not true, since some never completely healed, both physically and emotionally. Individuals recalled their feelings and thoughts about the Spanish influenza pandemic in literary works such as letters, descriptions and diaries. The majority of those narratives remain private, but a few were published to be read by a wider public.

62 Ibid., 194.
63 Ibid., 195.

Chapter Two

The Spanish Influenza Pandemic in American Literature

"The disease has survived in memory more than in any literature."

(*The Great Influenza – The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, John M. Barry)

Some critics have argued tat the Spanish influenza was not given enough consideration by the American historians of the time. Figures such as Samuel Eliot Morison, Henry Steele Commager and Richard Hofstadter[64] – who lived through the pandemic and would have therefore been able to give a detailed report of their experiences – only briefly mentioned the disease in their works. Also authors of the caliber of Francis Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, and Ernest Hemingway focused more on World War I and left the Spanish flu almost completely out of their artistic productions.

According to Nancy K. Bristow, the moderate reverberation the Spanish influenza pandemic had in American literature was unquestionably caused by American culture itself, as it "[drowned] out narratives of anguish with the noise of public optimism."[65] But it is also true that agony was difficult to put into words; a similar issue emerged with epidemics that occurred earlier, like the bubonic plague. Middle Ages scholars affirmed that "[while] there [were] a few vivid and terrifying accounts, […] little [was] written on [it]."[66] The recurring pattern of the existence of not that many written records concerned for the most part personal

64 *America's Forgotten Pandemic – The Influenza of 1918*, 315.
65 *American Pandemic – The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic*, 191.
66 *The Great Influenza – The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, 394.

literary creations. A collective and general narrative was preferred over the subjective and particular one. The latter were omitted on both cultural and ethical levels, since "the moral and emotional significance of an event is inversely proportional to its extent or its incidence,"[67] meaning that the more people faced a disturbing event, the tougher was to retrieve those personal memories. War, on the contrary, was a very present topic in the writings of the time:

> [the] First World War gave the West a lesson in the bleak meanings of human cruelty and destruction; the pandemic caused more physical damage but seemed to convey no meaning at all, overshadowed by the story of war, with its enemies, its weapons of mass destruction, its battles and its jubilant armistice. The flu was less remarkable than war at a time when infectious disease was a daily fact of life.[68]

Yet, 25 million Americans fell ill and about 650 thousand of them lost their lives due to the 1918 influenza pandemic. Chronicling each and every story was unthinkable as it would have not rendered justice to the misery of so many people, and it would have meant narrating only a small fragment of the events. At the same time, the few who wrote about what happened had to confront the fact that the language they wanted to employ "[could] not carry the burden."[69] The trauma and pain caused by the Spanish flu made it almost intolerable to delve into experiences and memories; that is one of the reasons why there are not that many personal and subjective accounts on the pandemic, and those few that were actually published precisely transmit that feeling. On the contrary, scientific written works – medical reports, studies, surveys, and experiments – were several, as it was formerly mentioned in Chapter One.

67 Belling, Catherine, "Overwhelming the Medium: Fiction and the Trauma of Pandemic Influenza in 1918", *Literature and Medicine*, Vol. 28, no. 1, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009, 56.
68 Ibid., 56.
69 Ibid., 56.

2.1 The Spanish Influenza Pandemic in American Fiction

American literary works treating the Spanish influenza pandemic as a theme are not numerous, silenced by a culture that was adamant on showing only the bright side of the catastrophe and leaving the traumatic marks – both physical and psychological – only on those who experienced and survived it. Charles De Paolo was intrigued by this fact and therefore decided to rigorously investigate the topic. Through research he observed that just a handful of historical books dedicated space to the 1918 pandemic, additionally noticing that the main cause was that the disease was 'shaded' by the First World War. What the scholar did, then, was to search and gather narratives about the Spanish influenza pandemic. The corpus of texts that explicitly depicts the pandemic was divided by De Paolo in his book *Pandemic Influenza in Fiction: A Critical Study* into two main periods: the works belonging to the first one – named 'Recovery Period' and that incorporates writings published between 1921 and 1946 – are by authors who were alive when the Spanish influenza hit; while "recent historical fictions that attempt to reconstruct accounts of the pandemic"[70] belong to the 'Recursion Period' – that goes from 2005 to 2006.[71] The popularity of pandemics in literature has been rapidly growing – thanks to the biomedical innovations and discoveries carried on over the years – since the last decade of the 20th century so much so that two further periods can be outlined: the 'Characterization Period', from 1995 to 2005, and the 'Novelistic Period', from 1997 to 2014. However, the works of fiction – mainly books, but movies are considered, too – included in the latter two groups do not deal with Spanish influenza. As a matter of fact, although they take inspiration from the past pandemics, what they actually cover is a more post-apocalyptic thematic where the protagonists have to deal with attacks perpetrated by

70 "Overwhelming the Medium: Fiction and the Trauma of Pandemic Influenza in 1918", 59.
71 *Pandemic Influenza in Fiction: A Critical Study*, 34, 72.

terrorists using biological weapons aimed at reducing the world population or with a lethal avian influenza. Therefore they will not be taken into account.

On an artistic point of view, previous pandemics served as an example for the Spanish influenza pandemic literary production, because – in a sense – they set the 'tone'; paintings, in particular, were particularly useful, in this regard; death became a central theme and pictures "[conveyed] how in pandemic predictability [disappeared.]"[72] When it comes to literature, the greatest example of pandemic narrative that immediately comes to mind is Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, with its impeccable and sometimes humorous chronicle of a young group of people living outside of Florence to avoid being infected with Black Death. Another essential pandemic account is that of Albert Camus; in his *The Plague* Camus confronted the void left by such a terrible disease. As for Spanish influenza pandemic in the United States, the modernist movement was pivotal for the authors who wanted to discuss the 1918 killing disease. American modernism entered the literary scene right in the middle of the pandemic. Modernism was a reaction to the dogmas of realism and to the disenchantment caused by the Great War. Even though the official beginning of American modernism does not coincide with the inception of the 'Recovery period' established by De Paolo, it is indeed legitimate to say that the advent of this new literary movement "gave the disease, if not the pandemic, its language."[73] This postulation finds a theorizer in Virginia Woolf, who wrote and published an essay in 1926 titled "On Being Ill". Woolf claimed that it was highly peculiar that novels did not address disease in the same way they addressed other themes,

> [considering] how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then

72 Simon, Ed, "On Pandemic and Literature", *The Millions*, March 12, 2020, accessed December 2020, https://themillions.com/2020/03/on-pandemic-and-literature.html.

73 "Overwhelming the Medium: Fiction and the Trauma of Pandemic Influenza in 1918", 64.

> disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to light, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us in the act of sickness, how we go down into the pit of death and feels the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers […].[74]

Woolf continued her essay by underlining that – in addition to a lack of appropriate language – one of the main reasons for this lack of interest was the idea a novel focusing on one's subjective experience of illness would be deprived of a riveting plot. On the contrary, being sick – in the writer's point of view – gave the chance to have more freedom of expression, something that "the cautious respectability of health [concealed]."[75] Woolf was fascinated not by the changes brought by influenza to the planet, but by how being ill changed people's perception of the world. Consequently, the vocabulary to express it had to be "primitive, subtle, sensual, [and] obscene."[76] The literary novelties presented by Virginia Woolf's thought-provoking essay would give some American writers the practical means to write down what happened to them.

2.1.1 The Recovery Period (1921-1946)

De Paolo argues that the Recovery period is composed by "one novella, one author's childhood reminiscences, and chapters from novels,"[77] highlighting that these works show the complexity of chronicling one's atrocious experiences. He defines them as "[…] a coherent survival account of how ordinary Americans endured the worst pandemic in human history."[78]

74 Woolf, Virginia, "On Being Ill", *The Criterion*, Vol. 4, no. 1, Faber & Gwyer, Limited, 1926, 32.
75 Ibid., 36
76 Ibid., 34.
77 *Pandemic Influenza in Fiction: A Critical Study*, 34.
78 Ibid., 70.

What for sure can be detected when reading the summaries and the analyses of these fictional works presented by De Paolo is that the writers belonging to this first period clearly found in the narratives they wrote a way to cope with what they – without any doubt – experienced; writing for them became a cathartic process. Though not autobiographies, the feeling the reader has is that the authors really know what they wrote about.

The first to be analyzed is *One of Ours* (1922) by Willa Cather. Cather survived both the influenza of 1889-1890 and the Spanish influenza pandemic – having had "seasonal strains of the flu at least five times"[79] from 1922 to 1936 – but in her Pulitzer-Prize winning book she does not recount what she had endured. Instead, the protagonist is Charles Wheeler, a soldier who sees the sickness 'in action' on a troopship while on the journey at sea that would take him and others who enlisted to fight in France. The few pages – compared to the whole of the novel – that Cather dedicated to the pandemic show that the writer gathered a great number of historical records, naval ones in particular. But *One of Ours* is more of a patriotic exercise than a study of the influence Spanish flu had on the lives of soldiers – in this specific case. Throughout the entire narration Charles manifests high moral values that are shaken when the protagonist is torn between the "idea of the just war [against the enemy] and the skepticism over the cost in lives […]"[80] caused by both war and the killing disease. But once the main character reaches France, his values are reinstated.

A different approach to Spanish influenza pandemic is given by *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life* (1929) by Thomas Wolfe. As in *One of Ours*, the flu is given few pages, but Wolfe's novel is indeed based on autobiographical events: like the author, the brother of the main character – named Eugene – falls ill with the flu and dies of complications triggered by pneumonia, surrounded by his family. The description of the scene is perhaps one of the best literary transposition of the feelings provoked by a loved one's death:

79 Ibid., 37.
80 Ibid., 43.

> They remembered the strange flitting loneliness of his life, they thought of a thousand forgotten acts and moments – and always there was something that now seemed unearthly and strange: he walked through their lives like a shadow – they looked now upon his grey deserted shell with a thrill of awful recognition, as one who remembers a forgotten and enchanted word, or as men who look upon a corpse and see for the first time a departed god.[81]

His brother's passing profoundly marked Wolfe's life, and it unquestionably transpires from the written passage.

Another semi-autobiographical narration comes from John O'Hara's story "The Doctor's Son" (1935). The writer at the time of the Spanish influenza was just a teenager, but he saw his father – a doctor – at work during the breakout. The family lived in rural Pennsylvania and the patriarch gave assistance to the sick with the aid of his own children. What is then narrated in the story is a genuine depiction of the pandemic. Even though the point of view is that of the young son, the center of attention is the father and his endless work to fight an antagonist that cannot really be seen.

Two years later William Keepers Maxwell Jr. published one of his most successful works, titled *They Came Like Swallows* (1937). In his novel, Maxwell fictionalizes his experience with the Spanish flu, as his mother died of the sickness's complications right after giving birth to the author's brother. *They Came Like Swallows* chronicles the story of the Morisons, who live in Logan, Utah. Each section is narrated through the point of view of a family member: 8-year-old Bunny, disabled 13-year-old Robert and James, the father. The engaging aspect of this short novel is how Maxwell – who at the time of the novel's publication was almost thirty

81 Wolfe, Thomas, *Look Homeward Angel: A Story of the Buried Life*, first published in 1929 by Charles Scribners' Sons, Bantam Books, 1970, 500.

years of age – managed to describe the terrible and painful facts as if to write were the children.

"Pale Horse, Pale Rider" – published in 1939 – is the fictionalized narration of one of Katherine Ann Porter's most traumatic moments. The author and her fiancée fell ill with the flu in the fall of 1918; while she slowly recovered, he died of the disease. The protagonist of the novella is Miranda, a journalist who contracts Spanish influenza. She is at first taken care of by Adam – a soldier with whom the woman is in a relationship with – but is later transferred to a hospital. Miranda there endures the delirium caused by the disease and "descends to an insensate level of consciousness."[82] Miranda awakens on the day of the Armistice, on November 11, 1918, after a long period of mental derangement and discovers that Adam has succumbed to the Spanish influenza in a training camp.

The 1918 pandemic was instead given the role of "incidental factor"[83] – a situation the protagonists find themselves in – in Wallace Stegner's best-seller *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, published in 1943. The novel follows the lives of the Mason family at the beginning of the 20th century and it is organized into ten different sections. Section V is dedicated to Spanish influenza and how the Masons responded to the pandemic. Harry – the family patriarch – realizes that in order to economically survive he has to do something. He therefore decides to buy and resell contraband alcohol. While on his journey he stops multiple times to assist the sick he encounters. At home, Elsa – Harry's wife – aids to their neighbors. At some point, Elsa, Harry and their son Bruce contract the virus and Chester – the other son – has to take care of both the house and his family members.

In *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957) Mary McCarthy remembers the Spanish influenza pandemic. Only six years of age at the time, McCarthy and her family were on a train to Minneapolis where they all contracted the disease. Taken care of by their grandmother, Mary

82 *Pandemic Influenza in Fiction: A Critical Study*, 59.
83 Ibid., 67.

and her brothers witness impotent the death first of their mother and then of the father. The autobiography puts in evidence how the author wanted to write down the agony of those moments in the most detached way possible as her desire was to demonstrate her having overcome the events. On the contrary, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* shows the loneliness and hopelessness derived from the Spanish influenza pandemic.

2.1.2 The Recursion Period (2005-2006)

The writers of the Recursion period delineated by De Paolo did not live through the Spanish influenza pandemic as the authors of the Recovery period. Therefore theirs are 'merely' fictional works that investigate "important ethical, social, and public health issues of the period."[84] They dramatically display the crisis originated from the virus, human frailties in reacting to the emergency and the strengths and weaknesses of the establishment. The consequences brought by these desperate conditions are anticipated, too. What is more, the authors of this period "highlight the tragic lessons of 1918-1919: the violation of human rights in life-or-death situations; unprepared governments and medical systems overwhelmed in [an emergency]; and the imperative that medical research meet the challenges of emergent disease."[85] The writers also tapped into historical sources – such as military and medical reports – to be as faithful as possible to the real events, putting in evidence De Paolo's assumption of Spanish influenza pandemic literature being an interdisciplinary subject, the merging of different fields.

Myla Goldberg's *Wickett's Remedy* (2005) centers its attention on Lydia Wickett, a nurse whose husband and some family members die because of the pandemic. Lydia then participates in some experiments run to find out more about the influenza pathogen that are

84 Ibid., 72.
85 Ibid., 72.

led on unwilling criminals who should have given their consent. Goldberg took inspiration for the scientific tests from those effectuated by the United States Public Health Service at Gallops Island, Boston. The emphasis is on the testings' 'primitiveness', particularly for what concerns the "biological safety and the treatment of infectious substances […]."[86]

October Mourning: A Novel of the 1918 Pandemic (2006) by James Rada Jr. concerns medical personnel, too, as the protagonist is Alan Keener, a doctor struggling to find a cure for the influenza disease. The author was capable of representing "the frustrations of actual physicians who, in September 1918, had no protocol through which they might help their patients."[87] As Goldberg did with *Wickett's Remedy*, Rada consulted the archives of medical reports to find reliable sources for his novel.

Slightly different from the two works mentioned above is Thomas Mullen's *The Last Town on Earth* (2007). Set in the fictional city of Commonwealth – in all probability inspired by Gunnison, in Colorado[88] – the narration follows the life of Philip, the adopted sixteen-year-old son of Charles Worthy, the town's mayor. Charles has decided to quarantine Commonwealth in order to avoid the spread of the virus within the community; no one can get in or get out of town. To keep the quarantine in effect some men volunteer and guard the borders; but a mysterious American soldier manages to enter Commonwealth with Philip's help. When influenza cases begin to appear among the town's population, the blame falls on both Philip and the soldier. The situation in Commonwealth falters because "the inhabitants of [the town] become fearful, suspicious, distrustful, selfish, dishonest and violent."[89]

86 *Pandemic Influenza in Fiction: A Critical Study*, 78.
87 Ibid., 108.
88 "Overwhelming the Medium: Fiction and the Trauma of Pandemic Influenza in 1918", 71.
89 *Pandemic Influenza in Fiction: A Critical Study*, 100.

They Came Like Swallows, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider", and *The Last Town on Earth* are different takes on the 1918 pandemic; William Keepers Maxwell and Katherine Ann Porter actually lived through those grueling circumstances and expressed what they felt in their narratives, while Thomas Mullen gave his fictional interpretation of the events. Even so, there is a 'fil rouge' that links them all together. As a matter of fact, not only their fictional works present the trauma of loss caused by the invisible threat and the resulting 'destruction' of the character's lives before coming in contact with Spanish influenza, but also the main characters of each narrative fall ill with the flu and survive it. The trauma represented in *They Came Like Swallows*, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," and *The Last Town on Earth* is the same, but simultaneously various, as it is possible to 'extrapolate' three typologies of loss – loss of a member of the family, loss of yourself, and loss of the community. Maxwell, Porter, and Mullen tried to express what their protagonists felt due to the gruesome experience that Spanish influenza must have been.

Chapter Three

They Came Like Swallows (1937)

3.1 William Keepers Maxwell Jr.

William Keepers Maxwell Jr. was born in 1908 in Illinois to William Keepers Maxwell Sr. and Eva Blossom Blinn Maxwell. While he was alive, Maxwell was mainly known for his work as an editor for *The New Yorker*, where he was employed from 1936 to 1976. In his time there he helped outlining the careers of authors such as John Cheever, and Sylvia Townsend Warner. Maxwell had always been influenced by Virginia Woolf and Henry James with their late nineteenth and early twentieth century realist fiction, but his interaction with writers whose works he had to edit inevitably changed Maxwell's own way of writing.

After his death in 2000, many literary critics started focusing not only on his work as an editor, but on his own written compositions, too. American novelist and critic John Updike stated that "Maxwell used 'modest specifics, clearly rendered,' and subdued 'figurative language' in order to 'get at the nearly unbearable heart truth'."[90] Other intellectuals remarked his "quiet, subtle prose and simple, searching voice."[91] They also emphasized how Maxwell managed to be accurate on a psychological level, and to evoke "an atmosphere that operated in tandem with its content."[92] What is more, Maxwell himself – in a 1981 interview by George Plimpton and John Seabrook – when asked by the journalists about what is the force that makes someone a writer, his answer was 'deprivation'. In his case, what Maxwell was

90 Krauthamer, Anna, "True Fiction: Three Writers' Approaches to Fact and/or Fiction", *Honors Thesis Collection*, 274, 2015, 15.
91 Ibid., 15.
92 Ibid., 15-16.

deprived of was his mother. As a matter of fact, Eva Maxwell fell ill with Spanish influenza while she was pregnant with the author's younger brother. She died of pneumonia complications caused by the flu right after having given birth to the baby, in 1919. Eva's death left a permanent mark on the Maxwell family – on the then ten-year-old William, in particular. It is absence, then, that 'inspires' authors, in William Maxwell's opinion. What is interesting is that – in Maxwell's case – this absence is even more present in the literary works of the novelist; in fact he dealt with his mother's passing in four of his novels and talked about it with Plimpton and Seabrook in their interview:

> With *Ancestors* I thought I was writing an account of my Campbellite forebears and the deprivation didn't even show up in the first draft, but the high point of the book emotionally turned out to be the two chapters dealing with our family life before and after my mother's death in the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. I had written about this before, in *They Came Like Swallows* and again in *The Folded Leaf*, where it is fictionalized out of recognition, but there was always something untold, something I remembered from that time. I meant *So Long, See You Tomorrow* to be the story of somebody else's tragedy but the narrative weight is evenly distributed between the rifle shot on the first page and my mother's absence.[93]

Even though to critics and the reading public it may appear that Maxwell's works are an autobiography, it is important to stress that the writer never considered his works to be autobiographical; his stories "[…] are fragments in which [he is] a character along with all the others. [They were] written from a considerable distance [,]"[94] and Maxwell did not have for a moment the sensation that his works could possibly expose him.

93 Plimpton, George and John Seabrook, "William Maxwell: The Art of Fiction", *Conversations with William Maxwell*, edited by Barbara Burkhardt, Literary Conversations Series, University of Mississippi, 2012, 39.
94 Ibid., 37.

Nevertheless, in his works a mix of fictional and non-fictional elements is always there, highlighting Maxwell's aim to "[build] his own imaginative backstory into fact, [and] suggesting there is no truth without the imagination."[95] In that 1981 interview he stated that "[autobiography] is simply the facts, but imagination is the landscape in which the facts take place, and the way that everything moves."[96] Critics showed that in the texts references to his life are consistently present: in one of his fictional short stories – for instance – Maxwell introduced details about the personal effects of a dead family friend that were anything but fictitious. What intellectuals therefore did was wondering whether his pieces were actually fiction or autobiography. They came up with a new definition, as Maxwell's writing style was denominated 'autobiographic fiction'; autobiography and fiction are inevitably intertwined: fiction cannot exist and express itself without real-life events and real-life events become part of the fiction. The way Maxwell rendered private features displays the re-exploration of the everyday life and how the unavoidable flow of time alters the memories of people.

The aforementioned death of his mother affected William Maxwell so much so that the novelist had to rely on the professional help of a therapist to deal with the tragedy in the early 1940s – about twenty years after it happened. The sessions with Theodor Reik – famously known for being a student of Freud's in Vienna and for his pioneering works in the 'lay analysis' field – gave Maxwell some guidelines regarding psychoanalytic theories, and shaped his fiction, too. What is more, psychoanalysis proved to be extremely useful for a more accurate analysis of the novels that were noteworthy the most. Scrutinizing Maxwell's works – especially *They Came Like Swallows* and *So Long, See You Tomorrow* (1979) which both thematized the main characters' maternal figures' passing – through the 'psychoanalytic lens', it can be affirmed without any doubt that they are narrations of an experience so traumatic that "[…] memory and imagination [wrangled] with the inadequacy of language to represent the

95 "True Fiction: Three Writers' Approaches to Fact and/or Fiction", 16.
96 "William Maxwell: The Art of Fiction", 39.

reality of [it].”[97] Writing gave William Maxwell the chance to come to terms with the loss of his mother, but what he put into words also made possible to recognize “[…] the innumerable losses during the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 […].”[98]

3.2 They Came Like Swallows

In the 1937 novel by Maxwell the reading public is presented with an ordinary American family, the Morisons – James, and Elizabeth and their two children, Robert and Peter (nicknamed Bunny) – living in Logan, Utah, in 1918. The Morisons’ daily routine suddenly changes when news of a new variety of influenza starts spreading not only around the world, but in their own town, too. The younger sibling – Bunny – falls almost immediately ill, followed by Robert, and, later, on Elizabeth. The latter – pregnant with another child – is infected while on a train taking her and her husband to a hospital in Decatur., Illinois While Bunny and Robert completely recover, Elizabeth on the contrary woefully dies a couple of days after delivering her third baby. Mirroring Eva Maxwell’s death and the impact it had on her family, the unexpected loss of Elizabeth and the way Bunny, Robert, and James acted in response to it point out the fundamental role she had in the household.

They Came Like Swallows is chronicled through three different perspectives: 8-year-old Bunny, 13-year-old Robert, and, ultimately, James. Each section reveals how Elizabeth was perceived by each member of the family. The first is Bunny, who – through the innocent eyes that only a child can possibly have – identifies his mother with an angel-like figure. Then it is Robert’s turn; slightly older than Bunny – as a matter of fact he is 13 years of age – he feels that, as the eldest son, it is his responsibility to protect Elizabeth from influenza, therefore his

97 Howe, Krista J.,“The Virtues of Ever-Present Absence in William Maxwell’s *They Came Like Swallows* and *So Long, See You Tomorrow*”, University of Wyoming, published by ProQuest LLC, 6.
98 Ibid., 8.

mother is seen as someone vulnerable. James – for his part – considers his wife as the center of his own world and believes that world will disintegrate without Elizabeth in it.

The novel's title is a reference to Irish poet W. B. Yeats's poem "Coole Park, 1929". Few verses of the poetic composition are employed by Maxwell as an out-of-context epigraph in the book that – in a way – set the tone for the publication:

> […] They came like swallows and like swallows went,
>
> And yet a woman's powerful character
>
> Could keep a Swallow to its first intent;
>
> And half a dozen in formation there,
>
> That seemed to whirl upon a compass-point,
>
> Found certainty upon the dreaming air […].[99]

What is more, birds are physically present in *They Came Like Swallows*, as they function – due to the migrating movements of the flying animals – as a reminder of the way influenza bizarrely appeared and disappeared. The woman that Yeats write about in "Coole Park, 1929" could be regarded as two different metaphors in Maxwell's novel; the feminine figure may be a personification of the United States and its inability to face and "[…] to control nature by scientifically identifying and annihilating the virus that caused […]"[100] the catastrophe that the Spanish influenza epidemic was, or the woman may be Elizabeth Morison herself, who was not able to properly fight the disease and succumbed to it.

99 Yeats, W. B., "Coole Park, 1929", *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, Macmillan, 1933.

100 "The Virtues of Ever-Present Absence in William Maxwell's *They Came Like Swallows* and *So Long,, See You Tomorrow*, 15.

Elizabeth's death curiously does not occur in the section narrated through Bunny's eyes. As a matter of fact, the news of her passing reaches Logan when the perspective has been replaced with that of Robert. This stylistic choice shows how strenuous discerning and understanding loss for a young person – Bunny in the book is only 8 years old – is. When his mother died, William Maxwell was only a couple of years older than his fictional character, and he came to accept life without his mother's presence only as an adult. With *They Came Like Swallows* Maxwell started his healing process that would be fully completed only forty two years later, when *So Long, See You Tomorrow* was published in 1979.

3.2.1 Bunny Morison

Part One of *They Came Like Swallows* introduces – as previously noted – Bunny as the 3rd-person perspective whose point of view the reader is 'catapulted' in. It is instantly detectable the vigorous bond that connects the mother and her youngest son:

> [feeling] altogether sorry for himself, he began to imagine what it would be like if she were not there. If his mother were not there to protect him from whatever was unpleasant – from the weather and from Robert and from his father – what would he do? Whatever would become of him in a world where there was neither warmth nor comfort nor love?[101]

From the very first pages the reader is therefore able to understand that Bunny's relationship with Elizabeth is unique and that things are antithetic with his older brother Robert and his father James. Love, warmth and comfort are feelings strictly connected to the mother, and her potential absence implies a lack of those sentiments.

101 Maxwell, William Jr., *They Came Like Swallows*, first published by Harper & Brothers in 1937, The Harville Press Edition, 2001, 8.

The library is a crucial room for the mother-child bond: it, for instance, is familiar and confidential when Bunny and Elizabeth are alone in it, and it abruptly is vulnerable to change and to unpredictability when other members of the Morison family enter the room. It is precisely in the library where the little protagonist familiarizes with the Spanish influenza pandemic, as his father reads the news out loud and wants everyone to listen to them. Paying attention to that kind of information to an 8-year-old boy – mainly interested in activities for children – is challenging, but Bunny does it anyways because he is well aware that for James that is essential. The article the father is reading is an explanation of what the emerging Spanish influenza is and what are its symptoms. It "[…] resembles a very contagious kind of 'cold' accompanied by fever, pains in the head, eyes, back, or other parts of the body, and a feeling of severe sickness."[102] The impression the reader has is that the media underestimates the issue of the Spanish flu. As a matter of fact it treats it as a 'plain' grippe, because the article highlights the mildness of the disease, the speedy recovery and underlines that, in comparison, the worst cases are only a few. Being Bunny only an 8-year-old child, he does not understand every term James pronounces. But a specific word – 'epidemic' – catches his attention and the young boy perceives it as something wrong, negative, "[…] unpleasantly shaped and rather like a bed pan."[103] The child understandably and immediately searches for his mother's glance in order to be comforted. Elizabeth, on the other hand, is too busy trying to hold a sneeze, ultimately failing. The sneeze is not casual; on the contrary, it functions as both a threat and a warning for what is going to happen to Bunny's mother in a not-too-distant future: she is going to die of Spanish influenza. Elizabeth then kindly asks her husband to change the subject, putting into evidence the contrast between James's and her own respective reactions. While he imperturbably reads the newspaper because he wants his family to know what is occurring, Elizabeth's only concern is to protect her children from those bad news.

102 Ibid., 14.
103 Ibid., 15.

But the fact that James promptly complies with her request expresses the intense respect and love that unite them. Roles are instead reversed during a family dinner – in the library and attended by Irene, Elizabeth's sister, too – as the topic of Spanish flu is introduced again; James immediately stops his wife before she finishes what she is saying that there is no sense to it, highlighting once more the idea of downplaying the pandemic similarly brought forward by the press. The tone of the conversation evolves into something more serious during the course of the dinner and the two children silently assist to it. While his father is articulating his ideas about the politics of the United States, Bunny is all of a sudden hit by a thought linked to the disease. Through the stream of the boy's thoughts, it is possible to evince how Bunny perceives his older brother. As Robert is 13 years of age, Bunny sees him as someone fearless and more experienced.

> Robert would not have had any trouble. *We were playing tree-deep*, Robert would have said. *And Arthur Cook got sick*. That would have been the end of it, so far as Robert was concerned. He would have not felt obliged to explain how Arthur ran twice around the circle without tagging anybody. And how he stopped playing and said *I feel funny*. How he went over by the bicycle racks then, and sat down.[104]

Before he can say anything, he is stopped by his father, who feels disrespected by his son's attempt to interrupt him. Due to James's reproach, Bunny does not share the information until a couple of days later. But it is already too late.

Children's innocence plays a major role in the entirety of Bunny's section. First of all, Bunny does realize the importance of giving the news of his friend being sick, but at the same time he is not able to understand what that really means, and the magnitude of the events

104 Ibid., 31-32.

happening around him – it is fair to underline that at first adults, too, do not fully comprehend the whole situation. Bunny is just a child, and – as such – he should just be worried about going to school, playing with his peers, and staying with Elizabeth as long as he can. Nevertheless, when he tells his mother – while they are, needless to say, alone in the library – about Arthur's confirmed case of flu she changes her attitude towards Bunny. She becomes more interested in what he has announced, phoning Arthur's family right away, and gives the youngest of her children a task that is usually Robert's. Bunny has suddenly to grow up; he goes into town all alone and Spanish influenza is – once again – the subject of the conversation between the shop owner the child has been sent to, and one of her clients. They are talking about the situation in other American cities – such as Chicago or St. Louis – where more and more people are dying of influenza. Bunny simply hears the dialogue between the two women, not really listening to the words they are saying. He is too interested in the candies exposed on the counter, a fictitious voice advising him to "[*take*] *as much of anything there is* […]."[105] His thoughts are ulterior proof that Bunny is still a young, innocent boy.

Until this moment, Spanish influenza has entered the Morisons' household only through the words read by James on the newspaper, and the exchange between Elizabeth and Bunny. It has simply been a volatile topic, and the Morisons have not been 'physically touched' by the disease, yet. It is thought-provoking, then, that the first to get the terrible sickness is precisely the youngest and the most innocent of the family members: Bunny. From a merely stylistic point of view, Maxwell did a marvelous work at trying to explain the sensation of falling ill with the flu through the point of view of an 8-year-old character, who has yet to fully develop a thorough understanding of the world around him:

105 Ibid., 45.

> He told himself anxiously that he must keep [his eyes] open. He must not drop off to sleep. But in a very short while there was Karl's great-grandfather (Karl is the Morison's German hire hand) digging and digging with a pipe in his mouth…
>
> and the water seeping into his ditch…
>
> and the air grown darker…
>
> and the high wind…
>
> […] His eyelids closed for a second and when he opened them the room had darkened permanently. There was nothing, he found, that he could do about it. He heard the rhythm of the piano. Cymbal chinked blindly on cymbal and drumstick beat drum. But he was wrapped comfortably around in music so deep and so firm that he could lie back upon it. He was upheld for a long time and then moved forward into a darkened air where thunder burst concentrically out of red rings… green rings… lavender rings…[106]

It is a very nightmarish moment, permeated by a sensation of oppression and the feeling that the child has not the control over his body anymore. Bunny is at the mercy of darkness. Due to his young age, he is one more time incapable of expressing what he has undergone. Being sent to bed by his father due to his difficulty in staying awake, Bunny feels betrayed by Elizabeth – who agrees with her husband's decision. A distance is created between the two; she is the only member of the family who the young boy perceives as an ally and losing her love will mean too much of a setback and sorrow for Bunny. The next day the 8-year-old boy wakes up having confused thoughts about the episode, not sure if it was a dream or if it was reality.

Bunny's section finishes with three interlinked events. The first one is the Armistice; reaching his family in the library for breakfast, everyone tells the youngest of the Morisons that the war

106 Ibid., 57.

has finally come to an end, with the Allied winning over the Central Powers. Yet, the extremely joyous moment is abruptly interrupted; Bunny does not feel well and because of that reaches Elizabeth to put his head on her lap. She is the one who discovers that her child has a high temperature by touching Bunny's forehead. Even though the young boy is sick, all he cares about is that his mother is holding him. For Bunny this is a victory, because it means that the bond with his mother has not changed, it is still strong and unique; his life – after the brief, unpredictable moment of the night before – is certain and complete again. The Armistice might have ended World War I, but for the Morison family the fight against something invisible, scarier and beyond one's control – the Spanish influenza pandemic – has just begun.

3.2.2 Robert Morison

Robert Morison is not there when his parents discover that Bunny has contracted the Spanish flu; he is with his friends celebrating the end of the Great War. Once home, the 13-year-old boy is clearly confused when he hears his father saying that the family doctor has ordered Elizabeth to stay away from Bunny's room, where the infected child is confined. The first impression the reader has when the perspective shifts from that of Bunny's to Robert's is that there is an evolution in terms of the way in which the events are displayed. Robert is more mature, and therefore he is more capable of understanding the thousand shades of the human emotions than his younger brother. Even the mother-son relationship is different, being it quite conflicted. The teenager does not perceives is mother to be an angel-like figure as Bunny does, but rather someone who imposes chores on him. He cannot stand being kissed and touched by any member of the family. Since he is older, his parents – and the other adults as well – treat him as a grown-up, having serious conversations in front of the boy and sharing with him details – even those Robert does not want to hear; for instance when James and

Elizabeth share with him the news of Bunny being sick with Spanish flu, or – in the second case – when his father converses with him about the reason why Elizabeth has to specifically go to a clinic situated in Decatur in order to deliver the baby, causing Robert's embarrassment. Due to Bunny sickness, a sense of fear and helplessness pervades the Morisons' house. Elizabeth feels like a bird in a cage because she cannot go inside the 'sick-room' – as Robert defines the room where his younger brother is kept – and care for her baby. James being at work, the 13-year-old boy consequently becomes the one responsible for the respect of the fundamental rule that Dr. Macgregor, the family doctor, has imposed on her. But the unpredictable entrance of a swallow in Bunny's room gives Elizabeth the possibility to get in, sit on the edge of her younger son's bed and hold him in her arms to protect him from the animal. The bird – as previously noted – functions as a metaphor for Spanish influenza itself. The swallow twirls around Bunny's head, indicating his unhealthiness, while Robert with a broom tries to send the bird – and Spanish influenza as well – out of the house. Bunny's innocence – and 'ignorance' on the matter – comes into play even in this situation; once again showing the difference between him and Robert, the 8-year-old does not want his brother to hurt the bird, unaware of the destruction it is causing. Sparrows become a regular presence. They are seen again flying and twirling over the Morisons' chimney.

The feeling of guilt for not having stopped her mother from swears Robert out not only because he was supposed to protect Elizabeth when James is not at home, but also due to the fact that he believes his family is punishing him for his failure. He is still a boy, after all, and – like his brother – he needs to spend his time with his friends. His mother, however, forbids her son to leave the family courtyard to go and play with his classmates. "[…] Because if you run all over town you'll be playing with all kind of boys who probably haven't a thing the matter with them [,]"[107] is the unaccepted justification Elizabeth gives him. Wanting to

107 Ibid., 79.

understand the situation, Robert asks his father the permission to take the newspaper from the previous day and is scared by what he reads:

> '*SCHOOLS… The school board and the health officer have posted notices on the school houses and at places about town to the effect that schools will be closed until further notice…*' […] *The notice reads as follows: To the Parents … While the epidemic has not reached Logan to any extent, and while it may seem unnecessary to many, yet after consulting with the health officer and the medical authorities your school board decided to close the schools for this week at least, in the hope that no new cases will develop and that this community will be spared any serious epidemic.*[108]

He becomes aware of the situation in which Logan – and other cities in the United States – finds itself in; something is happening, thoroughly opposed to what has occurred on the day of the Armistice. The day when that agreement is signed, a sense of enthusiasm permeates the town of Logan, with people loudly and happily celebrating on the streets. On the contrary, the virus that is hitting with its unstoppable force everything it comes in contact with is quiet. The idea of the impossibility to have any kind of power over the natural entity is extraordinarily declared by the simple, but precise, thoughts of the 13-year-old, who is mainly worried of remaining secluded without any possibility of leaving the house.

The days during which Bunny battles against the disease are not chronicled. The physical conditions after the recovery are instead described, his activeness and playfulness transformed into easy tiredness, and the vitality on his face mutated into pallor. Bunny has to be given a 'white-glove' treatment. Despite their brotherly relationship not being idyllic – as a matter of fact they argue a lot, like any other pair of siblings, for the most disparate little things –

108 Ibid., 82.

Robert strives to share with Bunny his toy soldiers – symbol of the strength the 8-year-old boy has employed to fight and defeat the Spanish influenza – and support him in case of necessity due to the child's still recovering figure. His younger brother's recovery means the recuperation of a brief glimpse of normality for the Morisons in spite of the worsening of the pandemic situation in Logan. The number of infected cases aggressively increases day after day, and the federal government advises the population to follow few simple rules in order to limit the circulation of the virus – like avoiding large gatherings and using public transportation only when absolutely necessary. As Elizabeth's final stages of pregnancy approach, she and her husband have to reach the clinic in Decatur to deliver the baby and find themselves forced to send Robert and Bunny to stay with Clara, their other aunt. The goodbye moment is touching. Robert – usually trying to avoid any type of physical contact with other people – would like to kiss his mother goodbye, but he hesitates too much and Bunny takes his spot. The teenager appears to sense that everything is changing once more; his family will never be the same again, and that has nothing to do with the arrival of a newborn in the family.

Contrary to the warning signs preceding Bunny's illness, Robert transitions from being fully healthy to being sick without any kind of hints; but, as opposed to Bunny's, the 13-year-old's section does not come to an end when the unpleasant discovery has been made. Maxwell persevered and decided to describe the consequences Spanish influenza has on body and mind of the people who contracted it. The task here is even more difficult, due to the young age of the character.

> [Before] he could get upstairs to the bathroom, he was vomiting. Aunt Clara undressed him, as much as he would let her; and pulled the covers back so that he could get into bed. In a little while, Dr. Macgregor came and took his temperature and asked him questions – all from too

> great a distance to be of any help. Robert was glad that Dr. Macgregor had come, and sorry when he went away. But there was nothing that he could do about it. He was cut loose. He was adrift utterly in his own sickness.[109]

Even though Aunt Clara and Dr. Macgregor do anything they can to help him, Robert is indeed alone in the fight against influenza. On the morning of the fourth day, all the 13- year-old can think of is how is mother is and if anything bad has happened to her, as he has overheard – during a moment of lucidity – his aunt talking on the phone about Elizabeth's health conditions. He still feels guilty for having let her near Bunny when he was sick. In spite of his own bad health conditions, he senses that something is wrong with her and his father. That is the moment when memories and dreams revolving around his mother begin to appear in Robert's mind. He remembers a moment before the Morisons apprehended the existence of Spanish influenza. Past and present merge, as Robert wishes with all of his entire being that moment of happiness and lightheartedness to be tangible and real. And he dreams of having a nightmare and being waken up by Elizabeth. She sits on the edge of the bed – as she has done with Bunny – and this gesture erases Robert's fear. He feels calmer, his head clearer, and light as a feather. Mirroring what happened before his mother left for Decatur, in his dream the 13.year-old is not able to get closer to Elizabeth. There is a great and growing distance between the two of them. This separation is the omen of the Morgans' matriarch's death.

Spanish influenza is not the only health issue Robert has had to face in his short life; before the events narrated in *They Came Like Swallows* the teenager was involved in an accident that led to the removal by surgery of his leg. Because of the amputation, he has always been considered – and has always felt – different from the 'average' children. It has been a great deal of pain – both physical and emotional – for Robert growing up. He is inevitably limited

109 Ibid., 120.

in his actions – for instance he cannot run as fast as his friends or play for a long period of time – and sometimes wishes for someone else to take his place. A duality in Robert's attitude is effortlessly discernible; he is just a teenager and no one would expect from him to endure and hide his affliction, but Robert does not want to be pitied; on the contrary, though he suffers, the teenager wishes that everyone – his family, in particular – sees that he is mature and strong enough to face anything.

3.2.3 James Morison

The final section of *They Came Like Swallows* is narrated through the Morisons' patriarch point of view, just got back home from Decatur without Elizabeth. As with Robert, James's part shows a development in the account of the events; James is actually an adult and is therefore more equipped to express how he feels. What he is not at all prepared for is losing his wife to Spanish influenza. Her absence is physically and emotionally detected; though everything is the same in the Morisons' household – the furnishings that up to that moment have represented his life are in the same positions James left them before their departure – the void left by Elizabeth fills every single room. The man is now aware that he is alone, his solitude embodied by the echo of James's footsteps, which he is sure he will hear until his own death. The dresses in the closet and a vague smell of flowers are what remains of Elizabeth. What is more, while his son Robert feels guilty because he thinks it is his fault his mother got sick in the first place, James has the same feeling. All the man can think about is the moment during which he is sure Elizabeth has contracted the influenza:

> When he relaxed, when he sat too long in one place, he invariably found himself on the railway platform downtown, with her. The train was coming in […]. And there were people

> walking up and down the platform, waiting to get on. He shoved forward, knowing each time that if he'd only waited – but he didn't wait. That was the whole trouble. He was trying to get seats for the two of them before all the others got on. If he'd stepped back, he'd have seen the interurban draw up alongside the train. […] That way they wouldn't have been exposed.[110]

James is tormented by the means of transportation chosen and by his own impatience to get on the train. He desires to go back in time and change the past in such a way as to bring her back to life, but even in his imagination he is not able to stop from getting on the train. The memory of the sound of Elizabeth's labored and suffocated breathing adds to James's agony. "If he could only go back, if he could remember everything during the last ten days, why then he might – it was foolish of course, but the same idea occurred to him over and over – he might be able to change what had already happened […]"[111] is just one of the sentences recurring in James's section about this idea of turning the time back. Since his wife's passing, the man is the ghost of himself, unable to care for Bunny and Robert and uninterested in the new addition to the family – he still refers to the newborn with an impartial 'it', to keep the baby at distance – because without Elizabeth he feels lost. She was the glue that kept the Morisons together; and now that she is not there anymore, even the easiest task – eating, for instance – feels impossible. But soon Elizabeth's sister makes him recognize that he is not the only one grieving. His sons need to overcome the excruciating pain, too; Bunny and Robert – of course – react to the news of their mother's passing in opposite ways: the 8-year-old cannot stop crying, while the 13-year-old seems to have taken it well. A chat with Aunt Irene – reported the next day to James – reveals Robert's actual feelings. He is now more sure than ever that it his is fault if Elizabeth has died; Irene explains to him that influenza symptoms come out in no more than three days after the exposure to the virus and that he is worrying

110 Ibid., 137-138.
111 Ibid., 147.

about something that has happened too long before his mother has actually gotten sick. James is still too shattered by the loss of his wife to actually be of any help to his children. He needs to emotionally heal. The man comes to a point where he wants to die, because life without Elizabeth is purposeless; he wants to stay with her forever. He dreams of getting out of their house – filled with his wife's absence – waiting for her to come and take him away in the snowy and cold night. But he understands that what he is dreaming is making him crazy. Consequently, he changes his attitude. Waking up from the steadiness caused by grief, James finally feels that – in spite of her not being physically present – Elizabeth will always be there with him, Robert, Bunny, and the newborn child. James even comes to the realization that neither Robert nor him are responsible for Elizabeth's death;

> [and] anyway, it was what people intended to do that counted – not what came about because of anything they did. […] What happened to him had happened before. And it would happen again, more than once. Probably someone would lie awake all night in that very same hospital feeling his lungs contract and expand, contract, expand – until the whole of him was limited to the one effort of breathing for somebody else…[112]

What the Morisons have endured is a fortuitous case of fate; James and Elizabeth have found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time, but they could not have done otherwise; they could have contracted the Spanish influenza in any other way. It was something out of their control. This awareness finally allows James to start properly mourning his wife; and – more importantly – he sees he is not alone in this process. Sharing not only the sorrow for their common loss, but the same blood, James finds in the family that he has not been sure of wanting anymore since Elizabeth's death the meaning to go on.

112 Ibid., 171.

Though Elizabeth is not considered to be the main character of *They Came Like Swallows*, after a careful analysis she actually is. To be more precise, her presence – which then turns into absence – is; her physically being – or not being – in the narration 'governs' the mood for each section. From the joy in Bunny's part due to her 'full presence' to the anguish and distress caused by Elizabeth's 'whole absence' in James's section, passing through Robert's perspective – where she is present at first and only in the final pages is not. Employing the Morisons family not only to recount a most abominable event in his life, William Maxwell in his 1937 novel wanted to use Bunny, Robert, James and Elizabeth as a symbol for all of those American families whose loved ones passed away due to the Spanish influenza and never overcame their losses, implying that the Morisons/Maxwells are just a small drop in the immense ocean of sorrow caused by the uncontrollable Spanish influenza pandemic. *They Came Like Swallows*, then, shows what a pandemic of that magnitude could do: it could bring about the disruption of family bonds, with – almost, in the Morisons' case – no possibility of remedy. If Maxwell revealed the disruption of family, Katherine Anne Porter in her 1939 "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" displayed another kind of disruption that Spanish influenza generated: the disruption of the individual.

Chapter Four

"Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (1939)

4.1 Katherine Anne Porter

Katherine Anne Porter was born Callie Russel Porter in 1890 in Indian Creek, Texas, to Harrison Boone Porter and Mary Alice Jones Porter. After the death of her mother when Porter was only two years of age, she was sent by her father – together with her four brothers – to Kyle in order to live with their paternal grandmother, Catherine Ann Porter. The old woman was such a pivotal figure in Porter's upbringing that the writer decided to professionally adopt her name. When Catherine died as well, the Porter family moved to different cities in both Texas, and Louisiana. Due to their constant movements, the siblings were not really able to have an education worthy of the name; the only exception was when Harrison Porter decided to enroll his children for the biennium 1904-1905 in a non-Catholic school – he favored schools where religion was not an integral part of school subjects – as he had realized they needed to be properly educated. Katherine there discovered her ability to write and a heartfelt interest in acting – years later she even tried to pursue a career as an actress. At age seventeen she escaped to elope with a certain John Koontz, but their unhappy marriage only lasted until 1915; Koontz was a violent man and Porter found comfort in writing. That same year Porter fell ill with tuberculosis and during her convalescence in a sanatorium she made the decision to prioritize her passion for the art of fiction. Once the writer got better, she begun looking for jobs in minor newspapers. In 1918 she finally landed a position as a reporter for Denver's *Rocky Mountain News*. She was then supposed to leave the

United States and go to the European front as a Red Cross volunteer, but Porter was among those who fell ill with Spanish influenza when the virus reached the American continent. Her conditions were so dreadful that her colleagues at the *Rocky Mountain News* wrote her obituary, but she surprisingly recovered – even though she would bear with her for the rest of her life the physical consequences of the illness, as she remained frail. Porter recounted her experience during the Spanish influenza pandemic solely twenty-one years later – in 1939 – in her short story "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," contained inside a collection bearing the same title, as she probably wanted to erase from her memory what and how she felt during those strenuous moments. But she became aware that "[…] her truest art came from deep pain and that she needed [a certain amount of] years to establish artistic distance."[113]

Katherine Anne Porter was quite mysterious about herself; she even admitted to the biographer she chose to recount her life, Joan Givner, that she fabricated many details about her personal existence, rendering Givner's task extremely interesting. Her body of work is not wide, and even though she is better known for having published in 1962 the best-seller, and her only novel, *Ship of Fools* – about a group of people leaving Mexico for Europe – her short stories were more critically acclaimed. From a thematic point of view, Porter's works of fiction 'speak' for themselves. Among those who most influenced her, the writer cited James Joyce as one of her greatest inspiration. It is indeed noticeable that both Joyce and Porter's characters find themselves in an immobility of sorts – Joyce's protagonists seem unable to leave their native land, a country that is in turmoil. Since Porter, instead, was both raised by a family with Southern values – a society with morality and in which women had to be submissive – and she lived during a definite historical period – the First World War, a time of uncertainty – the writer was conscious of how limited some social categories – women, in particular – were, somehow paralyzed in their actions and positions, and included this

113 Unrue, Darlene Harbour, *Katherine Anne Porter: The Life of an Artist*, The University Press of Mississippi, Kindle Edition, 2005, Loc. 1066.

realization in the fiction she wrote, but without radically and openly supporting her stand – as she did not want her own work to be censored for that reason, or even to be singled out as a feminist, who were not well seen. The main difference between Joyce and Porter can exactly be recognized in how the two writers employed the paralysis: "[while] Joyce [used] *Dubliners* to focus on the paralysis found in Ireland due to socioeconomic and political turmoil, Porter [borrowed] this preoccupation in her stories to track both the outside world and her characters' families."[114]

As previously mentioned, Porter invented features of her life. So, despite the fact that she really underwent some of the events in her fictional works – for instance the Spanish Influenza pandemic and her contracting the disease, among the others – it cannot be really stated that what she put in black and white in her short stories is an autobiography. It is more elaborate than that: Porter believed that it was extremely challenging to understand real life, but it became less complicated through the means of memory, and comparison. This operation transpired – as she admitted – in her writing process. Additionally, since her aim was to share with the reading public the untouched and unmodified truth, Porter never sought to impose herself – her thoughts, and ideas on how their lives should be – on the characters she was writing about. On the contrary, she impeccably managed to preserve the background of each protagonist and what constituted – in the fiction, of course – them: their past, their present, and their idea of what their life had been up to that moment. What made her different from any other novelist of her time was the choice not to forcibly reduce her characters into heroes who manage to obtain everything they have ever dreamed of, fighting and defeating the forces that attempt to stop them from that ambition of fulfillment. It is indeed crucial to stress that Porter never wanted to instill compassion or pity for the protagonists and the episodes she narrated about them. She succeeded in doing so with the employment of irony, because

114 Colwell, Jamie Rose, "Katherine Anne Porter's Adaptation of Joycean Paralysis in the *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* Collection", Clemson University, published by ProQuest, 2007, 1.

"[irony perceived] the disparity between the act and its supposed value, thereby freeing its possessor to look unqualifiedly at the foreign experience with both his own and the [stranger's] eyes."[115] Her style of writing is without a doubt extremely difficult to comprehend – at a first and superficial reading – and filled with symbols that are often linked to Biblical/religious meanings. But the way she verbalized what she wanted to share caught – and it still catches – the attention of the reader, earning Porter the qualification as one of the most interesting and innovative American authors of her generation.

4.2 "Pale Horse, Pale Rider"

The 1939 collection by Porter contains three short novellas – "Old Mortality," "Noon Wine." and the short story that gives the title to the anthology, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." The latter and "Old Mortality" have in common the main protagonist, Miranda Gay, and her evolution from just a teenager living in the South, to an independent and promising young woman working as a journalist in Denver during World War I. Miranda has an affair with a soldier named Adam. During their brief time together, the journalist contracts Spanish influenza that is just beginning to circulate in the United States and becomes seriously ill. Once she wakes up, she sadly discovers that while she has been sick, Adam, too, has contracted the virus and has subsequently perished due to its complications.

The events narrated in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" resemble – as it has already been revealed – an episode in Katherine Anne Porter's own life. In 1918, as she was working as a journalist in Denver, she became sick with Spanish Influenza and luckily recovered from it. The fact that Porter waited so long to share with the reading public – in the form of a short story – what she overcame highlights the desire of the writer to erase the pain she experienced from her mind in order to return to a normality of sorts. That did not happen, because trauma never actually

115 Young, Vernon A., "The Art of Katherine Anne Porter", *New Mexico Quarterly*, Vol. 15, no. 3, 1945, 333.

leaves those who survived it. In order to better understand what a traumatic experience does to someone who endured it, it is worthwhile to mention a study on trauma carried on by Cathy Caruth. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth declared that, even though someone might think to have erased a dreadful and distressing event from their memory, that trauma never actually disappears. Mental and/or emotional trauma differs from physical trauma; as the latter heals more easily with the passing of time and does not reappear, for what concerns the first, the recovery process is undisputedly divergent. As a matter of fact, since at the beginning the mind is unable to grasp what has happened, the shock regularly manifests itself, sort of 'haunting' the survivor, impacting – unconsciously, at first – their life. When questioned about Spanish influenza, Porter exemplified how the 1918 pandemic had repercussions on her:

> It simply divided my life, cut across it like that. So that everything before that was just getting ready, and after that I was in some strange way altered, really. It took me a long time to go out and live in the world again. I was really "alienated", in the pure sense. It was, I think, the fact that I had really participated in death, that I knew what death was, and almost experienced it. […] Now if you have had that, and survived it, come back from it, you are no longer like other people, and there's no use deceiving yourself that you are.[116]

What Katherine Anne Porter explained in the interview is that it is basically impossible to remain unchanged by such a colossal, and painful circumstance. This experience unavoidably makes you different from others, and your identity is altered, with no prospect of returning to the normality you were used to. The self you were before the trauma changed into the one you were during it, and – in order to cope with what has occurred – a third individuality is created

116 Porter, Katherine Anne, "Interview with Barbara Thompson", *Katherine Anne Porter: Conversations*, Ed. Joan Givner, University Press of Mississippi, 1987, 85.

which is a combination of what you were before the disquieting event and the one you were while living the traumatic experience. Memory is given an essential role in the process of getting better, because "[when] memory fails, the new identity becomes distorted and dysfunctional."[117] Memory and mind are fundamental in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider;" through the character of Miranda and both her physical and mental symptoms caused by the virus, Katherine Anne Porter was able to masterfully express the need – and why not, even the duty – for those who survived the Spanish influenza pandemic to remember it.

4.2.1 Miranda and the Mass Media

From the very first pages of the short story the reader realizes that Porter is not only writing about the Spanish influenza pandemic and how people were mentally affected by it, but she also presents interesting glimpses of the life of a working woman at the beginning of the 20th century in the United States. Miranda Gay works as a reporter for a local newspaper in Denver, and, together with her friend Mary Townsend, they are the only female workers there. Both of them were demoted from their roles as 'more serious reporters' due to a scandal concerning another woman that they were supposed to write about. They instead decided to cover the woman's immoral behavior up, leaving the enticing gossip to the competition. They are not considered as professionals as their colleagues anymore and there is some kind of hostility towards Miranda and Mary due to their mistake – and most likely due to their being women. They are now relegated to write less committed columns; Miranda finds herself reviewing theatrical plays, while Mary writes about the town's gossip – she is even given the moniker 'Towney' in relation to what she reports. As a consequence of what has happened, the two women have strongly bonded and spend their time outside working hours together. In

117 Davis, David A., "The Forgotten Apocalypse: Katherine Anne Porter's 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider', Traumatic Memory, and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918", *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 43, no. 2, University of North Carolina Press, 2011, 58.

spite of not being at work, the 'journalistic component' never really abandons the two women: they talk about the news every time they have the chance to.

In "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," news is given a function thoroughly different than one would usually expect: while in real life newspapers generally give serious news and are therefore highly valued by the readers, Miranda and the other characters – Mary and Chuck, a colleague of theirs, and Miranda's boyfriend Adam, too – do not take them seriously. The conversation that Miranda, Mary and Chuck have is unquestionably explanatory. They are talking about the appearance of this new strain of influenza on American shores:

> "They say," said Towney, "that it is really caused by germs brought by a German ship to Boston, a camouflaged ship, naturally, it didn't come in under its own colors. Isn't that ridiculous?" […]
>
> "Yes, it does," said Towney; "they always slip up somewhere in these details… and they think germs were sprayed over the city – it started in Boston, you know – and somebody reported seeing a strange, thick, greasy-looking cloud float up out of Boston Harbor and spread slowly all over that end of town. I think it was an old woman who saw it." […]
>
> "I read it in a New York newspaper," said Towney; "so it's bound to be true."[118]

An unverified rumor about a cloud of germs Germans have spread over the capital of Massachusetts has been popularized by an unknown woman. Apparently, rumors are not deemed for what they simply are – speculation – and are instead regarded as valuable pieces of information by the press. Miranda and Chuck respond to Mary's final statement by laughing and making fun of the fact that their colleague keeps reading newspapers anyways.

118 Porter, Katherine Anne, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Novels*, first published by Harcourt, Brace & Co. in 1939, Kindle Edition by Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2008, 296.

Their reaction demonstrates a complete distrust in the news; and this skepticism is even more sensational since it comes from people who work as journalists. It is as if the reported news bespeak the unpredictability, the mystery of what is occurring in the United States at the moment. A similar conversation happens between Miranda and Adam, who is a soldier. The young man and the journalist are talking about the high number of dead people because of a virus that is not considered as a serious danger. On the contrary, the word Adam employs to describe the disease and what it does to its helpless victims is 'funny.' What is more, Miranda's boyfriend makes fun of her and her job, teasing her about – for instance – the fact that newspapers in general predict the end of the war. Periodicals share with the public information both about the abruptly emerged Spanish influenza pandemic and World War I. Therefore, through the employment of the articles in the newspapers, in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" it is given prominence to the juxtaposition of the two disastrous events; what they both cause is suffering for those who manage to survive them and – for the less fortunate – death. It is also pertinent to highlight that what Mary declares about the Germans being responsible for the spread of the virus reinforces the thesis of the two circumstances being intrinsically connected to each other.

Even though Miranda from the beginning of the short story feels sick, showing mild symptoms of what can be acknowledged as common flu – headache and a slight cold – sarcastically enough, it is shortly after the time she spends inside a theater in order to review a performance for one of her articles that the protagonist falls dramatically ill with Spanish influenza. One moment she is perfectly fine, having an evening date with Adam in a peaceful restaurant, and the next she wakes up in her bed, knowing that she has spent some time sleeping. Mirroring Miranda's personal conditions, the situation of the outside world has commuted; paradoxically Adam – who repeatedly made fun of the mass media in his conversations with the young woman – while tenderly caring for Miranda as the disease's

symptoms start to get more severe, functions as a newspaper of sort, reporting to her that "[…] all the theaters and nearly all the shops and restaurants are closed, and the streets have been full of funerals all day and ambulances all night –."[119] Through Miranda's contracting the virus, the author is also able to show how the ordinary people reacted to the news of Spanish influenza's actual existence; when she learns that one of the renters has fallen ill with this frighteningly unknown malady, the protagonist's landlady – being a symbol for the hysteria of the citizens – goes mad with fear for a not-so-distant possibility of contagion caused by Miranda's presence inside the building. She does not want her there anymore and, because of that, has a quick dialogue with Adam, threatening to forcibly remove the young woman from her room if someone does not come straightaway to take her to the hospital.

4.2.2 Miranda and the Flu

What Miranda goes through is immediately burdensome physically and mentally, too. She is taken care of by Adam and since she knows the flu to be highly transmissible, the young woman does not want him to stay near her; the young man does it anyway, exposing himself to the possibility of being infected as he sits on the bedside, gives her pills, orange juice and ice cream – the last two are evidently not medical remedies – and attempts to psychologically distract her from the situation she is in. Since they have known each other for a brief period of time – only two weeks – Adam and Miranda share some significant dialogues concerning their lives before the war and their hopes and desires for the future. It is during the initial moments of the sickness that Miranda has the first of a series of delirious dreams, scanning the passing of her 'sick time':

119 Ibid., 312.

> Almost with no warning at all, she floated into the darkness, holding [Adam's] hand, in sleep that was not sleep but clear evening light in a small green wood, an angry and dangerous wood full of inhuman concealed voices singing sharply like the whine of arrows and she saw Adam transfixed by a flight of these singing arrows that struck him in the heart and passed shrilly cutting their path through the leaves. Adam fell straight back before her eyes, and rose again unwounded and alive; another flight of arrows loosed from the invisible bow struck him again and he fell, and yet he was there before her untouched in a perpetual death and resurrection.[120]

Numerous critics focused on this specific dream, as it reveals Katherine Anne Porter's cleverness in employing symbols in her writings. Sarah Youngblood – for instance – is of the opinion that the arrows in Miranda's hallucination are a reference to the pagan god Apollo, who in ancient times was believed to be the carrier of the plague. Another interpretation – this time by Sylvia Hendrick – calls the attention on the similarities between the arrows that hit Adam to the way Cupid makes two people fall in love. Last but not least, Roger Platizky points out that the young man being repeatedly pierced by darts is comparable to the life of Saint Sebastian, the Christian martyr identified with the healer of the plague, as opposed to Apollo.[121] It is also undisputedly discernible that this dream is an allusion to Adam's destiny at the end of the short story: Miranda discovers that during the time she was unconscious the young man has died due to complications after having contracted the virus, in all likelihood, from Miranda herself – even though the possibility that he may have been infected at the training camp is not exceedingly remote. While Adam has briefly left the apartment to go get something to eat and drink for the both of them, Miranda is reached by two young medical trainees – who have been previously called by the young man himself – and taken on an ambulance to the hospital, where the situation is utterly out of control; the main character is

120 Ibid., 317.
121 Platizky, Robert, "Adam's Arrows in Katherine Anne Porter's 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider'", *The Explicator*, Vol. 72, no. 1, Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, 2014, 2-3.

without a doubt not the only sick person in Denver – and the rest of the United States. On the contrary, the hospital is so overwhelmed by the high numbers of people who need treatment as quickly as possible that the protagonist is left in an anonymous corridor, waiting for a bed to become available for her – at the beginning of Spanish influenza pandemic's second lethal wave American medical facilities were overwhelmed in such a way that numerous patients were abandoned in the building's hallways. It is in the corridor that Miranda gets acquainted with Doctor Hildesheim and – with horror and dread – she discovers on her own skin some of Spanish influenza's most alarming side effects; she is no longer able to manage her body: it seems that she cannot properly control the words she wants to say. As she tries to have a normal conversation with the physician, what Miranda – much to her dismay – is trying to express comes out as stammered gibberish. What even worries the main character more is the sudden inability to read the letter she has received from Adam; a kind and willing nurse reads her the message, in which the young man reassures Miranda by saying that he will come and visit her as soon as possible; but once the nurse has finished, the young woman has already forgotten what was written in Adam's letter.

After this episode, Miranda is left alone and she witnesses two hospital staffers – which she describes as shadowy figures – removing a dead body from the hospital ward. It is employed a rather gothic tone to chronicle what Miranda is seeing; the couple performs an act similar to a tribal ritual, bowing and curtsying to each other, in a silence that is almost deafening:

> [two] dark figures nodded, bent, curtsied to each other, retreated and bowed again, lifted long arms and spread great hands against the white shadow of the screen; then with a single round movement, the sheets were folded back, disclosing two speechless men in white, standing, and another speechless man in white, lying on the bare springs of a white iron bed. The man on the springs was swathed smoothly from head to foot in white, with folded bands across the face,

> and a large stiff bow like merry rabbit ears dangled at the crown of his head. The two living men lifted a mattress […], spread it tenderly and exactly over the dead man. Wordless and white they vanished down the corridor […].[122]

The couple has definitely the function of Angels of Death facilitating the journey of the dead in the Afterworld. It is evident that the situation is influencing Miranda's thoughts in some way by the fact that – once the two staffers have disappeared with the corpse – she perceives a mist covering everything around her and has a peculiar vision: Doctor Hildesheim as a skeleton wearing a helmet – similar to that of a Hun conqueror – trying to kill Miranda. This nightmare of hers highlights not only the vividness of the dream itself to the point that when the protagonist actually wakes up from it she verbally assault Doctor Hildesheim, but also – and most importantly – Miranda's profoundly, but unconscious, rooted fear of death. In point of fact her subconscious – and utterly human – desire to stay alive that leaks out of this dreamlike sequence is contrasted by her deliberate and firm decision to die.

The last dream Miranda has concerns paradise, as she is one step away from death – were it not for the ready and essential medications given to her by Doctor Hildesheim and Miss Tanner, one of the hospital nurses. This one is even more gothic and darker than the one that involved the two figures transporting away the unidentified dead body. Miranda finds herself sinking "[…] easily through deeps under deeps of darkness until she [lays] like a stone at the farthest bottom of life, knowing herself to be blind, deaf, speechless, no longer aware of the members of her own body, entirely withdrawn from all human concerns, yet alive with a peculiar lucidity and coherence[.]"[123] However, the young protagonist – despite the ghastly setting – is at peace; she remains motionless, looking from the darkness below a stunning and reassuring sky – paradise. This feeling of quietness and harmony is interrupted by a strange

122 *Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Stories*, 320.
123 Ibid., 323.

sensation, an impression that something unfortunate has happened. Miranda asks herself if that has occurred to someone or something and she is aware of the necessity to return to the 'land of the living' even though it automatically means that she has to leave a place where what she feels can only be defined as 'rapture', and 'euphoria.' The protagonist's awakening is traumatic; death's distinct odor hovers on Miranda, and she is perfectly aware of it, feeling it even inside of her body, fatigued by the disease. Welcoming her when she wakes up, Miranda discovers a world wholly different from the one she knew before becoming sick. She hears noises coming from the street; bells ringing in celebration, fireworks exploding in the air, and people joyfully screaming. Sardonically, the recovery of the young woman begins on November 11, 1918, the day of the Armistice – as opposed to what happens in *They Came Like Swallows*, where Bunny falls ill with the flu on that precise date, instead. Miranda does not want to live, she wants to return with her whole being to the heaven she dreamed about since on Earth "[there is] no light, there [may] never be light again, compared as it must always be with the light she [has] seen beside the blue sea that [lays] so tranquilly along the shore of her paradise."[124] The news of Adam's death a month prior to her awakening – received through a letter written by a man who was at the camp with him – strengthens Miranda's desire to die. Even so, the ending of Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" is somehow dull, as if the protagonist had surrendered to the idea that she has healed and survived the pandemic, while so many others – her boyfriend among them – have not.

4.2.3 Miranda, Adam, And Memory

At the beginnings of her illness, Miranda and Adam share interesting conversations while the young man attempts to help the protagonist as best as he can. The most thought-provoking one occurs when the young woman wants to sing a song, a spiritual titled 'Pale Horse, Pale

124 Ibid., 327.

Rider' – which, of course, gives the name to the short story itself. The song is an obvious biblical reference to the Apocalypse Horsemen and consequently to Death. It is about a singer who loses every member of his family. The protagonist adds to the song a verse by saying that "[death] always leaves one singer to mourn."[125] This is a clear allusion to what will happen to Miranda and Adam. The protagonist is the singer, as the young man is destined to die after contracting Spanish influenza; but Miranda – unlike the singer in 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider' – is not ready to grieve. And the reason is not because she does not want to, but because she is not equipped for it. In order to show her sorrow for the man she loves, the young woman should be able to remember the time spent together, but the flu has compromised her memory by 'generating' a mental void in her mind, and that emptiness is unequivocally an impediment. At the same time, remembering Adam is burdensome for other reasons; the memories Miranda owns regarding her moments with the young man are altered due to the fact that they are inevitably linked to the memory of the pain she felt while being sick and the protagonist clearly wants to erase those agonizing memories. Besides, Miranda deep down is conscious that there is a significant probability that Adam got sick because he has never left her bedside, tending cautiously to her. It will not be possible to wipe those memories of him out of her mind; they will eventually – and overwhelmingly – resurface with the passing of time. Actually, the young man never leaves the protagonist, even after his death. He returns as a ghost in the final pages of the short story, as a reminder of what has happened to him:

> At once he was there beside her, invisible but urgently present, a ghost but more alive than she was, the last intolerable cheat of her heart; for knowing it was false she still clung to the lie, the unpardonable lie of her bitter desire. She said, "I love you," […] trying by the mere act of her will to bring him to sight before her. If I could call you up from the grave I would, she said, if I

125 Ibid., 316.

could see your ghost I would say, I believe… "I believe," she said aloud. "Oh, let me see you once more." [126]

What the protagonist feels is unquestionably guilt; not only because she perceives that Adam's death is completely her fault – since he was with her when she got sick – but also because – as it has already been highlighted – she has survived Spanish influenza, while countless have not. She is grateful, too, because Adam was there – when no one else was – and helped her during that difficult time. Miranda feels as if she does not deserve to be alive. Dying and forgetting are the only manageable ways to deal with what has happened to her, in Miranda's opinion; the pain is too intense, and there is no possibility she could have been prepared for the excruciating circumstance that the Spanish influenza pandemic was. The young woman does not understand that she is blameless, and the fault lies with the virus itself; she was an intermediary, a vehicle against her own will, something that comes out in Miranda's dream about Adam being speared by the arrows. In the vision, the darts pass through the protagonist's body before piercing and repeatedly killing her boyfriend, and this highlights the unreasonable idea that she could have had the power to prevent Adam's passing. The virus is an invisible force and – as such – no one can have control over its hazard and spread. Even humans – who until then have always considered themselves as invincible beings – are forced to recognize their 'smallness' in front of nature's inexorable power. The protagonist's mental turmoil is mirrored by her physical appearance and how she actually 'feels' her body. Once she is strong enough for properly stand and look at her figure in the mirror of her hospital room, Miranda describes herself as a 'corpse'. Towney – who has been visiting her since the protagonist's health has gotten better – attempts at comforting her by declaring that in a week she will be entirely different. Yet, the young woman does not seem to be interested in what her

126 Ibid., 330.

colleague is telling her, more preoccupied about being able to get her old apartment back. In addition to that, the protagonist wonders "[…] again at the time and trouble the living [takes] to be helpful to the dead. But not quite dead now, she [reassures] herself, one foot in either world now [.]"[127] Due to her experience, she considers herself both dead and alive, hovering on a very thin line; but she wishes to "[…] cross back and be at home again […],"[128] underlining how intensely she would rather be dead than live in a world where Adam is not present. To be more precise, she wishes for Adam to return from the world of the dead in such a way as to be together. Since it is not possible – as long as the young woman is alive – memory plays a crucial part, because the only way to commemorate Adam's existence is through remembrance.

Through "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" what Katherine Anne Porter made abundantly clear is that Miranda – and all the survivors of the Spanish influenza pandemic, for what that matters – has the responsibility to remember what has happened. The young protagonist must reminisce about the catastrophe not only because she experienced it firsthand, but also because of Adam, and for him: she must do so because of the sentiment that tied them together – even if for a brief period of time – and due to the fact that she is the survivor whose task is to keep the memory of the young man alive. Her personal experience can be pivotal for future generations to learn about that tragic event. Not only the survivors, but the memory that they carry have a pivotal role. While violently ill, Miranda is stuck, unable to think about anything else but her condition until she has fully recovered: she does not want to look into the painful past, and simultaneously cannot look ahead. She is at the mercy of influenza and what it is doing to her mind. The trauma of the disease has changed, disrupted her body and her mind, it has caused in the young woman a stillness, making her different from the ones who did not experience what she instead has; she is not the same Miranda having conversations about the newly

127 Ibid., 329.
128 Ibid., 329.

discovered virus spreading over Boston with her colleagues Towney and Chuck, she is not the same Miranda falling deeply in love with Adam, a young man she has barely known for only two weeks. Now she is Miranda, the survivor of Spanish influenza, and there is no chance she can go back to her previous state of being. The help the protagonist receives by Adam is a reference to what actually happened when Katherine Anne Porter fell ill with Spanish influenza: when no one else wanted to, she was taken care of by a stranger – a man living in the same building – who got infected while being with her and died soon after of complications. The author recognized the sacrifice someone she did not even personally know made in order for her to have at least a chance at remaining alive. It also showed what the virus was never – and will never be – able to destroy: despite the countless victims and survivors of the pandemic, and despite many were hysterical and afraid of being in contact with people who were contaminated – for instance, Miranda's landlady in the short story – some never lost their compassion. And compassion is what makes us human. In *The Last Town on Earth* (2006) by Thomas Mullen, this human factor is almost completely eradicated, showing how events linked to the Spanish flu manage to almost completely disrupt a community – despite it being fictional.

As previously – and to a great extent – mentioned, Katherine Anne Porter was one of the 500 million people around the globe who got infected with Spanish influenza and was lucky enough to survive it – even though with a particularly painful healing phase that confined the author to bed for a prolonged amount of time. She was brave enough to revive her awful experience in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," using Miranda Gay as an imaginary counterpart of sorts. The writing style Porter employed to chronicle the hallucinations Miranda has during her sickness can only be defined as gothic and mystic, unquestionably inspired by Virginia

Woolf's words in her 1926 essay "On Being Ill," the sick person being freer to express their journey in a blunter and more outspoken way. The protagonist's mind is no more governed by her own will, being instead presided over by the disease, intensely amplifying what she feels. The way Katherine Anne Porter put down this experience unavoidably makes the reader 'hurl' into Miranda's delirium. "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" is one of the exceptionally few – if not the only one – American published literary examples whose author actually lived through what she has written about and this reason renders Porter's short story one of a kind.

Chapter Five

The Last Town on Earth (2006)

5.1 Thomas Mullen

Thomas Mullen was born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1974 and – as of today – lives in Decatur, Georgia with his wife and two children. His first novel, *The Last Town on Earth*, published in 2006 by Random House, named by *USA Today* the Best Debut Novel of the year wo numerous prizes – the Fenimore Cooper Prize for excellence in historical fiction, among the others. In his relatively short career, Mullen has written various novels that encompass the most disparate themes – such as race relationships, or police corruption. They all have in common the fact that they are historical fictions – with the only exception of *The Revisionists* (2011), set in a futurist dystopia. *The Many Deaths of the Firefly Brothers* (2010) for instance, takes place in 1934, during the Depression era; and the *Darktown* series (taking the name after its first book, *Darktown* – published in 2015 – and followed by *Lightning Men* in 2017 and *Midnight Atlanta* in 2020) are detective novels set in 1940s-1950s Atlanta, starring the first black officers of Atlanta Police Department, Lucius Boggs and Tommy Smith as fiction characters.

In a 2013 interview with *The Bitter Southerner*, Thomas Mullen was asked by the blogger about what made him decide to become a writer, and Mullen answered that he had always wanted to become one, sharing a memory of him as a child writing "[…] imitation kids'

books."[129] Given the author's immense interest in the past and in history – especially that of the United States – one might wonder why Mullen does not write historical non-fiction instead of fiction. In another interview on National Public Radio, following the publication of *The Last Town on Earth* in 2006, he admitted to the speaker that he believes "[…] fiction allows us to explore things about the human character that in [his] opinion it would be a little harder to get at via non-fiction."[130] Writing *The Last Town on Earth* was a challenge for Thomas Mullen, as he was concerned with the prominence of the event he was going to deal with – the Spanish influenza pandemic. Mullen used as a main source for his debut fictional novel John M. Barry's 2004 *The Great Influenza – The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, but he did not believe he would be able to be accurate while writing the book. What makes *The Last Town on Earth* wholly different from *They Came Like Swallows* and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" is the fact that its author did not live through the 1910s and therefore did not experience what he wrote about. Mullen's take on the events is a 'fantastic' one: he could only imagine what could have happened in such a distressed situation and how people would react to that.

5.2 The Last Town on Earth

The fictional city where the novel's events take place – named Commonwealth – and situated in Washington State, was not totally invented from scratch by Thomas Mullen. As a matter of fact, the author was inspired by what some existent American cities – mainly situated in the Rocky Mountains and in the Pacific Northwest – did during the Spanish influenza pandemic. Those cities – Gunnison, Colorado, for instance – managed to keep the virus outside of their borders during both the first and the second wave of the pandemic thanks to their somewhat

129 Reece, Chuck, "What Is a 'Southern Writer,' Anyway?", *The Bitter Southerner*, accessed 17 February 2021, http://bittersoutherner.com/8-questions-for-thomas-mullen#.YCz35zZK2P9.

130 https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6133594&t=1613554744974&t=1613754577793.

extreme decision to completely isolate themselves. The city administrations "[…] erected barricades, sequestered visitors, arrested violators, closed schools and churches and banned parties and street gatherings, a de facto lockdown that lasted [for] months."[131] Mullen was genuinely curious about these cities, but at the time he did not find enough details – even *The Great Influenza – The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History* was not adequately useful, since Barry only briefly mentioned them in more than 400 pages of book. To be more accurate, when he started writing *The Last Town on Earth*, the theme of the Spanish influenza pandemic in general was barely known and studied in the United States; scholars started to take a deeper interest in what had actually happened in the biennium 1918-1919 following the spread of H1N1 pandemic, in 2009. Instead of being discouraged by the lack of specifics, the author used it to his advantage. The author indeed felt that he could be able to write his novel in a freer way, as he was not constrained by history itself. Mullen was captivated by those towns' choice to do what he referred to – in another interview for an online blog named BLDGBLOG – as "reverse-quarantine."[132] The author explained to the blogger that usually quarantine is implemented when someone shows symptoms and is therefore 'removed' from the community to avoid the uncontrollable spread of the virus, while all the communities of Gunnison and the other towns were healthy; theirs was a preventive decision, and it historically worked extremely well, because the virus – as previously mentioned – never infected those towns and their inhabitants. For Mullen's fictional town of Commonwealth, that is an entirely different story. In *The Last Town on Earth*, the author deeply analyzed the moral dilemma that a quarantine of that scope unavoidably entailed. He started by simply asking himself:

131 Carroll, Rory, "Gunnison, Colorado: the town that dodged the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic", *The Guardian*, published online, March 2020, accessed February 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/01/gunnison-colorado-the-town-that-dodged-the-1918-spanish-flu-pandemic.

132 Manaugh, George, "*The Last Town on Earth*: An Interview with Thomas Mullen", *BLDGBLOG*, published online October 6, 2009, accessed February 2021, https://www.bldgblog.com/2009/10/the-last-town-on-earth-an-interview-with-thomas-mullen/.

> "[What] happens if, one day, you and your buddy are standing guard over your town and you're presented with a lost traveler? He's freezing, and he's starving, and he's begging for your aid. He needs food and shelter, or he might die. What do you do? […] Do you try to be charitable, even if you know he might be carrying this awful virus that you don't really understand?"[133]

In order to better explore the morality of such kind of quarantine 'without any restrictions', Mullen had to find a place where to set the events of his debut novel. He then came out with the noteworthy idea to 'build' from scratch a town that could allow him to do that. The expedient Mullen employed was that of a man – Charles Worthy – moving with his wife Rebecca from the town of Everett, and into the woods to establish Commonwealth. Everett is a real city who became notorious due to a workers' strike that took place in 1916 and led to the massacre of many protesters at the hands of the police. Commonwealth is therefore to be absolutely considered as a utopian town; its founder does not share the capitalistic and pro-war views of Everett – and the rest of the United States, for what matters – and what he desires the most is for every citizen of Commonwealth to live a tranquil life. Its community consists of mainly mill workers – who share Worthy's ideals – and their families. The majority of the men refuse to enlist for the ongoing war using the fact that they are essential workers as an excuse. When first reports of an unknown virus infecting and killing people start circulating, the town's founder – with the approval of Commonwealth's entire community – decides to set a quarantine to prevent anyone from contracting the unusual influenza. Men volunteer to take shifts and guard the town's boundaries. Among them, there is Charles's 16-year-old adoptive son, Philip, one of the novel's main characters. Through the teenager's eyes,

133 Ibid.

the reader is given a fresh, young and – primarily – innocent perspective on the events. The only apparent tranquility of Commonwealth is altered by Philip himself; during a solitary patrol he spares the life of a stranger who – it turns out later on – is named Frank, and is an American soldier escaped from a training camp. Philip should have forcibly removed the soldier from Commonwealth's borders, but the teenager's good heart made him decide to give the stranger shelter instead in an abandoned house into the woods.

At the beginning of the novel everyone in Commonwealth – even those who were not totally sure about it – agrees with Worthy's decision to impose a quarantine on the town. What the citizens want more than anything else is for their family members to remain healthy. But as the time goes by, the people start to realize that they are extremely bored and that they want to do something outside of Commonwealth. Some furtively sneak out to reach the nearby town to drink and have fun with women. With *The Last Town on Earth* Mullen showed how – in the long run – people react and resist to a 'complete' quarantine and therefore demonstrated its impracticality due to the moral consequences it unavoidably implies. Not only that, because – through the various points of view employed in the novel (Philip's, Charles', Graham's, and Doc Banes' are the main ones) – Mullen highlighted how each perspective is important, even though one's way of seeing the events and acting accordingly to them may seem wrong to others. A flawless and objective viewpoint does not – and never will – exist. What is more, the novel – having been written in the 21st century – cannot fail to refer to the realities of present-day United States of America, emphasizing the tensions – family conflicts, or the fear of the outside world, for instance – within the country itself.

5.2.1 Philip Worthy and Commonwealth's Community

Sixteen-year-old Philip is to be considered one of the – if not the – main characters of Mullen's novel. Being the town's leader's adoptive son makes him feel inadequate for a mill worker's life in Commonwealth. To make matters worse, the young boy is crippled following a car accident in which his biological mother tragically lost her life. This sharpens his sense of not wholly belonging to the community, and that is the reason why he volunteers for the patrols. He wants to demonstrate that he is an integral part of the town. During one of his patrols with his older friend Graham an unknown soldier tries to enter Commonwealth. Still guided by a right moral judgment, the teenager hesitates; Graham instead shoots him to death, as he believes the stranger to be sick. On another patrol Philip while alone a second solider reaches the town's borders. The teenager's attempts at sending him away by only talking are in vain and the two engage in a firefight. But when Philip has the possibility to actually shoot him, he feels that is not the right thing to do, and instead decides to hide him inside an abandoned building in the woods. Once the other citizens discover what he has done, Philip is segregated with Frank inside the building for two days to prevent any kind of spread of the virus that the citizens are so keenly trying to keep out of their town. At first the forced cohabitation of the two strangers is not the best; the young man is paranoid, especially when all of a sudden – during their first dinner together – the soldier coughs and "[the teenager turns] his head away, [considering] standing up and walking to the other side of the room."[134] Since he has been told the symptoms of this new strain of flu during a meeting at the town hall, Philip is afraid that Frank may be infected and that he will be infected, too. The teenager therefore does not want anything to do with him, and especially staying close to him, but being forced to stay together in such a narrow space inevitably leads to Philip and Frank starting to know each other and form a kind of friendship. Thanks to this newly established

134 Mullen, Thomas, *The Last Town on Earth*, first published by Fourth Estate in 2006, Harper Perennial, 2007, Kindle Edition, 147.

amicable relationship, in the teenager is reinforced the idea that quarantining an entire town is wrong; a thought he had already shared with his friend and love interest, Elsie, before even coming in contact with the soldier. What Philip naively hopes once he is set free that everything will go back to 'normality', even though the life in Commonwealth cannot be genuinely defined as such. Preoccupation pervades the quarantined town; the news of Philip letting in a complete stranger circulates quickly among the tranquil and unaware citizens. Different feelings pervade the young man, closed in the building: he is certainly worried for his health, but what mostly upsets him is the thought that he has possibly done something terrible and that he will be criticized and frowned upon by his fellow citizens – in particular his adoptive family and Elsie – because of his ingenuousness.

When – after the two days – Philip and Frank are finally checked by Martin Banes – Commonwealth's doctor. While the teenager is able to leave the building and return to his home, Banes does not let the soldier leave – there is the suspicion that Frank may even be a German spy, and he has therefore to remain locked up to ascertain that the hypothesis remains so. Despite Philip is denied by Charles the chance to see Frank again – at least to try and persuade the soldier to tell what he knows – the young man is convinced the soldier to be the man he told Philip he was, a simple American man from Montana. The fact that Philip and Frank are not infected for a little while is refreshing and reassuring for the community of Commonwealth. But this sensation of security is destined to be short-lived, as cases of influenza suddenly rise and people – primarily the mill workers – start to die. The blame automatically falls on both Philip and Frank. As things get worse with the increasing number of cases and deaths, everyone in Commonwealth begins to behave differently; the citizens become distrustful of each other. A group of men even verbally attacks Philip while the young man is walking in the street alone, angry at him for having brought the disease inside the healthy town. In particular, one of them refers to the teenager as "[…] the one got Michael's

boy sick [,]"[135] highlighting how deeply personal they have taken Philip's actions and how guilty they consider him, and to a greater extent than the stranger himself. People getting sicker and dying strengthens in the young man the idea that it was all his fault, and that his decision to help Frank was unmistakably the worst he has ever made in his life so far. Knowing what the citizens think of him, makes him desire with his whole heart that – again – at least his family, Elsie, and even Graham do not see him as blameworthy. His relationships with his adoptive father and Graham are altered a little, though. Charles still thinks of Philip as a child who needs to be protected at all costs from the troubles of the outer world – because the teenager has already suffered enough – and therefore does not share important information with him, despite his adoptive son would like more responsibilities and to be considered as an adult. What his more, since the young man does not agree with the imposed quarantine, Charles and him often discuss about it, but the town's founder does not seem to want to hear what his son has to say. What happens with Graham is instead more complicated; after Philip has let Frank enter Commonwealth, Graham sees him like the men who verbally abuse the teenager and begins to push him away and to be elusive, his primary aim to protect his pregnant wife Amelia and their young child. Their friendship is completely 'torn apart' when Graham stabs to death Frank, as he is sure the soldier is the one to have brought the Spanish flu inside of the town and by killing him he thinks that the contagion will miraculously stop. Unfortunately, the cases and deaths intensify, and Philip, too, gets sick overnight:

> [the young man's] head was pounding, and the aspirin Rebecca had given him didn't seem to be working. It was like throwing a glass of water on a forest fire. He felt weak and his legs ached. At first he had tried to keep them perfectly straight or bend them just so, but he soon

135 Ibid., 254.

determined that no matter how they lay, they would ache as if they were being pummeled with hammers.[136]

In his sickness, the teenager alternates moments of clarity of mind – in which he is more or less aware of what is happening around him and feels the presence of his adoptive family at his bedside to comfort him – to a state of mental delirium, characterized by strange dreams. His biological mother and the accident that killed her, and Frank are figures present in Philip's hallucinations, all set in an extremely crowded train. The image of the train will return by the end of the novel, as it – in a way – anticipates what the teenager is forced to do: he has to take a train that will take him – it is unsure whether for a brief period of time or indefinitely – far from Commonwealth. It is during one of the moments in which he is able to grasp and understand what is going on that Charles reveals to Philip that the teenager is not the one to be blamed for what has happened, as some men have sneaked out of town to reach the nearby Timber Falls in order to buy alcohol, and visit their girlfriends, or prostitutes. This should relieve Philip, but he is not even scratched by the joyous news, because the sixteen-year-old falls back in a state of unconsciousness.

In a short amount of time – three weeks, more or less – Commonwealth is transformed by the Spanish influenza and the paranoia caused by it from an idyllic town where everyone supports each other, to a place that is the complete opposite, after almost everyone has run out of food supplies – it is important to remember that the quarantine urged by Charles did not allow the citizens to get out of Commonwealth, therefore running errands outside of town was out of question. The town gets into a wild state of sorts; people who once were friends are now afraid to keep in touch and give their support out of fear of being infected by someone who might be sick; the neighbors' lands are destroyed to recover as many basic necessities as

136 Ibid., 325.

possible; the general store is rack-sacked. The situation is out of control, as paranoia and panic exercise their undisputed authority and govern the immoral actions of Commonwealth's citizens. Nothing can describe better the circumstances than a thought expressed by Philip before he gets sick, once again underlining his total objection to the quarantine:

> It had occurred to Philip that every decision made by the town since the quarantine began had been somewhat selfish. They'd placed themselves on a pedestal above all outsiders, holding their value to be superior on pain of death. […] He didn't know how worthy a man he was or he might become, but he wanted to believe he was capable of selflessness.
>
> […] He'd find no guidance here, Philip had learned – the quarantine designed to block out the flu had only succeeded in cutting off the town from its previous ideals of right and wrong. It was a town in full eclipse, and Philip would have to navigate through the dark by himself.[137]

The word that beyond any doubt better describe the character of Philip is 'lonely'. From the moment when he loses his mother because of the accident to the time spent in Commonwealth – he loses his friendship with Graham, he is not able to communicate properly with his adoptive father due to a divergence of opinion, he loses the recently formed friendship with Frank, and will lose Elsie (the poor girl will die after contracting the flu from her mother) too – the teenager has always had the feeling that he was alone and has learned to rely only on himself. His great willpower makes his recovery from the influenza possible, exactly when a group of armed federal officers arrive in Commonwealth. They have discovered that many did not enlist for the war and are there to arrest and take them to Timber Falls to be put on trial. Even though Graham – and the other men – do not deserve his help for how they treated him, Philip decides to do something that can only be defined as an oxymoron. The teenager

137 Ibid., 287.

recognizes that – in some twisted way – Graham saved his soul when he killed the first soldier in his place. He is still weak and confused, but having in mind the idea of doing good for a community now almost completely disrupted, the teenager kills the sheriff in charge of the raid – an action that is morally and ethically wrong. In order to protect him from the repercussions of his action, Charles sends Philip to stay with a relative of his in Portland. There the young man will be forced to start – again – a life anew, and has to leave behind a town that is on the verge of breaking due to the wrong decisions that have been taken and the numerous immoral actions done by its inhabitants. But, at least this time, he is serene in not knowing what to expect from the future – whether he will be able to return to Commonwealth, or the town will not succeed in recovering itself, and will be lost forever. Philip and Graham share a moment in which they confront each other, but neither of them apologize for their choices, emphasizing how much each character is still holding on to their own ideas.

5.2.2 Graham Stone

Philip's friend and companion on patrol is in all probability the most complex character present in *The Last Town on Earth*, and that reason renders him the most fascinating one. All his decisions – the majority of which are definitely amoral – are taken 'relying' on his visceral desire of protecting his family and community. This impulse has deep roots in Graham's life; before moving to Commonwealth to work at the mill, he lived in Everett. At a strike organized in Everett, he met and fell in love – the sentiment was reciprocated – with Tamara, an activist for the working women rights; the woman tragically dies during the clashes between the strikers and the police, and Graham never forgave himself for not being careful enough and having the power to do nothing about it. As a consequence, the man promised himself to never be again in such a vulnerable position, "[and] even if the devil himself should ride into town on a flaming beast breathing pestilence and death, the [he will] stand at that post, look him in

the eye, and shoot him down."[138] The two soldiers – the one of the night patrol with Philip and Frank – are obstacles to that peaceful existence Graham desperately longs for, and to the – for that reason – need to be immediately eliminated. However, he has not reckoned with the possibility that his actions can have repercussions on himself and his family, too. When Graham commits the first homicide, it seems at first that he is not even scratched by the idea that he has killed in cold blood a complete stranger; he has simply done what he had to protect Commonwealth and its citizens. He feels no remorse, on the contrary he is tremendously sure that shooting the threatening stranger was the right thing to. The reality is entirely different; Graham is unable to sleep properly, haunted by sound of the bullet penetrating the soldier's chest and the man's last facial expression. In spite of everything, Graham remains adamant about the rightfulness of his actions. When Philip helps Frank by giving him shelter in the abandoned building in the middle of the woods, Graham is enraged. Once the man, Charles and Doc Banes reach the building, another facet of Graham's protective character peeps out; he is one of the few people in Commonwealth who does not trust the doctor and questions every assertion Banes makes. To the eyes' of the overprotective Graham, Philip has favored the entrance of a potential danger, transforming the sixteen-year-old in a menace, too. The man even tries to persuade Charles to extend the period of time Philip has to remain locked with Frank in the storage building to be more certain that neither of the two are infected with the new strain of influenza that is 'invading' the towns close to Commonwealth with unprecedented strength. His idea, of course, is not well seen by Charles, who thinks of it as an exaggeration. What Graham is unable to fathom is how it was possible that the town's founder adoptive son only thought about helping someone from outside of Commonwealth. The quarantine that the town set on itself is the perfect 'medium', in Graham's opinion, to persevere with the protection of the inhabitants.

138 Ibid., 70.

As Philip is set free, the man manages to keep is friend at distance, both physically and emotionally; he is still extraordinarily mad at the teenager, and – what is more – he is not exhaustively persuaded that Philip has not become sick. This deeply hurts the teenager's feelings – as it has already been widely pointed out – but on the other hand it does not seem to affect in any way Graham, who is overly absorbed by his task. He is grumpy and distant even with his colleagues at the mill, who notice his sudden and unexpected change of attitude – his wife observes it, too, because at home he does not behave as he used to. Graham has become more serious and offers to take part at more shifts around Commonwealth's perimeter, as he wants to do everything on his own – to be sure they are actually done. The patrols come to be his second job, but he beyond any doubts spends most of his energies precisely guarding the borders. He moves from his house to go to the mill, then to the borders – or to the storage building to guard over Frank – and then home again after his shift. He is basically obsessed with the patrolling. Graham's obsession increasingly intensifies when the possibility that both Frank and the soldier he has already killed may be German spies within the American army. The news validates in the man the idea of having done the right thing, and it also underlines how deeply a tiny detail can render virtuous, and – most importantly – moral the unforgivable action of taking someone's life. And when people in Commonwealth become tremendously sick with the flu, Graham sees it as an opportunity to eliminate Frank, the one who Graham confidently believes to be the problem that started it all: "'He's in there, and he's… he's breathing the stuff out on us.' Graham struggled for the right words to convey what he thought was an obvious point. 'He brought it into town with him, and now it's just coming out of him. The longer he stays here, the worse it'll get.' […] 'You know that guy has something to do with this.'"[139] The man's maniacal thinking of making the lives of his loved ones livable culminates with the murder of Frank, still locked up in the storage building. By killing the

139 Ibid., 230.

soldier, Graham erroneously believes that people will stop getting sick and dying of Spanish influenza, as Spanish influenza will have miraculously left Commonwealth:

> Graham, standing over the dead man wrapped in the meager blanket, hated what he had done and hated that he'd had to do it, but that was the way it was and there was no point questioning it. Killing the soldier was what the town needed. He didn't understand why no one else could see this, or, if they indeed saw it, why everyone else had refused to act on it. This man had brought something upon the town, had fouled the air or carried a curse. He was slowly killing them off. […] [He] was indeed a murderer. Graham had done the right thing when the first soldier had approached, had saved the town, and by removing this soldier, he had done right again. This deed, though painful, would maintain the purity of his earlier act.[140]

In his mind Graham has transformed an immoral and terrible act into something pure and good of the people in his town.

Both the murders Graham carries out are clearly fulfilled in places and moments that makes them somehow 'secret'; for what concerns the first homicide, very few people know what has actually happened – Philip, Charles, Doc Banes, and few members of the guard – therefore the reports on it are modified for Commonwealth's citizens to believe – for their own good and interest – that Philip and his friend have found a dead body while patrolling the perimeter; and, as for Frank's stabbing, he asks the help of another guard to get rid of the corpse. The truth, however, comes out, and the weight and gravity of his actions along with it; the citizens are incontrovertibly appalled by his gesture – even though it demonstrates their incoherence, since what they have done to each other in time of need does not shine of fairness and morality. Despite being confronted with his crimes, Graham remains adamantly firm on his

140 Ibid., 299.

position; the trauma of losing someone he deeply loved the man has already experienced and the idea that something similar would possibly happen again made him doing horrible things, and the result is that he manages to lose the community where he had adapted so well.

5.2.3 Charles Worthy and Doc Banes

In founding from nothing a town in the middle of the woods, Charles Worthy – with the ever present support of his politically active wife Rebecca – wanted to keep at a fair distance what he thought was an unacceptable way of living; the exploitation of the average worker made him understand the necessity to 'wipe the slate clean', and to do it on his own terms. The Everett Massacre gave him the proper motivation to sever the ties with that abhorrent world and to create a new reality that can only be described as utopian. World War I is another impediment to the 'success' of Commonwealth, but the men living in the freshly founded town are able to deal with the situation – the town's mill provides supplies for the American war effort, so the mill workers are exempt from the draft. When influenza begins its course on American soil and news of it spreading among the nearby towns' inhabitants, Charles decides to prevent a contagion by urging a quarantine on the town's citizens, who will not be allowed to get of town. Consequently, anyone coming from outside will not be granted the possibility to enter, with a discreet number of men protecting the borders – including his adoptive son, Philip. If at the beginning this auto-imposed quarantine seems to properly work – no one gets sick – the idea starts to 'wobble' when Philip witnesses the murder of the first soldier and subsequently helps Frank. Rebecca – who has never agreed with the idea of the self-quarantine, but has never been really listened to during the town councils – is shocked when Charles lets his wife know that Philip has been locked up all alone with a perfect stranger, who may even be dangerous and infected for the sake of Commonwealth. Charles recognizes that Philip alone with the soldier is an upsetting situation for him as well. But he also thinks

that his town – his creation – and its people are to be taken into great consideration, though that in a certain way means sacrificing Philip and putting in danger his well-being:

> The town was bigger than Charles, bigger than his paternal instincts for Philip's protection, bigger than his need to please his wife. He thought about his brothers […]. He would not allow himself to fall into that trap, to use his love for his family to justify a moral failing. It didn't mean he didn't love Philip, Rebecca and Laura any less – it meant that he loved them so much he would not compromise his vision of love for all.[141]

What Charles is attempting at doing is taking the right choice for the entire town; Rebecca – on the other hand – shows her maternal instincts by putting their adoptive son's welfare first. The town's only doctor, Doc Banes, favors Worthy's ideas. He is comprehensibly the most worried about the entire situation. He has been receiving news via mail from a doctor working in the military training camp at Fort Devens about this new and aggressive strain of influenza. Precisely the fact that it has developed among soldiers, makes him have even more doubts about the soldier who Charles' adoptive son is locked up with for 48 hours:

> Banes knew it was possible that the mysterious soldier soldier was healthy, possessing some resistance to the same disease that, according to rumor, had infected a majority of those at the nearest camp, Fort Jenkins. But he also knew there was an equal chance that the soldier had brought the disease with him, symptomless for now but present nonetheless. […] A decaying jaundice of the air itself or a microscopic agent of death? […] The two schools of thought warred in Banes's mind, and though he accepted the new theory now, he had believed the other

141 Ibid., 81.

> for so long that it seemed more natural to him […]. Regardless, the solution was the same: keep it contained. Keep Philip and the soldier locked away, count the hours. Pray.[142]

It is evident that Doc does not exactly know what to do, blending together medicine and religion. What is even more evident is the fact that this new, mysterious and scary disease is making Banes questioning his worth as a doctor; he spends entire nights reading from his old school volumes attempting to find as many information as he can about the influenza, but without success. All the doctor can actually do is 'guessing', and making suppositions. When the disease hits Commonwealth for real, nothing could have prepared Doc Banes for the scene he is presented with. The doctor is called by a woman whose husband is severely ill, and as she tells Banes the people with whom her husband had been in touch with the previous night, the doctor decides to go have a look at another man's house. There he finds a horrific scene: an intense smell of death, the man's body lying on the bed, his blood on the walls, and on the cushion, "[…] on the small table beside the bed, blood on the corner of a framed photograph that had fallen from its stand, […] blood on its lower left-hand corner and blood in the center, where he must have brushed against it one last time."[143] The news of the man's death due to Spanish influenza spreads extraordinarily fast among Commonwealth's citizens, who becomes hysteric. A quarantine is created within the one that has already been imposed; the infected and their families must never leave the house, the others are asked to leave the house only when strictly necessary, and gauze masks are strongly recommended to move around town. As the number of sick people exponentially increases, Banes finds himself alone in fighting this silent war against the invisible enemy – his nurses too afraid to get infected themselves. Charles – in the mean time – has to face a harsh reality. Rebecca was right all along about the preventive quarantine, as he does not recognize the citizens of Commonwealth and how they

142 Ibid., 129-130.
143 Ibid., 217-218.

act anymore. He ingenuously thought that people would not sneak out, and that they had a higher sense of what being communal is. On the contrary, the townspeople become selfish and self-centered, and – what is more – they blame Charles for their condition:

> "I don't want your help," Metzger spat. "You've done enough already. Calling a town meeting that panicked everyone. Locking down the town so people would have to robe me to feed their families. What's the point in keeping the town closed if everyone's sick anyway? This" – he gestured at the store – "would never have happened if people had been allowed to come and go as they pleased!"[144]

Charles realizes that what he is being told is fair: imposing the quarantine was wrong from the very beginning. He should have not suggested it in the first place. Now he wonders what it would have been like if things were different; and he manifestly feels overwhelmed and responsible for the situation. The 'joint action' of the epidemic and the raid perpetrated by the men coming from Timber Falls is likely to have destroyed what Charles and Rebecca have struggled so much to build from nothing. What makes the matters even worse is that Charles is fundamentally powerless in comparison to the out-of-the-ordinary strength of the chaos that has hit Commonwealth, as he confesses his feelings to a bedridden Philip: "I believe now that what's happened here was simply meant to be, that this is something larger than all of us – larger than each of us individually and larger than each of us collectively."[145] When the epidemic has been defeated and the Commonwealth men are saved by Philip, nothing is as it was before. The town is on the verge of collapsing, and Charles hopes – but does not actually know – if it will ever get back to its original status; the influenza – and the loss of loved ones

144 Ibid., 305-306.
145 Ibid., 340.

that followed – has clearly changed its inhabitants; Doc Banes – too traumatized by what he has been forced to see through his visits – finds solace in alcohol.

5.2.4 Commonwealth, Timber Falls and Present-Day United States

Commonwealth and Timber Falls are the embodiment of two different type of reaction to unanticipated difficulties; while the first acts before people are even actually infected (prevention), the second takes measures after the virus has already hit its inhabitants (adaptation). It is as though Commonwealth has put itself inside a bubble impossible to set foot in and go out of. The town's auto-imposed impenetrability has evidently consequences that concern its connection with the nearby town of Timber Falls; despite the fact Charles Worthy's town largely depends on commercial exchanges, the relationship is 'put on hold' by Worthy out of fear that Commonwealth's inhabitants may enter in contact with people who are possibly sick. At the same time, the very existence of this isolated town in the woods generates suspicion to those who do not live within it. When a delegation from Timber Falls turns up at the borders asking for help, they are badly rejected by Charles and sent back to their town. To the people of Timber Falls this feels like an actual abandonment in time of need and it increases in them the desire – and even the necessity – to get back at Worthy and his town for not lending a helping hand. In a certain way, Timber Falls is more prepared to deal with the spread of the Spanish influenza in its territory than Commonwealth, 'merely' because the first still has relationships for its sustenance with other towns. This does not mean that they are not afraid of the virus, on the contrary they fear it as much as anyone else. What is more, they are even forced to grieve for the loss of their loved ones on the European battlefields while simultaneously fighting against the spread of the Spanish influenza. Timber Falls' community does not understand how is it possible that they have to deal with this demanding difficulties, and the neighboring town does nothing. These negative emotions

towards Commonwealth lead to the breaking point between the two and the subsequently – and almost total – 'destruction' of Worthy's town. This being the case, one cannot but wonder whether the events would have been different if Charles had not imposed the reversed-quarantine in the first place. Clearly, people in Commonwealth would have contracted the Spanish influenza anyway, but the outcome and the impact of the disease would probably – if not definitely – have been different; the relationship with Timber Falls would not have been broken because the two towns would have been in the same situation and would have support each other throughout the burdensome time they both had to face.

Even though *The Last Town on Earth* revolves around the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918 in the United States, one cannot but notice the incontrovertible resemblance to the 21st-century United States; and – being even more precise – to how the country reacted after the September 11 attacks. As a result, Mullen's novel is not merely a consideration on the pandemic and on how to tangibly deal with it, but it tells something about the social and cultural tensions within the U.S. following 9/11, too. Both the fictional town of Commonwealth and the country's main goal is to protect their communities from death. This goal is so crucial and meaningful that drastic actions have to be implemented. The questions therefore are how far someone can go to defend their community and keep it safe from the dangers of the outside world, and whether limiting in such a strong and extreme way people's freedom is productive or it makes matters even worse – in Commonwealth's case, the reader distinctly perceives that what has been imposed leads to inevitable, and terrible consequences. The fear of the outside world, of the foreigner, is crucial in both *The Last Town on Earth* and in the 'actual' United States. In Mullen's novel Frank – and outsiders, in general – is frowned upon not only because he may be infected with the Spanish flu, but also due to the fact that he is a stranger and no one knows anything about him. When he is thought to be a German spy – basically an enemy not only for Commonwealth, but a national one – his position manifestly

deteriorates. This attitude towards foreigners bears resemblance to the one that the United States has had in the wake of 9/11; the suspicion towards and fear of strangers were exceptionally ordinary. Terror and distrust bring about an additional issue, that of human rights. As a matter of fact, one might think that all sorts of actions are implicitly justified when someone is afraid for their well-being. Denying to someone the liberty to move without constraints, and even committing a homicide, the highest form of crime perpetrated against the fundamental right to live, are – maybe initially – perceived as righteous, because those actions allow you to keep yourself and the people you love safe from a plausible, but overly dangerous harm. In addition to this, Commonwealth and Timber Falls in *The Last Town on Earth* do not base their choices and measures on actual facts; on the contrary, they are drawn by mere rumors to do what is in their opinion necessary. Both believe they are right in their beliefs, they are a model to be followed and act accordingly. The truth is more convoluted, as no one is willing to compromise. Compromising feels threatening. *The Last Town on Earth* is so well written because – despite it mainly being an historical novel aimed at recounting a blurred period in American cultural memory – the reader is able to 'extrapolate' and 'deduce' aspects of contemporary United States.

Thomas Mullen did a magnificent work in his debut novel at depicting the human behavior during and immediately after a traumatic experience of the caliber of a pandemic. Mullen was able to express the gradual loss of a fictional community's moral values. It can be said – without any doubt – that each character of Mullen's novel at a certain point loses something. But in the end they all lose Commonwealth. What makes *The Last Town on Earth* dissimilar from *They Came Like Swallows* and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" is that the author of the 2006 book did not experience the Spanish influenza pandemic like Maxwell and Porter did. Therefore his is solely an imagination of the events. But Mullen's book is strong and 'hits the

mark' because it does not want to imitate or emulate what others – more 'qualified' precisely because of what they have lived through – did before him. Thomas Mullen interprets what they experienced and gave it a modern twist, still remaining faithful to the major historical events. This renders *The Last Town on Earth* a spellbinding example of novels belonging to what Charles De Paolo dubbed as 'Recursion period.'

Conclusion

Despite the fact that Spanish influenza pandemic was one of the most life-threatening events to have ever hit the planet – causing millions of deaths on a global level – and it took place no longer than a century ago, in the United States few fictional writings have been devoted to it. The interest around this topic begun to arise only in the last forty years – linked to and was revived even more after the outbreak of Covid-19 in the first months of 2020. Doctors, scholars, and journalists took the information they had about the Spanish influenza and employed it to make comparisons with the current situation, and found out similarities between the past and the ongoing outbreaks regarding the symptoms and how governments acted and reacted to the invisible menace represented by the virus. The fact that in the collective memory the 1918 pandemic is not well remembered clearly expresses the complexity and the harshness that people were forced to endure during a page in history relatively recent in time. There clearly was the need to have a brighter perspective on life and remembering was not useful in that sense, as it is expressed in *American Pandemic – The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic* by Nancy K. Bristow; and it is of considerable importance to highlight that when Spanish influenza hit, countries were still focused on fighting WWI. Therefore the conflict must be regarded as one of the pivotal reasons why in the United States – and the rest of the world, too – the pandemic was overshadowed by the war effort. What is more, the gigantic psychological burden that both the Great War and the Spanish influenza pandemic left on those who had to face them should not be forgotten; losing loved ones and/or surviving to the disease permanently marked individuals, and that unequivocally affected presence of material on the scene of American fictional literature

revolving around Spanish flu, which can only be classified as exiguous. People refused to share their memories because they did not want to be forced to relive once more those devastating occurrences and favored silence, instead – numerous prominent authors, like Francis Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, entirely avoided the subject matter or devoted to it few lines in their works. On the contrary, those who dedicated their writing efforts in every respect to Spanish influenza were few; the fictional works of the writers belonging to the latter, modest group are raw in revealing what the characters have had to endure, but delicate at the same time. The renewed fascination in the Spanish influenza allowed contemporary authors to engage in writing down their views on the subject; and – since they were not yet alive at the beginning of the 20th century – the pandemic is employed in their novels to better explore ethical, political, and moral aspects of American society.

They Came Like Swallows, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," and *The Last Town on Earth* cannot be more different; the authors come from totally divergent experiences in life, not to mention the fact that Thomas Mullen was born in the 1970s, while Katherine Anne Porter in the last decade of the 19th century, and William Maxwell at the beginning of the 20th century. The three works deal with non-identical themes, with the horrors of the Spanish influenza pandemic 'put into service' as the backdrop. At the same time, they are connected by the fate of their protagonists: Bunny, Robert, James, Miranda, and Philip are all infected with the flu at some point in their respective narratives; and they all survive to it. There is another kind of connection, too, because they all deal with the trauma that loss has caused – even though in three different forms. And yet, the way the three works of fiction represent and deal with the pandemic is slightly different – this difference is surely given by the time in which the fictions were written and published. Analyzing in more depth Maxwell, Porter, and Mullen's works I was able to infer that in *They Came Like Swallows* and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" the pandemic was given a primary role by the authors, as it was the reason why Maxwell and Porter wrote

them in the first place; theirs is a personal, intimate take on the subject – given what they had to face in their lives. On the contrary, Mullen employs the Spanish influenza pandemic as a literary artifice, because the disease gives the context to expand the fictional world of his novel; Mullen could have made use of any other pandemic to say what he wanted to. What contemporary authors like Mullen will never be able to do – comparing to previous authors who actually lived through those times – is to really convey the horror of the Spanish influenza. To be more precise, the trauma of loss can be – of course – expressed by those authors, but it will be a completely different thing from those who experienced it. Contemporary authors base their fiction on suppositions and works by those who came before them.

Given the resemblances between the Spanish influenza pandemic and the ongoing Covid-19 outbreak, one might wonder whether 'history will repeat itself' for what regards the literary scene; to be more precise, whether a great deal of novels dealing with the pandemic will be published or not, due to the same feeling of trauma caused by loss. The truth is that means of communications have evolved over time; people are continuously updated thanks to the daily news and plots to some extremely renowned TV series have been modified to be more current. We will have to wait a while to see if fictional novels will be written and subsequently published, but one thing is certain: there will not be a shortage of books around the topic of Covid-19 pandemic, as it instead happened with the Spanish influenza. A literature on the Covid-19 pandemic already exists, and – at the moment – it mainly consists of blogs in which people publish their stories. The novelty – with respect to the Spanish influenza pandemic – lies in the fact that not only people who lost their loved ones and/or survivors of Covid-19 write about their experiences, but medical staff members – doctors, nurses, volunteers – share what they lived through. There is an evident need to talk, to express the feelings that this novel pandemic has brought up. While mass media report the news in a

sort of ‘aseptic’ way, this novel and multimedia literature is more personal, for sure. As it has already been said, we will have to wait some time to actually see novels about Covid-19 published, but critics – such as Laura Spinney, a columnist for *The Guardian* – predicted that those not-yet-published fictions will be useful for future generations, as they will teach them something about the past.

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