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Voyage au bout de la blessure

A traumatic re-reading of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's
Journey to the End of the Night

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E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle

(*Inferno*, XXXIV, v. 139).

ABSTRACT

The conceptualisation of traumatic experiences has been subjected to controversial opinions from the first systematic medical explorations in the 1860s to the publication of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (3rd ed.) in 1980. Although trauma emerged as a psychopathological concept, throughout the years it has increasingly acquired political, social and moral significance, considerably influenced by the historical events of the twentieth century.

After the formal medical recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder, the notion of trauma permeated into a variety of fields and discourses, including the humanities and the social sciences. The psychiatric normalisation of trauma, in conjunction with the human necessity to communicate the vehemence of dreadful experiences, laid the cornerstone for an interdisciplinary debate that sought to investigate the ethical, cultural and linguistic implications of trauma in contemporary society. In recent years, the trauma paradigm has progressively garnered academic interest, thus becoming a prominent interpretative category in cultural and literary criticism.

This thesis aims to explore the social, political and historical context that favoured the conceptualisation of trauma as a psychoanalytic, cultural and literary paradigm, furthermore addressing the literary symptoms of trauma in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's masterpiece *Journey to the End of the Night*.

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INTRODUCTION

Although trauma initially emerged as a psychopathological concept, over the years it has increasingly acquired political, social and moral relevance. The conceptualisation of trauma has been subjected to controversial opinions, from the early medical studies to the publication of the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-III*) in 1980.

The formal medical recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder inaugurated an interdisciplinary examination of trauma encompassing the humanities, social and cultural studies, and literature. In recent years, the trauma paradigm garnered academic attention, thus emerging as a prominent interpretative category in cultural and literary criticism. The nature of the interaction between trauma and narrative has often been envisioned as intrinsically paradoxical. Trauma theorists have highlighted the inherent incommunicability of trauma, while simultaneously recognising the necessity of narrating the traumatic experience in order to facilitate healing.

This thesis seeks to examine the clinical, social, political and historical factors that contributed to the contemporary conceptualisation of trauma and its evolution as a psychoanalytic, cultural and literary concept. Additionally, it will address the literary symptoms of trauma in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's masterpiece *Journey to the End of the Night.*

The first chapter will offer a comprehensive framework of the medical, social, historical and political circumstances that influenced the development of the psychopathological concept of trauma, from the first medical studies on hysteria in the second half of the

nineteenth century to the official medical recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder in 1980.

The second chapter will analyse the evolution of trauma as a cultural and literary phenomenon resulting from the devastating impact of the two world wars and the radical changes of the twentieth century. In addition, it will explore the theories formulated within the context of trauma studies with respect to the issue of incommunicability, the significance of testimony and the representational modalities of trauma in literature.

Lastly, the third chapter will focus on the literary representation of trauma in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's first novel *Journey to the End of the Night*. Given that the novel is extensively based upon autobiographical elements, this chapter will explore the author's biography and his perspective on existence, society and human nature. Subsequently, it will delve into the crucial features of the novel, including its themes, characters, structure and writing style, moreover contextualising the salient aspects within a framework of trauma. Ultimately, the chapter will provide an analysis of the main character's trauma, culminating in a reflection on the novel's foundational metaphor.

CHAPTER 1

Conceptualising an invisible illness

1.1 Early medical explorations of trauma

The medical debate that unfolded in the second half of the nineteenth century presented divisive opinions regarding the conceptualisation of traumatic experiences. The main controversies concerned the aetiology of post-traumatic stress, the objective value of the experience as opposed to the subjective perception of the traumatic event and whether personal vulnerability was sufficient to determine the onset of the symptoms. Within this framework, the central challenge consisted in conceptualising an invisible illness in the absence of an observable pathology.

1.1.1 Hysteria, the female malady

The first systematic medical research concerning trauma dates back to 1859, when French physician Pierre Briquet published his *Traité Clinique et Thérapeutique de l'Hystérie*, an avant-garde clinical study based on over 400 cases of hysteria, which was a widely known disorder at the time. In his *Traité*, Briquet alleged a connection between the onset of hysteria and a series of traumatic episodes occurring during infancy, thereby indicating the brain as the seat of hysteria.

Briquet excluded the possibility of an organic ailment at the root of hysteria, thus conceiving it as a mental condition. In this regard, it is crucial to mention that hysteria was historically regarded as a female malady[1], for it was considered as a physical disease of the female reproductive system — even from an etymological perspective, the name of this pathology derives from the Greek word *hystera*, which indicates the uterus.

At the time, medicine was still trying to discern symptoms of the body from symptoms of the mind and to understand to what extent they were connected. As far as hysterical symptoms are concerned, many physicians believed that they were prompted by a functional disturbance of the uterus. Nevertheless, Briquet observed that several patients who exhibited hysterical symptoms could not physically be subjected to the influence of the uterus, therefore excluding a connection between the two phenomena.

> Hysteria may occur in men, who have no uterus, in non-menstruating young women whose uterus is still in rudimentary state and where it remains without influence, and in old women where it no longer influences.[2]

Briquet proposed the clinical recognition of cases of hysteria in men. The clinical validity of male hysteria[3] remained a fervently debated issue around the turn of the century.

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1 *The Female Malady* is also the title of an outstanding book by Elaine Showalter — a cultural study dealing with the interrelated concepts of women and madness in nineteenth-century Britain.

2 Briquet, *Traité Clinique et Thérapeutique de l'Hystérie*, p. 585: 'L'hystérie peut se manifester chez les hommes, qui n'ont pas d'utérus, chez des jeunes filles non menstruées chez lesquelles l'utérus est encore à l'état rudimentaire et où il n'exerce encore aucune action, et chez des vieilles femmes où il n'en exerce plus'.

3 Briquet's idea that both genders could exhibit hysterical symptoms will be subsequently cited by acclaimed French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot in his research.

> Regardless of the denials, men may suffer from hysteria, and the cases that prove it are not rare; it is only possible to prevent it by acknowledging it.[4]

Other than providing a fundamental contribution for the development of the conception of trauma, Pierre Briquet's work inaugurated a process that eventually brought discredit to the popular belief that mental frailty was entirely a feminine issue. As an instance, in the second half of the nineteenth century, diagnoses regarding 'emotional weakness' or 'abnormal mental conditions' were generally considered as typical female peculiarities. Moreover, the general conception of mental disorders was characterised by a distorted perception that implied a social stigma.

1.1.2 The traumatic cost of industrialisation: railway spine syndrome

Around those years, clinical studies centred on a mysterious disorder whose symptomatic picture was uncannily similar to that of hysteria — the diagnosis of hysteria was excluded from consideration because the vast majority of people suffering from this condition were men. This condition was labelled as 'railway spine syndrome', because in several cases it emerged after episodes of railroad collisions or derailments.

The first fatal railroad accident occurred on September 15th, 1830, the same day that the Liverpool and Manchester Railway[5] was inaugurated. Railway accidents remained quite frequent in the following years, resulting in an increasing number of passengers reporting injuries from train crashes. In the aftermath of the accident, they started experiencing a series of physical ailments, namely backache, headache, dizziness and

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[4] Ibidem, p. 12: 'Malgré toutes ces dénégations, l'homme peut être atteint par l'hystérie, et les faits qui le prouvent ne sont pas rares; la prévention seule a pu empêcher de les reconnaître'.

[5] The Liverpool and Manchester Railway was the first inter-city railroad ever built.

amnesia. The onset of these symptoms was initially attributed to a musculoskeletal lesion — nevertheless, some railroad victims claimed to suffer from the aforementioned ailments even though they presented no empirical evidence of an organic injury. Charles Dickens, who was amongst the numerous victims of railroad collisions, portrayed his lingering feelings after the accident as follows:

> I am not quite right within, but I believe it to be an effect of the railway shaking. […] I cannot bear railway travel yet. A perfect conviction, against the senses that the carriage is down on one side comes upon me, with anything like speed, is inexpressibly distressing.[6]

A comprehensive medical study on the phenomenon of railway spine appeared in 1867, when Sir John Eric Erichsen[7] published *On Railway and Other Injuries of the Nervous System*. In this work, the surgeon asserted that 'nervous shock' stemmed from an organic pathology, conceivably a cerebral or spinal concussion induced by a mechanical shock during the accident[8]. Erichsen came to the conclusion that:

> The primary effects of these concussions or commotions of the spinal cord are probably due to molecular changes in its structure. The secondary effects are mostly of an inflammatory character.[9]

Some years later, in his work *Injuries of the Spine and Spinal Cord without Apparent Mechanical Lesions* (1883), surgeon Herbert William Page countered Erichsen's position on the aetiology of said condition. Page advocated that not all the patients included in Erichsen's clinical study were necessarily affected by a physical injury.

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6 Trimble, *Post-traumatic Neurosis: from Railway Spine to the Whiplash*, p. 28.

7 For instance, another name for railway spine syndrome is 'Erichsen's disease'.

8 Erichsen, *On Railway and Other Injuries of the Nervous System*.

9 Trimble, *Post-traumatic Neurosis: from Railway Spine to the Whiplash*.

Additionally, Erichsen had not thoroughly contemplated the possibility of a psychological origin and several errors in diagnosis were previously made because the influence of fright had not been properly valued[10]. Besides, Page argued, the clinical picture presented by railway spine was far too similar to that of hysteria to indicate such a distant diagnosis.

Page then proposed the idea that railway spine was only partially due to physical injuries or inflammatory states of the spinal column, thus rejecting the thesis embraced by Erichsen among many other physicians of the time, according to which this condition was exclusively imputable to organic reasons. He furthermore suggested that in the cases that lacked the evidence of physical injuries, the symptoms were psychogenic, therefore concluding that railway spine syndrome was in part a mental condition, sustained by feelings of apprehension and fear[11].

1.2 From hysteria to traumatic neuroses

A few years later, German neurologist Hermann Oppenheim published his controversial treatise *Die traumatischen Neurosen* (1889), shifting once more the attention on the organicistic nature of traumatic experiences. Oppenheim conceptualised this condition as a functional brain disorder triggered by emotional shocks. He furthermore alleged that nervous symptoms were the manifestation of molecular tissue changes in the central nervous system, arising as a reaction to fright.

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[10] Ibidem, p. 26.

[11] Page, *Injuries of the Spine and Spinal Cord without Apparent Mechanical Lesion, and Nervous Shock, in Their Surgical and Medico-Legal Aspects*.

It is pivotal to note that Oppenheim coined the term ‘traumatic neurosis’ by introducing into the lexicon of psychiatry a term that, until that moment, had been exclusively employed in the field of surgery to indicate a physical laceration[12]. Although Oppenheim was a proponent of the organicistic nature of this condition and ascribed its cause to physical lesions concerning the spine or the brain, his neologism started to construct the notion that an overwhelmingly violent experience has the faculty of inflicting psychological wounds that are comparable to physical lacerations. Oppenheim’s belief in the organicistic nature of traumatic neuroses was successively criticised by several neurologists, including Max Nonne and Jean-Martin Charcot.

1.2.1 Jean-Martin Charcot’s studies on hystero-traumatism

After several ground-breaking discoveries in the field of neurology, Jean-Martin Charcot decided to devote his research to ‘the great neurosis’, hence hysteria. While working with hysterical patients in the neurological department of the Salpêtrière Hospital, Charcot posited a relation between hysteria and traumatic experiences. He therefore connected a series of symptoms that arose in the aftermath of accidents, attributing them to a condition that he termed ‘traumatic hysteria’.

Charcot moreover noticed that hysterical symptoms were significantly more frequent in men rather than women, as a result of the common occurrences of work-related accidents and railroad collisions in that period. Analogously to Briquet’s work, Charcot’s research proved essential in dismissing the theories that related mental conditions to women.

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[12] Oppenheim, *Die traumatischen Neurosen nach den in der Nervenklinik der Charité in den 5 Jahren 1883-1888 gesammelten Beobachtungen*.

During his research, Charcot observed that at the core of hysteria there was a neurological disorder that affected the mind, rather than the brain. He furthermore hypothesised that hysteria was triggered by a pathogenic idea that behaves like a parasite settled in the motor cortex. Hysterical symptoms emerged from an emotional component, probably a sense of fear, which in turn originated from an *idée fixe* — a sort of obsession of which the patient is completely unaware. This idea remains dormant outside the boundaries of awareness, though it may reveal itself in the occasion of a traumatic event. Charcot hence concluded that these symptoms were not a result of the physical consequences of trauma, instead they stemmed from the idea that these patients had developed around the trauma[13].

Jean-Martin Charcot's studies on hystero-traumatism have subsequently proven crucial for the analysis and comprehension of traumatic experiences. His theories moreover constituted a fundamental basis for the consecutive research of his students Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud. Drawing from Charcot's observations, Janet and Freud conceptualised hysteria as a reaction to a loss which had not been integrated into consciousness and, by extension, into memory, furthermore considering the post-traumatic state as an 'attachment to trauma' in Janet's terms or 'compulsion' in Freud's.

1.2.2 Pierre Janet and the dissociative phenomenon

Janet preceded Freud in the formulation of his structural model of the psyche, which was based upon clinical observations of hysteria-related symptoms such as dual personality, amnesia and somnambulism. In his doctoral dissertation *L'Automatisme Psychologique* (1889) Janet supposed that the aforementioned hysterical symptoms

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[13] Charcot, *Leçons du mardi à la Salpêtrière*.

actually reflected a lack of synthesis that moreover resulted in the disassociation of the patient's personality[14].

The salient point of Janet's research lies precisely in the individuation of the dissociative phenomenon, a crucial feature of trauma. Janet's doctoral thesis employs the expression *désagrégation psychologique*[15] in order to indicate the fragmented nature of the traumatic experience. Janet furthermore posited that some traumatic events interfere with conscious mental processes, furthermore hindering the integration of perceptions, memories, bodily and behavioural representations, and sense of identity[16]. As a result, in the case of stressful, shocking or terrifying events, the traumatised subject can temporarily remove some personal aspects from consciousness, thereby rendering them unaccessible to memory.

Although the notion of dissociation has endured substantial changes over time, it is still regarded as 'the core pathogenic process that gives rise to post-traumatic stress' in contemporary psycho-traumatology[17]. Disassociation is currently conceived as a mechanism of psychological defence which in mild cases consists in an emotional detachment from reality that aims at tolerating stressful situations. Alternatively, in pathological cases, dissociative phenomena cause a severe disconnection from emotional and physical perceptions. The American Psychiatric Association has listed a series of dissociative disorders in the fifth edition of their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which will be successively addressed.

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14 Janet, *L'Automatisme Psychologique, Essai de Psychologie Expérimentale sur le Formes Inférieures de l'Activité Humaine*.

15 The term disassociation was later introduced into psychological lexicon by William James, in an attempt to translate the French word *désagrégation*.

16 Ibidem.

17 van der Kolk, Weisaeth & van der Hart, 'History of Trauma in Psychiatry', in *Traumatic Stress: the Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, p. 53.

1.2.3 Sigmund Freud's theorisation of traumatic neuroses

Sigmund Freud, in his collaboration with Viennese neurophysiologist Josef Breuer, mentioned Janet's dissociation theory, by stating that:

> The splitting of consciousness which is so striking in the well-known classical cases under the form of "double conscience" is present to a rudimentary degree in every hysteria, and that a tendency to such dissociation, and with it the emergence of abnormal states of consciousness […] is the basic phenomenon of this neurosis.[18]

Freud's topographic model, theorised in 1913, individuated three sub-systems in the mental apparatus: unconscious, preconscious and conscious. The topographic theory has been frequently illustrated through the iceberg metaphor, where the tip of the iceberg represents the conscious part of the mind, while the intermediate part just below the surface and the mass of ice deep underneath the water respectively correspond to the preconscious and the unconscious. The unconscious portion of the psyche encompasses all the desires, urges and repressed memories that are inaccessible and, as a result, outside of awareness; whereas the preconscious contains latent material which is not fully assimilated into consciousness but, if prompted, it can still be accessed[19].

Freud proposed a further tripartition of the mind in the essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), which was then implemented and formalised in the essay *The Ego and the Id*, published three years later. This theory, known as the structural model, conceptualises three components of personality: the Id, the Ego and the Superego[20].

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18 Breuer & Freud, 'Studies on Hysteria', in J. Strachey *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, p. 9.

19 Freud, 'The Interpretation of Dreams', in J. Strachey *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*.

20 Freud, *The Ego and the Id*.

The Id is described as the instinctual and unconscious component of the psyche, that comprises primitive instincts and desires, impulses and basic urges, including aggressive and sexual drives. This section operates according to the pleasure principle, aiming to satisfy such impulses and desires. For the other part, the Superego is defined as the moral component of personality, consists of social standards and moral values which have been acquired and internalised through experience. The Ego is the rational part that operates both consciously and unconsciously and behaves as a mediator between the instincts of the Id and the inhibitions of the Superego. Inevitably, the Id and the Superego are in perpetual conflict, for this reason the Ego has the function of negotiating in order to alleviate the internal tension between the two components[21].

In Freudian theory, unconscious thoughts, impulses and memories exert a crucial influence on human behaviour — this increasing preoccupation for the role of unconscious factors contributed to the progressive evolution of a fracture between the medicine of the brain and the medicine of the mind, hence between neurology and psychiatry.

After the horrific experience of the First World War, Freud returned on his examination of traumatic experiences. In the essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud addresses the topic of combat neuroses, moreover discussing the psychological consequences of recent war events:

> The terrible war which has just ended gave rise to a great number of illnesses of this kind, but it at least put an end to the temptation to attribute the cause of the disorder to organic lesions of the nervous system brought about by mechanical force.[22]

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[21] Ibidem.

[22] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 6.

Freud's theorisation of traumatic neuroses is defined by fright, a feeling that is commonly confused with anxiety or fear. However, fright differs from these emotions because it originates from surprise, it is 'the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it'[23]. Conversely, the feeling of anxiety connotes a state of expectation and preparation for a possible unknown danger — for this reason, traumatic neuroses emerge in the absence of anxiety, that would have otherwise prepared the psyche for the shocking experience. It is indeed in this state of unpreparedness that the genesis of a traumatic neurosis is possible.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud furthermore asserted that the psyche is composed by outer and inner layers, where the outer layer functions as a shield or filter against stimuli in an effort to avoid unpleasant affects. Within this framework, the traumatic impact is connoted by a force so powerful and overwhelming that it is capable of creating a breach in the psyche's protective barrier and furthermore penetrating into the deeper layers of the mind. As a consequence of this rupture in the protective shield, the unexpected external event cannot be adequately processed and integrated, the traumatic memory therefore settles in the unconscious portion of the mind.

> The outer layer has by its own death secured all the deeper layers from a like fate — at least so long as no stimuli present themselves of such a strength as to break through the protective barrier.[24]

Several years later, in *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud explained that the manifestation of physical and psychical symptoms in the aftermath of a traumatic event is not immediate, it rather arises after a variable period of time.

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[23] Ibidem, p. 11.

[24] Ibidem, p. 35.

> It may happen that a man who has experienced some frightful accident — a railway collision, for instance — leaves the scene of the event apparently uninjured. In the course of the next few weeks, however, he develops number of severe psychical and motor symptoms which can only be traced to his shock, the concussion or whatever else it was. He now has "traumatic neurosis".[25]

The time that elapses between the abovementioned frightful accident and the onset of the associated symptomatology is referred to as 'latency period', after which the traumatic past returns to haunt the victim through recurring dreams, involuntary memories and flashbacks.

According to Freud and Breuer, traumatic memories behave like a foreign body residing in the psyche, which furthermore continues to act long after the traumatic event that originated the neurosis:

> Trauma does not simply act as a releasing agent for symptoms. Rather, psychic trauma or more precisely the memory of the trauma acts like a foreign body which long after entry must continue to be regarded as the agent that still is at work […] a psychical pain that is remembered long after the event. Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences.[26]

Since the traumatic event is not fully assimilated into consciousness, it has the ability of eluding memory. For instance, the traumatised subject is not aware of the repressed material that is stored in their unconscious portion of the mind and hence does not realise that they are stuck in a compulsive mechanism of re-enactment.

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[25] Freud, 'Moses and Monotheism, An Outline of Psycho-Analysis and Other Works (1937-1939)' in J. Strachey *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, p. 67.

[26] Breuer & Freud, 'Studies on Hysteria', p. 58.

> [The] patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of […] *remembering* it as something belonging to the past: a compulsion to repeat.[27]

In an effort to 'master the stimulus retrospectively'[28], the traumatised subject is governed by the unconscious urge of re-living the traumatic event in oneiric form or through the compulsion to repeat. This mechanism brings the victim to a situation that reminds them of the traumatic accident in the hope that this time the psyche will prepared to adequately process the stimulus, thus overcoming the internal tension caused by the post-traumatic process. These moments are generally characterised by a disruption of the continuity of time, where there appears to be no boundary or separation between past and present — in the perception of the victim, the traumatic past manifests as a contemporary experience.

Breuer and Freud held that trauma-related symptoms could be alleviated through the verbalisation of the traumatic experience. Since the traumatic event is not fully integrated into consciousness, its memory results fragmented and disjointed — then, once it is verbalised in a consistent and coherent narration, the memory can finally be assimilated and thereby consciously remembered. Aside from constituting the fundamental basis for the notion of trauma therapy, the Freudian concept of a 'talking cure' that could treat the pathogenic traumatic event[29] emphasised the connection between narrative and trauma — this interrelation is moreover the essential paradigm for the foundation and development of literary trauma studies in the 1990s.

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[27] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 18-19.

[28] Ibidem, p. 37.

[29] Breuer & Freud, 'Studies on Hysteria'.

1.3 The disastrous impact of the Great War

Through the years, studies on psychological trauma have encountered eras of ground-breaking discoveries and valuable contributions as well as long periods of stagnation. This discontinuity in the history of trauma was considerably influenced by the social, political, historical and cultural context in which it developed.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, tales of war were still influenced by a romantic narrative that hyperbolically idealised conflict as an ennobling act — a trope inherited from the classical tradition. In the collective imagination, the aesthetic of the war scenario could be exemplified by the homeric battle between Achilles and Hector: the quintessential heroic duel that, whether it ended in triumph or sacrifice, would still be perceived as an act of glory and honour. Lord Byron's fatal decision to fight for the philhellenic cause during the Greek War of Independence is perhaps the most suitable example of this widespread idea of romantic militarism.

Said romantic military ethic was still in vogue in 1914 and, on the eve of the first world conflict, the call to arms was received enthusiastically by the European youth. Furthermore, the aesthetic fantasy of war was thoroughly exploited by the different governments in order to exert a positive influence on recruitment and morale. Militarist propaganda was extensively employed in the pre-war period in an attempt to appeal to the reader's sense of patriotism and honour, thereby encouraging young men to enlist in the army and serve their country.

Nevertheless, the ideals that romanticised war by way of portraying it as an heroic and ennobling act were soon shattered by the atrocities the combatants had to face in the trenches. The pressures of the battlefield, the slow and consuming trench warfare, the brutality of continuously witnessing violence and death, the unanticipated number of

victims and the futility of sacrificing countless lives rapidly led to an intense feeling of disenchantment. After fighting in World War I, war poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, openly defied the edulcorated conception of war perpetuated by the official military propaganda through their literature of disenchantment.

> How many a brief bombardment had its long-delayed after-effect in the minds of these survivors, many of whom had looked at their companions and laughed while inferno did its best to destroy them. Not then was their evil hour; but now; now, in the sweating suffocation of nightmare, in paralysis of limbs, in the stammering of dislocated speech.[30]

It soon became clear to thousands of combatants that war as it had been narrated to them was extremely distant from what they were enduring. Sadly, the reality of trench warfare had nothing to do with those stories they had heard about glory and heroism. In this regard, Leo Tolstoy, who fought in the Crimean War, makes an observation upon the inconsistencies between history and reality in his masterpiece *War and Peace*:

> All these odd and to us incomprehensible discrepancies between the facts and the historical accounts arise only because the historians writing of these events wrote a history of the fine phrases and feelings of the various generals, and not a history of the events themselves.[31]

It is estimated that the Great War caused around sixteen million casualties — ten million soldiers and over six million civilians. Besides, the amount of psychological casualties was unprecedented and unanticipated. The experience of World War I, considered amongst the greatest catastrophes of human history, provided the fundamental basis for the contemporary understanding of trauma.

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[30] Sassoon, *Siegfried Sassoon's Long Journey: Selections from the Sherston Memoir*, p. 51.

[31] Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, p. 1283.

The years of the Great War have witnessed a paradigm shift in the general conception of memory. Never before had a traumatic event gathered such an elevated number of testimonies that furthermore differed in age, social class and nationality — this is the concept that Paul Fussell will later define as 'modern memory': ordinary people, who had nothing in common before the war, experienced the same atrocities[32]. The post-traumatic impact of the first world conflict portrayed in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* reflects the general shock and horror of those years[33]; the sense of helplessness of the soldiers who had returned from the front is precisely the feeling that Giuseppe Ungaretti coveys in his poem *Christmas* when he pleads to be left 'as a thing put in a corner and forgotten'[34].

1.3.1 The invisible wounds of war trauma

Studies dealing with the post-traumatic effects of wartime experiences were in vogue from the previous century. The notion that prolonged exposure to war produced a series of physical ailments was already noticeable in the American Civil War and the Crimean War. In the 1870s surgeon Jacob Mendes Da Costa identified a cardiac condition that was quite common among soldiers who had fought in the American Civil War, labelled as 'soldier's heart'[35]. The symptomatic picture of this diagnosis included fatigue, tachycardia, respiratory distress, excessive perspiration and chest pain — for instance, it was initially conceived as a cardiovascular disease. Once again, the origin of this illness was ascribed to a physical issue, in this particular case to a malfunction of the heart.

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32 Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*.

33 Eliot, *The Waste Land*.

34 Ungaretti, 'Natale', in *Vita d'un Uomo - Tutte le Poesie*: 'Lasciatemi così / Come una / Cosa / Posata / In un / Angolo / E dimenticata'.

35 Trimble, *Post-traumatic Neurosis: from Railway Spine to the Whiplash*.

After the outbreak of the Great War, neurophysicians noticed that the number of soldiers who returned from the front presenting with symptoms such as extreme fright and anxiety, amnesia, frequent headaches, tinnitus, insomnia, mutism, disorientation and in some cases even paralysis, was increasing exponentially. Another common characteristic amongst soldiers who returned from the trenches was their lost and unfocused gaze, an indicator of their emotional detachment for the traumatic experiences they had endured. This peculiarity, later considered as a distinctive feature of shell shock, came to be known as the thousand-yard stare. After their return from the front, the striking evidence that the combatants had suffered a devastating experience was visible in their behaviour and appearance. In Italy the expression *scemi di guerra*[36] came into use towards the end of the First World War to indicate the traumatised soldiers who, after their experience in the trenches, looked lost and detached from reality, therefore suggesting that these people had lost their mind.

The unprecedented number of soldiers who reported psychological damage during the war led to the necessity of a new diagnosis — the term 'shell shock' thereby made its first appearance in medical literature in 1915, in an article that Charles Myers, consulting psychologist for the British Army, wrote for *The Lancet*, a renowned medical journal of the time[37]. The origin of this nervous disorder was initially attributed to a cerebral lesion that had presumably been triggered by the concussive effects of exploding mines and artillery shells. However, as it had happened before for the diagnoses of soldier's heart and railway spine syndrome, a significant amount of combatants who suffered from shell shock did not present any physiological abnormalities. Another hypothesis that was adopted at the time in order to justify the

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[36] Lit. transl. 'war fools'.

[37] Myers, 'A Contribution to the Study of Shell Shock: Being an Account of Three Cases of Loss of Memory, Vision, Smell, and Taste, Admitted into the Duchess of Westminster's War Hospital, Le Touquet', in *The Lancet*.

absence of organic lesions imputed the cause of shell shock to poisoning from carbon monoxide, released in the immediate aftermath of explosions.

Although the condition of shell shock was generally accepted by the public, a considerable number of physicians held that said diagnosis could serve as a quick and easy escape from the pressures of the battlefield. Correspondingly, the phrase 'traumatic neurosis' was banished from psychiatric lexicon after a team of German psychiatrists led by Emil Kraepelin came to the conclusion that this sort of diagnoses contrasted with national interests because, amongst other things, it reduced the will to fight[38].

Thus began an increasingly popular vortex of speculations among psychologists and physicians, claiming that soldiers suffering from shell shock were liars seeking for a pension or cowards 'lacking in moral fibre'[39]. These conjectures started diverting the attention away from the horrific nature of trench warfare and rather allocating the core of combat neuroses to individual vulnerability, furthermore perpetuating the social stigma that historically hovered over mental conditions.

The traditionalistic view according to which the diagnosis of shell shock solely relied on cowardice or mendacity was so deeply rooted in the popular conception that it led to the coinage of an idiomatic expression in southern Italy: *Far lo scemo per non andare in guerra*, literally translated as 'play dumb not to go to war'. This idiom demonstrates the lack of social recognition for the psychological cost of war, moreover exemplifying the extensive dissemination of the belief that these traumatised soldiers were actually pretending to be ill.

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[38] Macleod, *Shell Shock Doctors: Neuropsychiatry in the Trenches*.

[39] They were considered inadequate for the pressures of the battlefield.

In the light of the abovementioned conjectures, pension systems were partially blamed for the 'shell shock epidemic' that was in progress. As a result, during the first world conflict, the British Army decided to draw a distinction between combatants who had been wounded by the enemy and soldiers who suffered from war neuroses in the absence of explosive exposure.

> Shell-shock and shell concussion cases should have the letter W prefixed to the report of the casualty, if it was due to the enemy: in that case the patient would be entitled to rank as "wounded" and to wear on his arm a "wound stripe". If, however, the man's breakdown did not follow a shell explosion, it was not thought to be 'due to the enemy'; and he was labelled "Shell-shock, S" (for sickness) and was not entitled to a wound stripe or a pension.[40]

This method proved ineffective, considering that it was extremely difficult to determine whether a combatant had been in close proximity to an explosion.

1.3.2 The treatment of psychiatric casualties during the first world conflict

Amongst the various detrimental aspects inherent to the treatment of shell shock, worthy of mention is the management of psychiatric casualties in the face of the increasing number of victims. For instance, during the first world conflict, medical military services were striving to contrast the threat of manpower shortages due to the unanticipated number of deaths and psychiatric casualties — essentially, the central preoccupation of the military command was maintaining the fighting force. Under these circumstances, several medical officers chose to prioritise military responsibility at the expense of the soldiers' health and frequently urged the combatants back onto the

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[40] Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century*, p. 29.

battlefield without the care and assistance they needed. On this account, a strategy that was extensively adopted consisted in delaying diagnoses. Military doctors made an increasingly conspicuous use of the indication 'not yet diagnosed: nervous' with the intent of stalling — the omission of a diagnosis was basically aimed at minimising the time of recovery and consequently ensuring a rapid return to active duty[41]. This inconsiderate behaviour towards the soldiers' health produced disastrous effects.

Within this framework, psychiatrist Lewis Yealland gained a reputation for rapidly curing the soldiers and re-instating them in the trenches, despite his methods being controversial. In Yealland's opinion, shell shock was not a pathology and the onset of hysterical symptoms in men was the demonstration of their lack of discipline and sense of duty. Shell-shocked soldiers were thus conceived as 'morally invalid' and subjected to an inhumane therapy that was based on electric shock treatment, humiliation and punishment[42]. According to neurobiologist Bessel van der Kolk, this cultural climate that showed no compassion towards mental vulnerability and the resulting usage of inhumane and degrading treatment constituted a fertile ground for the rise of the National Socialist Party[43].

The general confusion and lack of adequate treatment regarding war neuroses during the first world conflict and the interbellum had disastrous consequences — with the Second World War approaching, the failure to process the unprecedented traumatic experience of the previous conflict led to a sort of re-traumatisation.

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41 Salmon, *The Care and Treatment of Mental Diseases and War Neuroses ("Shell Shock") in the British Army*.

42 Yealland, *Hysterical Disorders of Warfare*.

43 van der Kolk, McFarlane & Weisaeth, 'Trauma and its Challenge to Society', in *Traumatic Stress: the Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*.

1.4 The horror and dehumanisation of the Second World War

While Europe was still trying to heal and rebuild what the previous conflict had destroyed, it was brought to its knees by the events that occurred between 1934 and 1945. In addition to the prolonged impact of war trauma, the second world conflict brought the horror and dehumanisation of the concentration camps and mass extermination.

Notwithstanding this, in an attempt to contain the number of psychiatric casualties and to avoid the shell shock epidemic that had occurred twenty years before, in 1939 the military and civil authorities came to the decision that war injuries of psychiatric nature would no longer have been awarded with pensions. The same year, the term ‘shell shock’ was outlawed — combatants who were psychologically affected by the consuming reality of war were diagnosed with ‘battle fatigue’ or ‘combat stress reaction’. This seemingly insignificant linguistic statement was actually concealing the attempt to minimise the problem in the eyes of the public: while ‘shell shock’ sounded like a serious condition, the expressions employed in the second world conflict centred upon the concepts of exhaustion or fatigue, thus conveying the image of a milder condition that could be naturally resolved with some rest. Additionally, the source of combat stress reaction was ascribed to an underlying, pre-existing mental condition.

The technological advancement of the inter-war period contributed to the introduction of new powerful weapons in the second world conflict such as assault rifles, anti-aircraft artillery, anti-tank projectile lunchers and nuclear fission bombs. The destructive power of these innovations erased the necessity of close combat that had characterised the Great War — moreover, this rapid technological progress resulted in an emotional and psychological simplification of the dynamics of war.

As previously mentioned, the most brutal and emotionally draining aspect of the Great War for the people involved was the constant violence, death and devastation — against this background, deploying weapons of mass destruction was paradoxically easier for the combatants, considering that it spared them the psychological burden of directly facing the horror they were contributing to create, thus eluding post-traumatic repercussions. This circumstance, among the many that favoured an emotional detachment from the inhumane experiences that they were enduring, left people in a mental and moral state of numbness that ultimately alienated them from reality.

In his collection of essays *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi provides a profound reflection on the role of the *Sonderkommandos*. Levi categorises these officers as inhabitants of the 'gray zone'[44] — gray is the quintessential neutral colour, lying halfway between the two extremities of the spectrum and, other than recalling the horrific image of the ash coming from the crematoria, the colour grey implicates the moral dullness of the *Sonderkommandos*, who performed abominable acts in an opaque state of consciousness that obfuscated their judgement. Within the borders of this gray zone, dominated by a dense moral fog that Levi defines *impotentia judicandi*[45], it is extremely difficult to discern right from wrong, good from bad, victim from executioner.

The interest in battlefield psychiatry gradually declined shortly after the end of the first world conflict. Nevertheless, the work of Kardiner and Spiegel in the 1940s proved crucial for the emergence of the modern conception of traumatic syndromes. After observing traumatic experiences from a social and anthropological perspective, American psychiatrist Abram Kardiner published an extensive clinical study entitled

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[44] Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved,* p. 20.

[45] Lit. transl. 'impotence of judgement'.

Traumatic Neuroses of War (1941). Kardiner recognised an extreme physiological excitement in his patients that suffered from traumatic neuroses, moreover noticing that they were afflicted with a perpetual state of alertness and a sharpened sensitivity to external stimuli[46].

During the second world conflict Kardiner decided to revise his work in collaboration with Herbert Spiegel — the second edition of *Traumatic Neuroses* was therefore published in 1947 with the updated title of *War Stress and Neurotic Illness*. The American Psychiatric Association's conceptualisation of post-traumatic stress disorder in the 1980s was extensively based upon the work of Kardiner and Spiegel.

1.5 A renowned interest for psycho-traumatology: the influence of the feminist movement and the Vietnam War

After World War II, the field of psycho-traumatology encountered another period of stasis that lasted until the years of the Vietnam War. The social and political turmoil of the 1970s contributed to the emergence of a paradigm shift that re-defined the meaning of psychological trauma. It is fundamental to emphasise that the researches and studies on psycho-traumatology conducted from the 1890s to the 1970s were entirely based upon white male victims — other genders and ethnic groups had not been taken into consideration. During the 1970s, the feminist movement started to raise awareness about 'the problem that has no name', hence the climate of violence and compliance that women experienced in their everyday lives. Thus began a conversation addressing topics that had hitherto been considered unmentionable, such as domestic violence and

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[46] Kardiner, *The Traumatic Neuroses of War*.

sexual abuse. It was consequently discovered that a significant number of women exhibited the symptomatic picture of combat neuroses in their civilian lives.

After decades of stagnation regarding the examination of trauma, the massive psychological impact of the Vietnam War on combat veterans renowned the interest for the topic of combat neuroses. After the return of Vietnam veterans, the necessity of a new diagnosis that could encompass all the symptoms and distresses that these soldiers were experiencing was more evident than ever. The inadequacy of mental health diagnoses led veterans and mental health professionals to strongly advocate for the medical validation of a diagnosis and treatment that could effectively help people. This intense work of advocacy was critical in order to ensure a clinical recognition for the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder.

> It was the return of American soldiers from the Vietnam War and the recognition of the difficulties they faced in returning to "normal" life that we began to conceive trauma as we do today.[47]

During the Vietnam War, combat-related psychiatric injuries were rather infrequent within the borders of the battlefield. Although the soldiers did not present any psychological difficulties during their military service, after retuning to their civilian lives in the United States they started showing a series of delayed symptoms. For this reason, 'delayed stress syndrome, 'post-Vietnam syndrome' and 'post-combat disorder' were amongst the candidate names for the new diagnosis. Fifteen years after the end of the Vietnam War, over 25 per cent of veterans still exhibited the symptoms of psychogenic ailments[48].

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47 MacArthur, 'Shattering the American Pastoral. Philip's Roth Vision of Trauma and the American Dream', in *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, p. 19.

48 Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*.

The emergence of the PTSD diagnosis presented political connotations: formally acknowledging the existence of a combat-related disorder had the ultimate aim of undermining the government's decision of pursuing the war. On this account, a great number of professionals in the field of psychology who were politically opposed to the war put this opportunity to good use. For instance, Vietnam veteran Charles R. Figley completed a doctorate in Human Development, moreover focusing on post-traumatic stress disorder with the purpose of demonstrating that the effects of war extended far beyond the borders of the battlefield. Another anti-war protestant that had a crucial role in the formal recognition of PTSD was Robert J. Lifton, a member of the American Psychiatric Association's commission for reactive disorders who was entrusted with the formulation of a diagnosis related to stress exposure[49]. Robert J. Lifton moreover contributed to the foundation of 'rap groups' in the 1970s, with his colleague Chaim Shatan. These groups, conceived as a safe space where combat veterans could address their experience and raise awareness of the psychological consequences of the Vietnam war, were based upon the concept of talking cure (or narrativisation), theorised several decades before.

1.6 The medical crystallisation of post-traumatic stress disorder

Although the term 'post-traumatic stress disorder' was already in use in the previous decade, it only entered the psychiatric nomenclature in 1980, when the American Psychiatric Association included in the third edition of their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-III*) the diagnosis of PTSD[50] — which was

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[49] Jones & Wessely, 'Psychological Trauma: A Historical Perspective', in *PSYCHIATRY.*

[50] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (3rd ed.).

maintained and implemented in the subsequent publications of the *Manual*, the *DSM-IV* and the *DSM-5,* comprising a series of changes in its criteria and categorisation.

The diagnosis of PTSD is not limited to war-related trauma: it was initially attributed to the category of *Anxiety Disorders* in the *DSM-IV*, then, in the revised version of the *DSM-5* (2013), it was classified under the category of 'Trauma and Stressor-Related Disorders'[51]. A stressor-related disorder is basically prompted by an external agent such as the exposure to a violent or catastrophic event. The American Psychiatric Association defined the external stressor at the basis of a post-traumatic response as 'a psychologically distressing event outside the range of usual human experience' that is generally elicited by feelings of extreme fear and terror and a sense of helplessness[52] — said definition encompasses life-threatening events or harmful and terrifying experiences such as war, sexual assault, torture, incarceration, domestic violence, accidents, natural disasters and so forth.

1.6.1 Symptoms and diagnostic criteria of PTSD

The symptomatic picture of post-traumatic stress disorder comprises disassociation, amnesia, dysphoria, hyper-reactivity, disturbing thoughts, upsetting feelings, recurring dreams and recollections related to the traumatic event (also known as 'intrusions'), mental and physical distress — in extreme cases, the subject can even suffer from hallucinations and suicidal preoccupation. The intensity and severity of the specific symptoms vary from case to case. Furthermore, PTSD can be characterised by an immediate or delayed onset — in other words, its symptomatology can manifest itself

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[51] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.).

[52] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (3rd ed.).

over a variable period of time, namely a few weeks or several months after the traumatic event.

It is crucial to note that the aforementioned exposure to a traumatic event is not limited to a direct experience of the shocking event. Conversely, a post-traumatic response can arise even by witnessing an upsetting occurrence. For instance, the trauma caused by the 9/11 terrorist attack did not exclusively affect the individuals who experienced the terrible event in the first person and the relatives of the victims, but it also exerted a disastrous impact on people who were not directly involved in the attacks. In the aftermath of the 9/11 events, a vast number of people were treated for PTSD even though they had only witnessed the attacks on television.

In this respect, PTDS victims have been categorised according to their level of involvement in the traumatic occurrence that originated the disorder — in the *DSM-5* the degree of exposure to the traumatic event represents the first diagnostic criterion of post-traumatic stress disorder. For instance, in the revised edition of the *DSM-5*, the American Psychiatric Association included a series of diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder which include exposure, symptomatology, cognitive and reactivity alterations, duration, functional relevance and exclusion — all the criteria are required in order to confirm a PTSD diagnosis[53].

CRITERION A — EXPOSURE TO THE TRAUMATIC EVENT

According to the *DSM-5* there are four degrees of exposure to a traumatic event:

- Experiencing the traumatic event in the first person — also known as direct exposure;
- Witnessing the traumatic event without being directly involved;

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[53] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.).

- Acquiring the knowledge that a close person (e.g. a family member or an intimate friend) was involved in a perilous or life-threatening situation;
- Conspicuous and reiterated exposure to crude or disturbing details that are related to the traumatic event — this is often the case of rescue personnel and volunteer workers who are in contact with trauma survivors.

CRITERION B — INTRUSIVE SYMPTOMS

Criterion B refers to intrusive thoughts, that may manifest through recollections of the traumatic event or re-enactments of oneiric nature — in these instances the victim may have the perception of re-experiencing the traumatic occurrence in the present. Intrusive manifestations are often accompanied by extreme fear and consequent physiological reactions, such as increased heart rate, muscular tension, excessive perspiration and nausea. The mechanism underlying intrusion revolves around the same logic of the compulsion to repeat that Freud illustrated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: the traumatised subject is obliged to re-live the shocking event repeatedly in an effort to retrospectively resolve the internal tension created by the post-traumatic effects. In addition, details and elements that are related to the upsetting event may function as a traumatic reminder and consequently become a *trigger*, hence an element which forces the victim into an abrupt process of re-enactment — in this case the recollection most frequently occurs in the form of flashbacks.

CRITERION C — AVOIDANCE SYMPTOMS

The victim is involved in an unconscious attempt to elude any trauma-related stimuli that may trigger a recollection or re-enactment of the upsetting event. The avoidance phenomenon may relate to external reminders, such as situations, places, people, objects, activities, conversations and so forth — basically any detail that in the patient's mind is somehow associated to the traumatic occurrence. Avoidance may also concern

internal experiences such as negative thoughts and sensations that the victim endured in the traumatic past. The mechanism at the core of avoidance is furthermore considered to be the link between post-traumatic stress disorder and a series of concomitant conditions, for instance psychological and physical self-harm, alcohol and substance abuse, compulsive sexual behaviour, stakhanovism, gambling — the victim may incur in these self-destructive habits in order to elude confrontation with trauma-related feelings. Although resorting to avoidant strategies may result effective in the short term, it is only a temporary solution — as a matter of fact, they tend to hinder the elaboration of the traumatic experience over the long term.

CRITERION D — ALTERATIONS IN COGNITION AND MOOD

The victim may develop distorted thoughts and expectations regarding themselves or the people around them, which furthermore result in a series of negative feelings such as anger, sense of guilt or shame, fear and depressed mood. In addition, memory may be affected by significant alterations, for instance the traumatised subject may be unable to recall important elements concerning the trauma — this phenomenon is termed post-traumatic amnesia.

CRITERION E — ALTERATIONS IN AROUSAL AND REACTIVITY

In its course of evolution, human beings have developed the instinct of fighting or fleeing from dangerous situations in a specified moment. When the perception of danger subsides, the arousal state that made the defensive response possible ceases accordingly. However, in the case of PTSD, said response is constantly active, resulting in an everlasting physiological state of hyper-arousal. Trauma survivors develop some sort of hyper-sensibility to potential danger signals leading to unceasing alertness, vehement and frenzied responsiveness even in absence of provocation, and eventually to living in a hyper-vigilant state of tension that may hinder any attempt to calm or fall asleep. This

category includes the symptoms of insomnia, reckless and self-destructive behaviour, irritability, outbursts of anger, concentration difficulties and hyper-vigilance.

CRITERION F — DURATION

In order to ascertain a PTSD diagnosis, the manifestation of the related symptoms must necessarily persist for more than one month.

CRITERION G — FUNCTIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

Post-traumatic effects cause distress and functional impairment that may interfere with private, social and occupational aspects of the victim's life.

CRITERION H — EXCLUSION

It is crucial to exclude the possibility that the aforementioned symptoms are instead prompted by other factors, for instance adverse effects of medications or substance abuse.

After the formal recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder, the trauma paradigm permeated into a variety of fields and discourses, including human, cultural and social studies. In recent years, trauma increasingly acquired relevance as a central interpretative category in cultural and literary criticism. Literary trauma theory thus emerged as a growing field of the humanities which explores the intersection of trauma and language with regard to its effects on literature and society.

CHAPTER 2

Writing the wound

2.1 Trauma and modernity

The vicissitudes of the human condition have always been a central subject of representation in all forms of art, including literature. Throughout the centuries, as the reality and preoccupations of humans changed under the course of history, the modes of representation of said condition evolved accordingly. The increasing importance that trauma acquired from the second half of the nineteenth century to the point of becoming an irremediably indispensable element, was the result of a paradigm shift that ran parallel to the development of modern society. In this regard, Mark Selzer asserts that

> Modernity has come to be seen under the sign of the wound […] the modern subject has become inseparable from the categories of shock and trauma.[54]

Against this background, it is important to follow the thread that binds the modern subject and trauma in order to comprehend which historical events have favoured this cultural paradigm shift. As illustrated in the previous chapter, the evolution of psychopathological trauma is closely interrelated to the emergence of the social issues that characterised the industrialised society, namely railway collisions and work-related accidents.

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[54] Selzer, 'Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere', p. 18.

> The accident was where the social, economic, political and bureaucratic elements of the states met up to determine and contest the traumatic costs of industrialization.[55]

It was precisely when the notion of accident acquired political resonance, that the conception of trauma became an essential element in the formation of identity of the modern subject. In his recent study *The Trauma Question* (2008), Roger Luckhurst argues that

> Trauma is a concept that can only emerge within modernity, […] as an effect of the rise, in the nineteenth century, of the technological and statistical society that can generate, multiply and quantify the "shocks" of modern life.[56]

The turn of the century witnessed a world that was rapidly evolving and concurrently increasing in complexity, due to the radical changes brought by the newly emerging industrialised society and, successively, the Great War. For instance, another critical contingency that favoured said paradigm shift was the disruptive impact of the first world conflict, an unprecedented collective catastrophe that shaped the contemporary understanding of trauma. The outbreak of the war significantly contributed to the disintegration of the climate of optimism and prosperity that characterised the antebellum, moreover replacing it with a strong and generalised feeling of disillusionment and helplessness. Besides, the process of post-war reintegration of soldiers proved tedious for several reasons, especially for the unanticipated phenomenon of war neuroses.

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55 Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 25.

56 Ibidem, p. 19.

Despite the optimistic views of the experts, the number of psychiatric casualties did not decrease after the end of the Great War — conversely, the lingering effects of the battlefield assumed enormous proportions. The unforeseen psychiatric cost of the conflict became a crucial concern which furthermore pervaded medical, military and political discourse for the two decades that followed the end of the conflict[57]. Martin Stone identifies in the diagnosis of shell shock a crucial turning point in the evolution of modern psychiatry:

> If we want to understand the historical relation between the redefining of the modern psychiatric enterprise we should look not to Freud's writing but to *shellshock* […]. It brought the neuroses into the mainstream of mental medicine and economic life and set psychiatry's field of practice within the social fabric of industrial society.[58]

The magnitude of the shell shock phenomenon in the interbellum gave social, clinical and political relevance to the mental and emotional implications of overwhelming experiences, furthermore demonstrating 'that neuroses could be a widespread working class health problem that amongst other things was extremely expensive'[59]. The shell shock debate introduced the reality of traumatic neuroses into the mainstream of modern society, thus adapting to the general population a 'moral vulnerability' that had hitherto been confined to small psychiatric practices devoted to the treatment of female maladies.

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[57] As a case in point, in 1939, over twenty years after the end of the Great War, England was still spending around 2 million pounds per year in shell shock pensions.

[58] Stone, 'Shellshock and the Psychologists', in W. E. Bynum, R. Porter, M. Shepherd *The Anatomy of Madness*, p. 265.

[59] Ibidem, p. 266.

Although the contemporary conception of trauma was extensively shaped by the events of the second world conflict, the significance that the phenomenon of war neuroses acquired during the interwar period undoubtedly contributed to the rise of trauma as a prominent category of social discourse — thereby demonstrating that trauma as a cultural phenomenon is the epitome of a modern crisis. The traumatic repercussions of World War I gradually permeated into the arts, thus becoming a predominant topic in the works of the time. However, it soon became evident that literary realism and linear narrative structures were inadequate to depict the condition of humanity in the aftermath of the first world conflict — within a few years the world had become increasingly rapid and violent, demonstrating the incontrovertible necessity to re-conceptualise reality and its modes of representation.

2.1.1 Portraying a new reality: the innovations of Modernism

After experiencing the physical and emotional devastation of the first world conflict, several artists and writers sought to portray in their works the shocks and traumas of the era. Still, the complications of modern life resulted unrepresentable within the limits of traditional literary conventions. The fragmented state of society, the implications of post-war trauma and the complexities of surviving in an epochal moment of crisis are reflected in the literary works of several modernist authors, for instance T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Virginia Woolf.

The philosophical, artistic and literary movement of Modernism emerged as a response to the cultural crisis that dominated the social, political and artistic panorama of modern society in the first decades of the twentieth century. Modernists advocated for a radical rupture from the conventions of the past, with the purpose of substantiating the general

crisis of representation that significantly affected the arts, with respect to the content and the modes of representation. As far as literature is concerned, modernist aesthetic aimed at undermining the traditional conception of language as mimesis, furthermore departing from conventional modalities of representation.

Modernist literature explored a range of narrative forms and expressions that could preserve the essence of the modern world onto the written page. Considering that the notion of literature as mimesis of reality was no longer suitable for representing the historical circumstances of the interwar scenario, modernist writers implemented a series of innovative writing techniques and literary devices that could give form and representation to the fragmented state of this new, unprecedented reality — it was undoubtedly a prolific period as far as literary production and experimentation are concerned. The atmosphere of unsteadiness and destruction that characterised post-war society was rendered through fragmentation, intertextuality, disjunction in syntax, non-linear narratives, multiple perspectives and the experimental writing technique of stream of consciousness, which consisted in a fluid monologue depicting a character's unfiltered thoughts and feelings.

Similarly to free indirect speech and interior monologue, the narrative mode of stream of consciousness was intent on emulating the natural flow of thoughts, thereby shifting the narrative focus towards interiority. In addition to accentuating individual experiences and subjectivity of perception, said inclination towards the inner dimension of the characters reflected onto the temporal element, gradually detaching the narration from measurable 'clock' time and increasingly concentrating on the interior perception of time — subverting, as a consequence, the chronological and linear temporality that characterised pre-war narratives.

The main concern of literature in the decade after the end of the conflict centred upon the mental deterioration caused by the persisting consequences of trench warfare and its literary representation. Modernist fiction may be considered as a prototypical literature of trauma, since it constitutes a first attempt at converting the lingering effects of disruptive experiences into a narrative. For instance, modernist narratives sought to mirror the functioning of the human mind in the wake of trauma through unconventional forms and structures, thereby laying the cornerstone for the literary representation of dreadful experiences that was subsequently explored by trauma studies. Against this background, it may be argued that Modernism dealt with a psychological condition that would not be clinically recognised for another sixty years but that, at the time, was embodied by the notorious phenomenon of shell shock.

2.1.2 Disenchantment: the spiritual malaise of modernity

The shell-shocked soldier who is tormented by the atrocities of the battlefield can be defined as the first iconic figure of survivor, the embodiment of the psychological destruction caused by an unbearable experience — in this particular instance, prolonged exposure to warfare. Sarah Cole asserted that

> The return of the soldier — each individual soldier as well as their accumulated returns — became a literary event, in itself a moment of disruption, which also transfixed an array of social changes and uncertainties.[60]

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[60] Cole, *Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War*, p. 191.

As far as the illustration of shell shock in literature is concerned, the most emblematic fictional example lies in Virginia Woolf's characterisation of Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). In the novel, Woolf brilliantly addressed the social and medical repercussions of post-war trauma through the careful depiction of the psychological status of Septimus, a traumatised soldier who survived the Great War but that, years after the end of the conflict, was still suffering its devastating consequences.

In addition to the protracted traumatic experience of the trenches and its psychological and emotional implications, Septimus was profoundly scarred by the death of his commanding officer and good friend Evans, killed at the front immediately before the Armistice — a memory that continues to haunt Septimus, moreover contributing to the asphyxiating feeling of guilt[61] that lingered from his warfare experience.

Throughout the novel, Woolf repeatedly enters Septimus' tormented mind, thus providing the reader with an insight into the reality of a deeply traumatised person who is in the wake of combat neuroses. Septimus, for instance, is afflicted by visual and auditory hallucinations as well as intrusive thoughts that continuously place him in front of the traumatic event, forcing him to re-experience the horrors of his past.

The spectre of Evans, unchanged and unmarked by the war, frequently appears in Septimus' hallucinatory delirium as if he were still alive, blurring the lines of temporality and demonstrating that, in the soldier's mind, the past feels more vivid and authentic than present life:

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[61] This precise feeling is often conveyed by the expression 'survivor's guilt', which refers to a mental and emotional condition of distress that arises after surviving a life-threatening situation.

> A man in grey was actually walking towards them. It was Evans! But no mud was on him; no wounds; he was not changed. I must tell the whole world, Septimus cried, raising his hand (as the dead man in the grey suit came nearer).[62]

Through Septimus' frequent visions of Evans, Woolf reflects in literature the harrowing manifestation of the intrusive symptoms which characterise post-traumatic affect, furthermore mirroring the disruption of chronological time that erases any distinction between past and present. As previously mentioned, traumatic processes of intrusion consist in an involuntary re-enactment of the traumatic event — in these instances, the temporal dimension seems to blur and collapse in the victim's mind so that they may have the perception of re-living the originating traumatic accident as a contemporary experience. Delving into Septimus' innermost thoughts and feelings, Woolf allows the reader to catch a glimpse of the internal turmoil of a mind that was severely disrupted by the trauma of the war. Septimus remains trapped in the no man's land of his traumatised psyche, consumed by his own delusions and alienated from the outer world:

> He looked at people outside; happy they seemed, collecting in the middle of the street, shouting, laughing, squabbling over nothing. But he could not taste, he could not feel. In the tea-shop among the tables and the chattering waiters the appalling fear came over him — he could not feel. He could reason; he could read.[63]

In the novel Woolf blends measurable and psychological time, inner and outer space in an effort to emulate the fragmentation of consciousness that affects the psyche in the aftermath of a traumatic event — the subversion of the temporal and spatial dimension allows Woolf to fictionalise the distorted perception of a mind that operates according to

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62 Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 52-53.

63 Ibidem, p. 65.

trauma processes, furthermore demonstrating that the complexity of trauma is unrepresentable within the modes of traditional literature.

Septimus embodies the unending rows of soldiers who survived the first world conflict, but who lost their souls and minds in the process, and whose tragic fate inevitably marked the people around them. Aside from constituting a brilliant literary rendition of the shell shock phenomenon, the character of Septimus represents an enduring presence that lingers beyond his death, and that continues to affect the lives of others — Clarissa's reaction to the news of Septimus' tragic death is a notable example of this concept. The invisible chain that interconnects the characters reveals a world of sensibilities which was brutally shattered by the devastating effects of the conflict.

Woolf sought to portray in her novel the immense impact that the Great War exerted on human feelings and relationships years after its cessation, thus emphasising the intertwined nature of personal and historical experiences. Within this context, the character of Septimus Warren Smith may be interpreted as an extreme literary rendition of the spiritual malaise that infected post-war society, hence an irremediable feeling of disenchantment. The sentiment of disenchantment reverberated through the literature of the time, which intended to grasp the essence of a world that was physically, morally and spiritually devastated by the incomprehensible and overwhelming force of war. Although the Great War and the Armistice were merely memories, the dreadful recollections of the conflict continued to resonate in the written productions of the 1920s. As previously mentioned, modernist literature written in the decade that followed the first world conflict constitutes a testimony on the collective trauma experienced during the conflict and in its immediate aftermath. As an instance, Ezra Pound's poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), vividly describes the profound sense of disorientation

and despair of the soldiers, who navigated through hell, deceived by the older generation, and returned home to face the consequences of lies old and new:

> Walked eye-deep in hell
> believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving
> came home, home to a lie,
> home to many deceits,
> home to old lies and new infamy.[64]

An analogous perspective is expressed in Charles E. Montague's acclaimed work *Disenchantment* (1922), a bleak and bitter reflection on the post-war condition of society, in which the modern individual is a casualty of their own times, overpowered by a sense of disillusionment that assumes the form of a death sentence. Drawing from his personal experience at the front, Montague recounts how the illusions of grandeur and heroism of the soldiers precipitated into cynicism and despair after their experience at the front, moreover reflecting on the immense losses, the shattered youth, the sacrifices:

> The lost years, the broken youth, the dead friends, the women's overshadowed lives at home, the agony and bloody sweat — all had gone to darken the stains which most of us had thought to scour out of the world that our children would live in. Many men felt, and said to each other, that they had been fooled.[65]

Montague's poignant words eloquently capture the sentiment of the modern world, thereby exemplifying the social, moral and physical desolation that afflicted individual and collective life during the inter-war period.

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[64] Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*.

[65] Montague, *Disenchantment*, p. 206.

The abovementioned malaise of disenchantment was already evident in T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915), written years before the outbreak of the Great War. Prufrock's interior monologue exemplifies the moral and intellectual dilemma of the modern condition, hence the inability to find a meaning to existence, thus anticipating the symptoms of the spiritual crisis that intensified and accelerated in the years of the conflict. Similarly to Prufrock, who is trapped inside a modern hell and paralysed by his inability to act, the modern individual is physically, emotionally and spiritually petrified, 'Like a patient etherized upon a table'[66]. Against this background, it may be argued that *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* predicted the agonising reality of a hopeless generation that witnessed the brutal battles of the war extending far beyond the trenches and into the streets of a London that appeared as an 'unreal city'[67].

Soon after the end of the Great War, the lingering feelings of horror and anxiety of the trenches started permeating into the civilian world, thereby eliminating the boundaries that separated the battlefield from urban life. The condition of hopelessness, instability and decay that dominated the interwar period is interwoven in the fabric of Eliot's undisputed masterpiece, *The Waste Land*, which magnificently captured the collective post-war sentiment of disillusionment and anxiety:

> A sense of desolation, of uncertainty, of futility, of the groundlessness of aspirations, of the vanity of endeavour, and a thirst for a life-giving water which seems suddenly to have failed.[68]

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66 Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', in *Prufrock and Other Observations*.

67 Eliot, *The Waste Land*.

68 Lewis, *Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*, pp. 129-151.

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot brilliantly employs symbolism, intertextuality, polyphony and fragmentation in order to reflect the deteriorating effects of post-war trauma on modern English society. The plurality of voices that succeed one another in the poem serves as a testimony of the social, psychological and emotional collapse that characterised the modern age, thus constituting a 'testament to the disillusionment of a generation, an exposition on the manifest despair and spiritual bankruptcy of the years after World War I'[69].

> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.
> Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
> And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.[70]

The second verse of the aforementioned excerpt echoes Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*, in particular the *Canto III* of the *Inferno*[71] — from Eliot's perspective, the crowd flowing over the London Bridge bears a strong resemblance to the lost souls located in the first circle of hell. Eliot often incorporates in his works the gloomy imagery of Alighieri's *Inferno* in order to depict the state of a society that was inexorably descending into an abyss of moral and spiritual annihilation. Analogously, Eliot's characterisation of the hollow men in the eponymous poem preserves the

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[69] Bloom, *T. S. Eliot: Comprehensive Research and Study Guide*, p. 40.

[70] Eliot, *The Waste Land*.

[71] Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, *Canto III*, vv. 55-57: 'Sì lunga tratta / di gente, ch'i' non averei creduto / che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta'.

imagery from *Canto III* and *IV* of the *Inferno*[72], which depict the Limbo[73], in an attempt to portray a society that had fallen in an irreversible state of spiritual and moral decline.

> We are the hollow men
> We are the stuffed men
> Leaning together
> Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
> Our dried voices, when
> We whisper together
> Are quiet and meaningless
> As wind in dry grass
> Or rats' feet over broken glass
> In our dry cellar.[74]

Similarly to the 'anime prave'[75] that appear in the Limbo, the hollow men are neither dead nor alive — they are merely shadows, trapped within an infernal circle that, like the infernal nightmare that had enveloped the world during the interbellum, deprived them of any chance for escape or redemption. 'Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion'[76], the hollow men are the embodiment of the human condition in an unprecedented moment of crisis, bound to remain in a condition of static lifelessness until the world ends 'not with a bang but with a whimper.'[77]

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72 Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, *Inferno, Canto III-IV.*

73 According to the *Commedia*, hell is divided into nine concentric circles — the Limbo is the first circle of hell.

74 Eliot, 'The Hollow Men', in *Poems 1909-1925*.

75 Ibidem, *Canto III*, v. 84: lit. transl. 'corrupted souls'.

76 Eliot, 'The Hollow Men'.

77 Ibidem.

2.2 Annihilation and loss of meaning in the aftermath of the Second World War

Although the interbellum was characterised by a fervent search for innovative modes of representation, after the Second World War the field of literature seemed to have lost all its vitality and creativity. The Holocaust represented the crucial trauma of the twentieth century, for it proved to what extent human action can degenerate into senselessness and brutality. Systematic prosecution and mass extermination forced people to confront the most abominable and paradoxical aspect of human degeneration: the unreasonable desire of self-annihilation. The existential void stemming from the horrific events of the second world conflict left no margin for new aesthetics and experimentation. After 1945, while several writers engaged in the tedious task of recounting the experience of the concentration camps, others questioned the possibility of literature after the Shoah. In *Prisms* (1955), German philosopher Theodor Adorno provided a reflection on the future of poetry after Auschwitz:

> The critique of culture is confronted with the last stage in the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today.[78]

The barbaric historical events of the Second World War, and more particularly the dehumanising experience of the concentration camps constituted an epochal moment of rupture that completely redefined the conception of language, history, memory and testimony. The impossibility of confronting the darkest hour of human history resulted in an extreme annihilation that reflected onto language, the medium of testimony, which seemed to have lost its meaning. Within this framework, the Holocaust constitutes the

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[78] Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 31.

quintessential *aporetic*[79] event, whose traumatic force has the faculty of destroying meaning, representation and identity. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben identifies the aporia of Auschwitz in the logic impairment that hinders human reason when it incurs in an intrinsically contradictory question:

> The aporia of Auschwitz is, indeed, the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension.[80]

The essential question of the postbellum consisted in reconciling the necessity of a historical truth and the moral imperative of testimony with the complexity of recounting an unprecedented historical trauma that tests the limits of human logic, comprehension and even imagination. During his studies on the effects of the Holocaust on contemporary art, Ernst van Alphen provided an observation upon the narrative inaccessibility of traumatic experiences. Rather than attributing the unrepresentability of the Holocaust to the intrinsic violence of the historical event, van Alphen identifies the matrix of this *narrative vacuum* in the lack of representational forms that could articulate a history that was unprecedented and unknown.

> The unrepresentability of the Holocaust experience is caused not by the extremity of Holocaust experience as such, but by the fact that this horrible history was *unknown* — not figuratively, but literally. The symbolic order offered no terms, positions or frames by which the Holocaust could be experienced, because this event has no precedent whatsoever.[81]

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[79] The adjective *aporetic* derives from the Greek term *aporia*, which literally means 'lacking passage' — it is frequently used in rhetoric to indicate a contradictory or paradoxical situation that is thus configured as unresolvable.

[80] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, p. 12.

[81] van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature and Theory*, p. 52.

The general debate concerning the Holocaust and its historical, cultural and social repercussions emerged several years after the end of the second world conflict, after decades of silence. The trial to Holocaust perpetrator Adolf Eichmann[82] proved crucial in this respect, because it delineated a paradigmatic shift in memorial consciousness. For the first time in history the individual experiences of the victims were converted into a 'collective story that receives a legal hearing and a public acknowledgment and validation'[83]. During the four months of the trial, it became evident that the contributions of Holocaust survivors and witnesses was essential so that the collective trauma of the century could be reproduced in court, thus allowing the reconstruction of a historical truth. The historical significance of Eichmann's trial lies precisely in the fundamental re-conceptualisation of the function of testimony.

> Testimony has changed direction. […] At the same time, the function of testimony has also changed. In the years following the war, the primary aim of testimony was knowledge — knowledge of the modalities of genocide and deportment. Testimony had the status of an archival document. Today […] the mission that has devoted to testimony is no longer to bear witness to inadequately known events, but to keep them before our eyes.[84]

As literary critic Shoshana Felman notes in *Juridical Unconscious* (2002), the debate inherent to the ethical and historical value of testimony furthermore resulted from the influence of two paradigmatic works, hence Hanna Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) and Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1985)[85]. The reflection concerning the Holocaust thenceforth revolved around two

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[82] The trial to Adolf Eichmann was held in Tel Aviv from April 11th to August 15th, 1961. Eichmann was charged with fifteen counts, including crimes against humanity and war crimes. By the end of the trial, Eichmann was found guilty on all charges and sentenced to death.

[83] Felman, *Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 152-153.

[84] Wieviorka, 'On Testimony', in G. Hartman *Holocaust Remembrance: the Shapes of Memory*, p. 24.

[85] Felman, *Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, p. 106.

fundamental nuclei, hence the ethical and historical value of testimony and the feasibility of narrating traumatic experiences.

The discussion that arose in those years around the Holocaust and its impact on history, memory, language and culture significantly contributed to the evolution of a theory that conceives trauma as intrinsically aporetic, which is currently in vogue. The issue of incommunicability of traumatic experiences thus emerged in an aesthetic debate that sought an intersection between the psychoanalytical claim that trauma is unrepresentable and the possibility of accessing the traumatic reality through artistic forms.

2.3 The significance of testimony: Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman

As previously mentioned, in the immediate aftermath of the second world conflict, any attempt of documenting the horrific reality of the concentration camps collided with an insurmountable silence. Holocaust survivors were maimed by the inability to confront and process the magnitude of the traumatic experience they had endured — the necessity of testimony was opposed by the impossibility of understanding an unanticipated humanitarian tragedy, whose complexity extended far beyond the limits of human comprehension.

In this paradoxical situation, the central issue of testimony is configured as the impossibility of communicating an experience that eludes comprehension, language and meaning and that consequently remains buried under a deafening silence that continues to operate a distortion of reality. Regarding the significance of testimony, Shoshana Felman writes:

> What constitutes the outrage of the Holocaust — the very essence of erasure and annihilation — is not so much death in itself, as the more obscene fact that *death itself does not make any difference*, the fact that death is radically *indifferent*, everyone is leveled off, people die as numbers, not as proper names. In contrast to this leveling, to testify is to engage, precisely, in the process of *refinding one's own proper name*, one's *signature*.[86]

The notion of testimony acquired social and historical significance in the last decades of the twentieth century. Around those years, American psychiatrist Dori Laub was investigating testimony methodologies, and more specifically trauma-related modes of communication. In 1979, Laub collaborated with documentary film-maker Laurel Vlock for the realisation of the Holocaust Survivors Film Project, which was conceived as a collection of video-recorded interviews to survivors of the Shoah — two years later, 183 recordings of said project were deposited at the Yale University Library as a basis for a comprehensive testimony archive. Over the years, the *Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies* gathered over 4,400 testimonies of Holocaust survivors and witnesses, thus becoming one of the most important pieces of evidence that documented the consequences of crimes against humanity[87].

During his interviews with Holocaust victims, Laub noticed that these people were torn between the urgent need of recounting the atrocities they had survived and the utmost inability to deliver their testimony in a sort of crisis of history, identity and truth. Laub thus concluded that, although it may seem paradoxical, the necessity of testimony derives precisely from the impossibility of testimony.

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[86] Felman, 'Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching', in C. Caruth *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 53.

[87] Laub & Hartman, *Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies*.

> None find peace in silence, even when it is their choice to remain silent. Moreover, survivors who do not tell their story become victims of a distorted memory, that is, of a forcibly imposed "external evil", which causes an endless struggle with and over a delusion. The "not telling" of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny.[88]

In 1992, Laub published *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* in collaboration with Shoshana Felman. This work was extensively based on Laub's experience as an interviewer of Holocaust survivors and it focused on the value of testimony and the crucial role carried out by listeners in the healing process of trauma survivors.

According to Laub, transmitting the testimony to an interlocutor is pivotal, because the hearer represents 'the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time'[89], thereby contributing to the narrative reconstruction of the traumatic experience. Voicing a traumatic account to a recipient who is able to comprehend its emotional intensity moreover encourages the narrator to share their experience, thus minimising the possibilities that the victim withdraws into the pain caused by their trauma. Laub identified three distinct levels of testimony, namely

> The level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself.[90]

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88 Laub, 'An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival', in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, p. 79.

89 Laub, 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, p. 57.

90 Laub, 'An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival', p. 75.

While the comprehension of the first and the second level is rather immediate, the third level results more complex because it requires a co-operation between the narrator and the listener in order to achieve the complete understanding of a truth that remained buried for years. For this reason, narrator and listener

> Need to halt and reflect on these memories as they are spoken, so as to reassert the veracity of the past and to build anew its linkage to, and assimilation into, present-day life.[91]

Narrating trauma has the function of expressing a truth that has never been integrated into consciousness and that, for this reason, continues to elude every mode of representation. The narration basically consists in a dialogical process that encourages the victim to confront their loss and thus reconcile the two realities that blend in their perception: the past that was violently disrupted by the events of history and the future that still has to be lived.

> By virtue of the fact that the testimony is *addressed* to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension *beyond himself*.[92]

Pioneer in the field of psychoanalytic literary criticism Shoshana Felman examined the new modes of representation employed by trauma survivors in the narration of their dreadful experience. With respect to the linguistic annihilation that derives from surviving an extreme event, Felman included in her study the example of Paul Celan, a German-speaking poet who strove for the reappropriation of his language, which was embedded with Nazi connotations after the second world conflict:

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[91] Ibidem, p. 76.

[92] Felman, 'Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching', in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, p. 3.

> Celan's poetic writing therefore struggles with the German to annihilate his own annihilation in it, to reappropriate the language that has marked his own exclusion: the poems dislocate the language so as to remold it, to radically shift its semantic and grammatical assumptions and remake — creatively and critically — a new poetic language entirely Celan's own.[93]

Celan's poetic writing is imbued with the grievous attempt to retrieve the visceral connection with his mother tongue, which had become the language of the perpetrators. Celan sought to remold his poetic language through the obsessive use of repetition and the introduction of silences as means of rhythmic hiatus — narrative techniques that allow him to testify against the horrors of the Holocaust, while simultaneously restoring the profound sense of existence that got lost in the dreadful events of history.

Felman moreover wondered whether written productions have the same intensity of direct interpersonal exchanges in the communication of traumatic experiences. In her essay *Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching* (1992), Felman addressed the interaction between trauma and pedagogy, moreover considering whether the testimony of a crisis can be employed in a learning environment in order to encourage the students to approach certain historical realities.

> In a post-traumatic century, a century that has survived unthinkable historical catastrophes, is there anything that we have learned or that we should learn about education, that we did not know before? Can trauma *instruct* pedagogy, and can pedagogy shed light on the mystery of trauma?[94]

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[93] Ibidem, p. 27.

[94] Ibidem, p. 1.

Against this background, Felman planned a course entitled 'Literature and Testimony'[95], whose program comprised a series of texts that 'dramatize in different ways, through different genres and around different topics, the account of — or testimonies to — a crisis'[96]. For this purpose were taken into account the works of Freud, Dostoevskij, Mallarmé, Camus, Kafka and Celan, in addition to real first-person testimonies from the *Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies* — documents and works that, in Felman's opinion, allow the recipient to perceive the significance of the traumatic occurrence in all its disturbing and alienating force. In the closing lectures of the course, Felman noticed that her students seemed to have developed a sort of fixation for the topics discussed in class:

> They were obsessed. They felt apart, and yet not quite together. They sought out each other and yet felt they could not reach each other. They kept turning to each other and to me. They felt alone, suddenly deprived of their bonding to the world and to one another. As I listened to their outpour, I realized the class was entirely at loss, disoriented and uprooted.[97]

The students were therefore invited to produce a written testimony of their experience and then share it with the rest of the class — this activity allowed Felman to exemplify the importance of testimony in the process of elaboration of the traumatic occurrence. According to Felman, in an era that irremediably revolves around trauma, teaching should not be limited to the passive conveyance of notions, but rather eradicate established thinking and outdated reference systems, in an effort to stir consciences. Felman thus concluded that

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95 Felman's course 'Literature and Testimony' was taught at Yale University in 1984.

96 Ibidem, p. 7.

97 Ibidem, p. 48.

> If teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps *not truly taught*[98].

Laub and Felman's observations on memory and testimony were successively employed as a basis for the elaboration of a thematic characteristic of trauma narrative: the relationship between narrator and listener and, by extension, between narrator and reader.

2.4 Trauma and literature: a crisis of representation

The 1970s witnessed a renowned interest for the psychopathological concept of trauma so that, when the American Psychiatric Association crystallised the medicalisation of post-traumatic stress disorder in 1980, the notions of trauma, memory and testimony permeated into a variety of fields and discourses, including the humanities and the social sciences. Roger Luckhurst argued that the late 1980s and early 1990s delineated a 'memoir boom'[99] — a virtual explosion of the trauma paradigm that inaugurated an interdisciplinary examination of overwhelming experiences. Within this framework, various intellectuals developed an interest towards the issue of incommunicability, moreover returning to Freud and Janet's theories on psycho-traumatology in an effort to

> Unravel the intricacies and undecidability of individual and collective traumas for the sake of both the victim's recovery and the ethical, emphatic unsettlement of the other involved in the act of telling.[100]

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[98] Ibidem, p. 53.

[99] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 88.

[100] Nadal & Calvo, *Trauma in Contemporary Literature*, p. 8.

The advent of literary trauma studies therefore resulted from the conjunction of two circumstances: the psychiatric normalisation of trauma and the human necessity to find a method to effectively communicate the vehemence of dreadful experiences.

Another crucial moment that marks the evolution of the relationship between trauma and literature resides in the publication of a special edition of the psychiatric journal *American Imago*, entitled 'Psychoanalysis, Culture and Trauma'[101]. The essential purpose of this issue was to examine the notion of trauma and its role in society and literature, furthermore proposing a series of multidisciplinary approaches to the paradox of incommunicability. This edition laid the cornerstone for innovative theoretical approaches that still exert a crucial influence on contemporary literary production, featuring the contributions of prominent trauma theorists and scholars Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth[102].

Trauma theory thus emerged as a branch of the humanities in the 1990s with the purpose of addressing the linguistic representability of trauma. More specifically, the canon of trauma studies is essentially concerned with the representation of psychological trauma and its impact on language, literature and society. In line with Freud and van der Kolk's theorisations concerning traumatic and post-traumatic experiences, the initial course of this field defines trauma as an extreme experience, whose violence and unpredictability affects consciousness, language and meaning.

Neurobiologist and post-traumatic stress expert Bessel van der Kolk argues that traumatic experiences cannot be put into words. The essay *The Intrusive Past: the*

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[101] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 4.

[102] The essays featured in 'Psychoanalysis, Culture and Trauma' were subsequently collected in the volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), edited by Cathy Caruth.

Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma proved essential for the development of literary trauma studies, because it contains theories that attribute scientific value to an aporetic conception of trauma. For instance, in the abovementioned work, the two trauma specialists essentially propose the idea of an anti-mimetic nature of traumatic memories — this thesis is based upon the scientific hypothesis that the intense emotion deriving from traumatic shock inhibits the hippocampus, the brain structure that is responsible for memory formation, which consequently commits errors in the collocation of experiential data on spatiotemporal coordinates[103]. This error of categorisation determines the paradoxical situation that annihilates the real traumatic experience, while leaving intact the memory of trauma-related emotions, that are instead vividly remembered by the victim.

The idea of an inherent ineffability of traumatic memories as a consequence of the state of unpreparedness of the psyche at the moment of impact had already been proposed by Sigmund Freud in his acclaimed work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. As illustrated in the previous chapter, Freud's psychoanalytical theories depicted trauma as an overwhelming and unpredictable force that ruptures the protective barrier of the psyche, thereby eluding traditional integrative processes and penetrating into the deeper layers of the mind. Considering that the traumatic memory is relocated in the unconscious portion of the mind, in the perception of the victim it is configured as an unassimilated event that results fragmented and incoherent.

According to this model, traumatic experiences are unavailable to conscious recall because they cannot be accessed through traditional mnemonic operations. Then, after a period of latency, the psychic traces left by the overwhelming experience emerge through the mechanism of repetition compulsion — for these reasons, rather than

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[103] van der Kolk & van der Hart, 'The Intrusive Past: the Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma' in C. Caruth *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. 158-182.

remembered, trauma is *re-experienced* through fragments, feelings and flashbacks. Said impossibility to consciously access the traumatic memory represents the central obstacle in the integration of trauma into a narrative — if trauma is fundamentally *unknown*, how can it be represented? This impasse is located at the core of the theoretical debate that aimed at conceptualising the double paradox that connotes the complex interaction between trauma and consciousness and, by extension, between trauma and language.

> The knowledge of trauma […] is composed of two contradictory elements. One is the traumatic event, registered rather than experienced. It seems to have bypassed the perception and consciousness, and fall directly into the psyche. The other is a kind of memory of the event, in the form of a perpetual troping of it by the bypassed or severely split (dissociated) psyche.[104]

The first wave of theories concerning trauma and narrative relied upon the abovementioned psychoanalytical claims in an effort to substantiate the crisis of representation that is intrinsically inherent to traumatic experiences. However, it may be argued that the incommunicability of an overwhelming experience is not solely imputable to its unavailability to conscious memory: trauma survivors often assert that language falters in the representation of the horrors they have experienced or witnessed. In this respect, the inadequacy of language undoubtedly occupies a prominent place in the barrier that interposes between trauma and language. Nevertheless, a more modern model of trauma, known as pluralistic model, argues that the incommunicability of trauma is only one amongst the many diverse post-traumatic responses that an individual may develop. Still, the conception defining trauma as an intrinsically unrepresentable experience remained a dominant concept in the aesthetic debate that sought to identify trauma's function in literature.

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[104] Hartman, 'On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies', in *New Literary History*, p. 537.

2.4.1 Cathy Caruth and the paradoxical nature of trauma

Cathy Caruth produced two amongst the most influential works as far as the narrative representation of traumatic experiences is concerned, hence *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996). The insights included in these works set the initial parameters for the field of literary trauma studies by combining psychoanalysis, neurosciences and literary criticism in order to define the interaction between trauma and language. Although the conceptual basis of the aforementioned essays is partially outdated, Caruth's formulations have created a fervent theoretical debate in the 1990s around the notions of trauma and narrative.

Relying on van der Kolk and van der Hart's theory that trauma interferes with cerebral circuits moreover inhibiting their correct functioning, Caruth conceives trauma as a paradoxical experience that completely disrupts any psychological mechanism of defence and consequently hinders the mnemonic processes that are responsible for memory registration. By way of illustration, in *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth argues that trauma is configured as

> A wound inflicted upon the mind that breaks the victim's experience of time, self and the world, and that causes great emotional anguish in the individual.[105]

Similarly to the canon of early theories on trauma and literary criticism, Caruth's formulations primarily rely on Freud's understanding of traumatic neuroses that, amongst other things, identifies an inherent latency in the insurgence of post-traumatic symptoms. Correspondingly, Caruth asserts that the manifestation of a post-traumatic response does not occur immediately after the traumatic accident, on the contrary, it is characterised by a delayed and repetitive onset. Then, once the traumatic affect

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[105] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, pp. 3-4.

resurfaces, the fragmented memory of the event manifests its intrusive force by exerting control over the psyche through the compulsive return of dreams and thoughts, recollections and hallucinations.

Traumatic recollections of oneiric nature evoke an event that is not consciously accessible to memory and that is thus configured as a lacuna in the past. In line with Pierre Janet's observations, Caruth conceives this post-traumatic amnesia as a result of the victim's inability to integrate the upsetting event through traditional integrative processes. Considering that the traumatic event cannot be converted into a narrative memory, it becomes an unconscious mnemonic fragment which perpetually demands to be confronted.

In light of the aforementioned concepts, Caruth characterises trauma as a pre-linguistic experience, unassimilable through conventional integrative processes and therefore consciously inaccessible. In other terms, extreme experiences are unrepresentable on a linguistic level because their memory eludes cognitive knowledge and therefore results fragmental and lacunose — for these reasons, Caruth describes trauma as an intrinsically aporetic event which 'stands outside representation'[106].

> Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness.[107]

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[106] Ibidem, p. 17.

[107] Ibidem, pp. 91-92.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, verbalising fragmentary traumatic memories into a coherent narration is pivotal in order to alleviate the impact of post-traumatic effects on the psyche. Caruth however expresses her concern that the aforesaid process may mitigate or alter the original vehemence of the traumatic occurrence, thus leading to a sort of 'loss of precision'.

> The capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort […]. Yet, beyond the loss of precision there is another, more profound disappearance: the loss, precisely, of the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*.[108]

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth furthermore addresses the connection that binds trauma to art and literature: in her opinion, psychoanalysis and literature are the privileged media that enable the representation of trauma without disrupting its essential features. Caruth turns once again to Freud in order to support her theoretical claim — in this instance, Caruth cites the literary reference included in the third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where Freud mentions an episode of Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* in order to illustrate the compulsive mechanism that characterises post-traumatic affect.

> If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet.[109]

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[108] Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. 153-154.

[109] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, pp. 2-3.

Caruth suggests that the connection that binds trauma and literature lies precisely on the peculiarities of figurative language, the sole medium that is capable of preserving the iconic, non-verbal nature of the traumatic past, thus enabling the narration of

> The story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and language.[110]

The validity of a privileged connection that identifies art and literature as the designed modes of representation for traumatic and overwhelming experiences is an extensively debated topic in the canon of trauma studies. Dominick LaCapra, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) counters Caruth's position regarding the alleged privileged function assumed by art and literature in the representation of trauma, subtly questioning the post-structuralist foundation of a theory that re-writes the 'key notion of "unreadability" […] in the terms of trauma'[111].

2.4.2 Dominick LaCapra: acting out and working through

Amongst the founding figures of trauma theory, Dominick LaCapra aimed at adapting psychoanalytical principles to the domain of historical analysis, furthermore investigating to what extent cultural principles are affected by the trauma paradigm. LaCapra's early theories result very similar to the views expressed by Cathy Caruth — for example, LaCapra defines trauma as follows:

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[110] Ibidem.

[111] LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 184.

> Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered.[112]

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) LaCapra proposes a differentiation between two possible reactions to historical trauma, namely 'acting out' and 'working through' — two distinct processes that are however closely interrelated. On the one hand, acting out basically refers to the post-traumatic mechanism of repetition compulsion, and more particularly to the nullification of the boundaries between past and present that pervades the perception of trauma victims. Working through, on the other hand, is based upon the elaboration of intrusive thoughts and reminiscences, that will ultimately lead to overcoming the traumatic experience and alleviating its reverberations on the psyche. It is crucial to note that working through is not limited to the mere erasure of traumatic memories, it is rather defined as a process of elaboration that consists in facing the traumatic occurrence and eventually coming to terms with it.

> Working through does not mean avoidance, harmonization, simply forgetting the past, or submerging oneself in the present. It means coming to terms with the trauma, including its details, and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past and even to recognize why it may be necessary and even in certain respects desirable or at least compelling.[113]

Once the victim confronts the traumatising occurrence, they acquire the ability to operate a distinction between the two different temporal realities that overlap in their perception, so as to restore a certain order in their life. Nevertheless, in some cases the traumatised subject may develop a tendency to resist the process of working out, either

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[112] Ibidem, p. 41.

[113] Ibidem, p. 144.

consciously or unconsciously — this reticence to elaborate one's trauma derives from a mechanism that Janet had termed 'attachment to the trauma' that leads the victim to develop a profound connection to their traumatic experience and even identify with the lost object.

> One's bond with the dead, especially with dead intimates, may invest trauma with value and make its reliving a painful but necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound. This situation may create a more or less unconscious desire to remain within trauma.[114]

The acting out / working through binomial was based upon Freud's conceptualisation of melancholia as opposed to mourning, theorised in 1917. In the case of melancholia, the traumatised subject is trapped in the compulsive repetition of their repressed past, plagued by the impossibility to move on and project their life into the future. Mourning, in contrast, encourages the victim to confront their traumatic memories and gradually detach from them, in an effort to reinstate their standing into society.

In his earlier work *Trauma, Absence, Loss* (1999), LaCapra had already theorised a distinction that is intimately related to acting out and working through: the dichotomy between loss and absence.[115] LaCapra asserts that loss can be contextualised within an historical framework, since it is the consequence of a specific event. Although loss is inextricably linked to pain, it can be elaborated and eventually overcome through an adequate process of mourning, because it is related to a definite object. Conversely, the notion of absence stands on a metahistorical and metaphysical level, precisely because

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[114] Ibidem, p. 22.

[115] LaCapra, 'Trauma, Absence, Loss' in *Critical Inquiry*.

'one cannot lose what one never had'[116]. The interaction between these two abstractions is extremely complex, especially in situations that have a traumatic nature.

> The study of traumatic events poses especially difficult problems in representation and writing both for research and for any dialogic exchange with the past which acknowledges the claims it makes on people and relates it to the present and future.[117]

With respect to the narrative depiction of trauma, LaCapra addresses two different forms of writing, hence 'writing *about* trauma' and 'writing trauma'[118] — the former is subjected to documentary methods and research models and it therefore reconstructs the traumatic event as it occurred, whereas the latter provides insights into the complex phenomena of traumatic matrix 'by offering a reading over process or period, or by giving at least a plausible "feel" for experience an emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods'[119].

> History faces the problem of both writing about and writing out trauma, and I have indicated that it is subject to certain frames or limits that may be contested but not, in my judgement, abandoned or simply flouted.[120]

According to LaCapra, post-traumatic literature should account for the aforementioned concepts in order to ensure an effective narration of the traumatic experience that is not confined to the detached documentation of the event. LaCapra moreover asserts that experimental narrative techniques and innovative literary approaches result more

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116 LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 50.

117 Ibidem, p. 41.

118 Ibidem, p. 2.

119 Ibidem, pp. 13-14.

120 Ibidem, p. 194.

efficient in the narration of an overwhelming experience, because they are able to convey the essence of trauma and its effects on contemporary society.

> Redemptive narrative is a narrative that denies the trauma that brought it into existence. And more experimental, non redemptive narratives are narratives that are trying to come to terms with trauma in a post-traumatic context, in ways that involve both acting out and working through.[121]

2.5 Writing the wound: the characteristics of trauma fiction

The theoretical framework provided by trauma theorists served as a basis for the writers who attempted to incorporate the functioning of traumatic and post-traumatic processes in their literary works, thus indicating a fascination towards trauma victims and their way of remembering past events.

> The rise of trauma theory has provided novelists with new ways of conceptualizing trauma and has shifted attention away from the question of what is remembered of the past to how and why it is remembered.[122]

Anne Whitehead, in her work *Trauma Fiction* (2004), addresses the salient aspects of trauma criticism and post-traumatic literature in an effort to identify and categorise the thematic and stylistic features of contemporary trauma literature. The canon of trauma studies agreed upon the fact that the narrativisation of extreme experiences is embedded with contradictions and discrepancies. According to Whitehead, the expression 'trauma fiction' itself connotes a paradox:

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[121] Ibidem, p. 179.

[122] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p. 3.

> Trauma fiction effectively articulates several issues that contribute to the current interest in memory: the recognition that representing the past raises complex ethical problems; the challenge posed to conventional narrative frameworks and epistemologies by belated temporality; the difficulty of spatially locating the past; and the hitherto unrecognised cultural diversity of historical representation.[123]

Whitehead conceives trauma fiction as the result of three distinct cultural realities that are however extensively intertwined, namely post-modernism, colonial fiction and the post-war scenario. Trauma fiction inherited from post-modernism the intricate and conflicted relationship with the past which elicits a sense of tension and unsteadiness that reflects onto the present. Post-modern literature proposed a series of avant-garde techniques that depart from the conception of history as a meta-narrative medium — another crucial intersection between trauma fiction and post-modern productions consists in the tendency to stretch conventional narrative structures beyond their limits, in an attempt to 'convey the damaging and distorting impact of the traumatic event'[124].

Colonial fiction, on the other hand, gave priority to the inner workings and the private experiences of human beings, thus bringing to light repressed cultural content and contributing to the process of historical re-writing — trauma literature and colonial fiction both seek to retrieve stories which have been neglected, silenced or concealed in the past, thus giving a voice to 'the denied, the repressed and the forgotten'[125]. Finally, the two world conflicts undeniably served as a catalyst for the evolution of the concepts of memory, identity, testimony and language.

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[123] Ibidem, p. 81.

[124] Ibidem, p. 82.

[125] Ibidem.

According to Whitehead, the experimental structures employed by post-modernist and colonial fiction are the appropriate means for conveying the unreality of trauma onto the written page, while still preserving the events of history.

> While traditional literary realism may not be suited for rendering traumatic events, I have argued that the more experimental forms emerging out of postmodernist and colonial fiction offer the contemporary novelist a promising vehicle for communicating the unreality of trauma, while still remaining faithful to the facts of history.[126]

Trauma fiction is characterised by a series of tropes and aesthetic coordinates that define it as a recognisable genre in contemporary literature. Whitehead observes that fiction inevitably changed after colliding with the concept of trauma.

> Fiction itself has been marked or changed by its encounter with trauma. Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and its symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection.[127]

In line with Caruth's theories, the most common techniques portray trauma as an obsessive return of fragmental memories into the present. On this account, Whitehead identifies in trauma narratives the disturbing presence of ghosts that haunt the lives of the characters, persistently coming back in the form of a revenant[128] and distorting the victim's perception of time and space. Analogously to the temporal element, the spatial

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[126] Ibidem, p. 87.

[127] Ibidem, p. 4.

[128] A revenant is an element from the past which obsessively re-emerges, for it has not been properly mourned or worked through.

dimension is irremediably affected by trauma — the concept of place, conceptualised by Pierre Nora as *lieux de mémoire*[129] plays a significant role in trauma literature[130].

> The traces of unresolved past events, or the ghosts of those who died too suddenly and violently to be properly mourned, possess those who are seeking to get on with the task of living.[131]

The performability of trauma is often rendered in literature through a series of narrative techniques that mimic symptoms and dynamics that are associated with the post-traumatic experience, such as intrusive thoughts and compulsive behaviours. In this respect, trauma novels are defined by a non-linear narration that subverts the chronological order of the events as well as the frequent repetition of details and elements that, similarly to traumatic memories, resurface continuously throughout the plot. The obsessive recursivity that characterises psychopathological trauma cannot be portrayed through conventional or linear narrative forms, because it is not consistent with the victim's consciousness and thus escapes its control. As a result, rather than relying on traditional literary modes of representation, contemporary authors favour the use of blank spaces and silences to exemplify the unspeakability of a traumatic experience.

Joshua Pederson identified three recurring tropes that define trauma narrative, namely absence, indirection and repetition. Firstly, absence is a narrative technique that consists in the employment of textual gaps, silences and lacunae in an effort to elude the traumatic event. Secondly, indirection centres the narration upon an event or anecdote that indirectly refers to the traumatic experience, although it may seem completely

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[129] Lit. transl. 'site of memory'.

[130] Ibidem.

[131] Ibidem, p. 6.

unrelated to the originating accident. Lastly, repetition is a central feature of post-traumatic processes — in this case the narration recurrently converges towards words, events and details that are related to the traumatic accident[132].

Pederson furthermore asserted that literary language is endowed with an 'imaginative quality that allows access to traumatic experience'[133]. Non-literary language is not suitable for the narrativisation of traumatic experiences, because its intrinsic factuality may debase the intensity of the account, thus converting it into the mere documentation of the event. Conversely, the non-referentiality of literary language enables this kind of narrative to capture the profound essence of an overwhelming experience.

Nicole A. Sütterlin proposes a fourth trope as far as the literary representation of trauma is concerned, hence 'splitting of the narrative voice', which consists in doubling the narrator's point of view or providing multiple perspectives to the story[134]. The strategy of doubling the narrator's perspective with that of a *doppelgänger* was inspired by Janet's theorisation of *dédoublement de la personnalité*[135]. In general terms, the concept of division of the self at the basis of this narrative device recalls the process of psychological separation of identity and consciousness that may arise as a reaction to trauma — the phenomenon of disassociation, for instance, is a mechanism of psychological defence that creates a sort of schism in the psyche by means of disaggregating the victim's perception of reality, identity and memory.

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132 Pederson, 'Trauma and Narrative', in J. R. Kurtz *Trauma and Literature*.

133 Ibidem, p. 99.

134 Sütterlin, 'History of Trauma Theory', in C. Davis and H. Meretoja *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, p. 20.

135 Janet, *L'Automatisme Psychologique, Essai de Psychologie Expérimentale sur le Formes Inférieures de l'Activité Humaine*.

As previously mentioned, the performability of trauma in literature incorporates the features of post-traumatic affect into a narrative through a range of narrative devices that resemble traumatic processes — in this respect, it is crucial to mention focalisation and unreliable narration. The literary technique of focalisation is a 'perspectival filter' which centres the narration upon the limited and biased perspective of one or multiple characters[136]. Focalisation can be internal or external — in the first case the narrator grants the reader access into the focal character's mind by illustrating their thoughts, feelings and memories, whereas in the second instance, the narration consists in the description of the focal character's behaviour and experiences, without including any psychological or emotional insight. Focalisation grants subjectivity to the narration, especially if the focaliser and the narrator coincide. However, an excessive focus on subjectivity may cast a doubt on the reliability of the narration.

In his paper *Kinds of Unreliability in Fiction: Narratorial, Focal, Expositional and Combined*, Bo Pettersson classified unreliable narrators into three categories, hence fallible narrators, deluded narrators and deceptive narrators. Firstly, fallible narrators are considered as unreliable for their narrow perception of the reality around them, which is usually limited by their immaturity or analogous reasons. Secondly, deluded narrators are endowed with a distorted conception of reality, which can be the result of a traumatic event that profoundly affected the narrator's vision of the world around them. Finally, deceptive narrators purposely mould the narration in an effort to deceive the reader — this objective can be pursued through different stratagems, namely providing the reader with false information, exaggerating or minimising certain details, or deliberately omitting parts of the story[137].

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136 Vickroy, *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel & the Psychology of Oppression*, p. 3.

137 Pettersson, 'Kinds of Unreliability in Fiction: Narratorial, Focal, Expositional and Combined', in V. Nünning, *Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness: Intermedial and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, pp. 111-114.

CHAPTER 3

Voyage au bout de la blessure

3.1 Louis-Ferdinand Céline, between genius and controversies

Louis-Ferdinand Céline was a prominent yet controversial figure in the intellectual debate that unfolded in France between the first and the second world conflict. Amongst the most influential writers of the twentieth century, Céline was particularly celebrated for developing an innovative literary style which revolutionised the French literary panorama. His first novel *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932) is regarded as a masterpiece of European literature, which proved to be highly influential on the post-war French existentialist movement. However, the echo of this brilliant novel extended far beyond the limits of Europe, moreover reaching into the cultural landscape of the United States and inspiring the style of writers like Jack Kerouac, William Boroughs, Henry Miller and Charles Bukowski. In this respect, French editor and literary critic Maurice Nadeau asserted that

> What Joyce did for the English language… what the surrealists attempted to do for the French language, Céline achieved effortlessly and on a vast scale.[138]

[138] Vitoux, *Céline: a Biography*, p. 531.

Céline's production was disregarded for several years in France due to the ambivalent political positions that the author embraced in the course of his life, which tended towards antisemitism and pro-Nazism[139] from the late 1930s. Although his literary qualities are undeniable, Céline's reputation is still fiercely debated to the present day — while some critics deem his misanthropy and antisemitism as unforgivable faults, others find a paradoxical humanism in his works, moreover arguing that Céline's rhetoric can be read as a sort of revolt against a world which had become intolerably hypocritical and inhuman.

Céline's understanding of life was characterised by intense instances of nihilism, cynicism and misanthropy that were nevertheless mitigated by a visceral compassion for the suffering of others. These complex and often contradictory aspects at the basis of Céline's perspective are reflected in the character of Ferdinand Bardamu — Céline's fictional alter ego and protagonist of *Journey to the End of the Night*.

The points of intersection between the author and the narrator extend far beyond their disposition and conception of life — the experiences that Bardamu faces throughout the novel reflect a succession of events that Céline endured until the early 1930s, so that *Journey to the End of the Night* has been defined as a semi-autobiographical novel. For the aforementioned reasons, in order to fully comprehend a controversial novel like *Journey to the End of the Night*, it is crucial to gather some information regarding Céline's life.

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[139] From 1937, Céline published three pamphlets — *Trifles for a Massacre* (1937), *School of Corpses* (1938) and *A Fine Mess* (1941) — in which he exposed his antisemitic views and advocated for an alliance between France and Hitler's Germany in an effort to avoid war at any cost.

3.1.1 The life of Louis Ferdinand Destouches

Louis Ferdinand Auguste Destouches was born in Courbevoie[140] in 1894. The only child of Marguerite-Louise-Céline Guillou and Fernand Destouches, young Louis Ferdinand was strictly educated according to a *petite bourgeoise* mentality, which was rooted into values of discipline, hard work and respect for social hierarchies. Louis Ferdinand spent most of his childhood in the *passage*[141] Choiseul, a place that the author mentioned in his earlier novels *Journey to the End of the Night* and *Death on the Installment Plan* (1936), which he depicted as a grim, claustrophobic and foul-smelling place resembling a prison. Céline later defined his childhood as a miserable period, scarred by moral and financial constraints — one of the few happy memories of Louis Ferdinand's childhood revolved around his maternal grandmother Céline Guillou, from whom the author derived his pseudonym.

In 1912, at the age of eighteen, Céline enlisted as a volunteer for the French army in an act of rebellion against his parents[142]. Two years later, on the outbreak of the first world conflict, Céline's unit was directly involved in the action. After a few months in the trenches, Céline volunteered for a dangerous mission which consisted in delivering a message under heavy German fire — during this heroic endeavour Céline was wounded in his right arm, probably as a consequence of a shell explosion. Céline claimed throughout his life that after this occurrence he was also wounded in his head and, although there is no medical record of such an injury, he was afflicted by severe headaches and tinnitus for the rest of his life[143]. In addition to the aforementioned

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140 Commune of the Hauts-de-Seine *département*, located on the outskirts of Paris.

141 Passage Choiseul is a covered passage of Paris, located in the 2nd *arrondissement*. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, Parisian *passages* were arcaded streets, often narrow and dimly lit, conceived as prototypical shopping centres. The small shops located in these *passages* often served the dual function of business and residence.

142 McCarthy, *Céline*, p. 22.

143 Ibidem, p. 24.

physical ailments, the experience at the front left Céline with a series of neuropsychiatric consequences, namely chronic insomnia, paranoid thoughts and even auditory hallucinations — a symptomatic picture that is congruous to the diagnostic criteria of PTSD. After receiving the official recognition of invalidity[144] and a *médaille militaire* for his bravery on the battlefield, in September 1915 Céline was declared unfit for military duty and consequently dismissed from the French army.

Céline repeatedly declared that his wartime experience irremediably changed him, moreover instilling in him 'a profound disgust for all that is bellicose'[145]. For instance, after fighting in the first world conflict, Céline developed an intense feeling of hatred towards war and an existential angst which often tended towards pessimism and misanthropy, in addition to an irremediable sense of anguish regarding the vulnerable and miserable nature of human existence.

In 1916, Céline participated in an expedition to the French-administered Cameroon as an employee of the Forestry Company of Sangha-Oubangui — during this assignment, his duties involved directing a pharmacy for the local inhabitants and supervising a cocoa plantation. A few months later Céline was forced to return to France because he contracted malaria. However, the experience in colonial Africa proved crucial for two main reasons: it laid the cornerstone for Céline's distaste for colonialism, while increasing his interest for the field of medicine, that will subsequently encourage him to study in order to become a doctor. After his experiences in the colonies, Céline enrolled in the Medical Faculty of the University of Rennes and he later transferred to the University of Paris, where he concluded his studies in May 1924.

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144 The injuries that Céline sustained on the battlefield left him invalid for 75 per cent.

145 Vitoux, *Céline: a Biography*, p. 102.

The following month, Céline joined the Health Department of the League of Nations in Geneva, where he worked as a health officer — this job gave him the opportunity of travelling to the United States, Canada and Cuba. After three years, Céline returned to Paris, where he established a small medical practice in the working-class suburb of Clichy. The practice was however not profitable, so that Céline continued working for public clinics and pharmaceutical companies in order to supplement his income. In this period, during his interminable sleepless nights, Céline started writing his first novel — *Journey to the End of the Night* was then completed by the end of 1931.

3.2 Journey to the End of the Night

Journey to the End of the Night is a gloomy and nihilistic observation of the frail and miserable nature of the human condition. The novel covers the story of Ferdinand Bardamu, restlessly wandering in the pursuit of meaning in a world that had become increasingly brutal and hostile. Bardamu's journey will take him to the trenches of World War I, through the meanders of colonial Africa, to the hellish nightmare of urbanised America and finally in the poor suburbs of Paris. Céline's revolutionary novel aimed at denouncing inequalities and conditions of social marginalisation through the brilliantly irreverent voice of the narrator, a young Parisian medical student who strives to survive in a world that was still recovering from the shocks and traumas of the first world conflict. The narrator's criticism of war, colonialism, industrialisation and the degraded conditions of the suburbs offers a bitterly insightful reflection on the modern condition. Moreover, the sense of revulsion for a society that thrives on hypocrisy and idiocy reverberates throughout the novel.

The title of the novel is excerpted from the first stanza of a song of the Swiss Guards dated to the late eighteenth century, which moreover serves as the first epigraph of the novel — it recites:

> Our life is a journey through winter and night,
> we look for our way in a sky without light.
> (*Song of the Swiss Guards*, 1793)[146]

Besides conveying the gloomy atmosphere of the novel from the paratext, the epigraph encompasses two fundamental nuclei of *Journey to the End of the Night*, hence the metaphor of the night and the irremediable restlessness of searching for the meaning of existence. The two epigraphs[147] serve as a bridge to help the reader penetrate into the dark and nihilistic universe that Céline created in the novel.

When *Journey to the End of the Night* was published in 1932, it immediately garnered the attention of literary critics by means of creating a clear dichotomy between opinions. On the one hand, the novel was praised for the anti-militarist, anti-colonialist and anarchist views it conveyed, on the other hand it was heavily criticised for the peculiar perspective of the narrator, denoted by an exceedingly pessimistic and cynical attitude towards humankind.

Beyond its content, the novel was particularly celebrated for its literary style and innovative language. For instance, Céline devised a unique literary language, built on the colloquial French spoken by the members of the working class — in order to transpose this cryptic popular language onto the written page, Céline incorporated in the

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[146] Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, p. 3.

[147] The novel features a second epigraph, written by Céline, which comprises a reflection on the concepts of travel and literature and the crucial role of imagination.

text a series of features of colloquial speech, namely argots[148], Parisian slang, working-class jargon, neologisms as well as specialised medical terminology.

In the text, popular language blends with brutal descriptions and crude images, a desecrating dark humour and figures of speech such as ellipses and hyperboles. In addition, the aforementioned feeling of restlessness that will persist with the protagonist throughout his journey is also mirrored in the literary form, which is characterised by an episodic structure, brief sentences and accumulations of thoughts.

Bardamu's reflections and accumulations of thoughts have often been associated to the modernist literary technique of stream of consciousness, although Céline was not particularly fond of this parallelism. Moreover, several critics have argued that the novel features a polyphonic narrative, hence the simultaneous presence of multiple voices within the same narrator.

Merlin Thomas asserted that the narrative voice is characterised by a clinical and detached tone, comprising the observations of the experienced doctor who contemplates the world through the gaze of Ferdinand Bardamu, his younger alter ego[149].

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[148] Historically conceived as a code or secret language, an argot is a ensemble of words, expressions and idioms employed by a social class or a particular group in order to communicate without being understood by other people — in the nineteenth century, argots were popular amongst ostracised social groups (namely criminals, prisoners and homosexuals) so as to elude law enforcement.

[149] Thomas, *Louis-Ferdinand Céline*, pp. 55-56.

3.2.1 The figure of Ferdinand Bardamu

Ferdinand Bardamu, narrator and protagonist of *Journey to the End of the Night*, is a classic example of unreliable narrator: from the beginning of the novel, Bardamu's first-person narration gives the impression that he is not completely sincere, thus planting in the reader the suspicion that he is concealing or omitting something — it seems that the narrator does not want the reader to trust him completely. Moreover, Bardamu's radical point of view that frequently comprises vulgar language and misanthropic declarations serves the purpose of distancing the reader. In this regard, it is conceivable that the narrator aims to construct an image of himself that is not necessarily positive, thereby engaging in aesthetic self-fashioning strategies in an effort to create a distance between him and the reader.

Bardamu belongs to a category of narrators that German critic Martin von Koppenfels defined 'infamous first-person narrators'[150], namely narrators who embody values and opinions that the reader cannot completely share, but that force them to depart from their vision and adopt a different perspective. Céline moulds the figure of Bardamu around a façade of unreliability, morally questionable views and instances of hatred towards humanity. Céline's biographer Patrick McCarthy defined hate as a fundamental component of the novel, which furthermore provides the characters with 'a concrete, if illusory, reason for their unhappiness'[151]. McCarthy moreover asserts:

> The characteristic trait of Célinian hatred is that it is gratuitous: one does not dislike because the object of dislike has harmed one; one hates because one has to.[152]

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[150] von Koppenfels, 'The Infamous "I": Notes on Littell and Céline', in A. Barjonet and L. Razinsky *Writing the Holocaust Today: Critical Perspectives on Jonathan Littell's The Kindly Ones*, p. 133.

[151] McCarthy, *Céline*, p. 62.

[152] Ibidem.

Célinian hatred is an urge, a necessity — it may be conceived as a mild antidote to the world's intolerable evil.

The reader's perception of the narrator of *Journey to the End of the Night* is undoubtedly complex — beyond his explicit hatred towards humankind, Bardamu is a doctor who chose to open a medical practice in a poor working-class suburb, thereby refusing to profit from his profession. The pronounced discrepancies between Bardamu's bitter words and his kind actions, substantially influences the reader's understanding of a complex character like Bardamu, who will consequently result even more arduous to judge. Although the reader may wish to distance themselves from Bardamu's opinions and values, they perceive that Bardamu's perspective of the world is profound and that there are reasons for his actions. Notwithstanding this, the narrative is purposely constructed in order to force the reader to continuously judge the characters, especially the narrator — for this reason, the novel unfolds as a moral conundrum.

3.2.2 The horror and futility of war

Journey to the End of the Night opens with a conversation between Ferdinand Bardamu, a young student of medicine, and Arthur Ganate, his friend from medical school. The conversation touches on various topics, including France, war, love and misery. Said conversation enables Céline to construct the fundamental socio-cultural premise of the novel. Bardamu and Ganate both belong to the working class and, in the first pages of the novel, Bardamu provides a reflection on their condition of social marginalisation:

> We were born loyal, and that's what killed us! Soldiers free of charge, heroes for everyone else, talking monkeys, tortured words, we are the minions of King Misery. He's our lord and master! When we misbehave, he tightens his grip… his fingers are around our neck, that makes it hard to talk, got to be careful if we want to eat… For nothing at all he'll choke you… It's not a life…[153]

In Bardamu's imaginary, misery is a king, ruling over his life and the lives of countless people who constantly strive to survive. Moreover, Bardamu self-defines as an anarchist, a man standing on his own, who refuses to associate with any political party because men like him have no place within the political spectrum. Against this background, it seems that choosing a political position is conceived as a luxury for the members of the working class, whose sole preoccupation consists in surviving and earning a living.

On this account, Bardamu employs the metaphor of the ship in an effort to illustrate the separation between the rich and the poor — while rich people enjoy the fresh air on the deck, poor people are located in the hold, relentlessly working for them.

> We're down in the hold, heaving and panting, stinking and sweating our balls off, and — meanwhile! — up on deck in the fresh air, what do you see? Our masters having a fine time with beautiful pink and perfumed women on their laps.[154]

Within this context, Bardamu introduces his theory of country n. 1 and country n. 2: the poor and the weak belong to country n. 2, which is shamelessly oppressed and exploited by country n. 1 — the clear dichotomy between the rich and the poor plays a pivotal

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153 Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, p. 8.

154 Ibidem, pp. 8-9.

role in the novel. Country n. 1 and country n. 2 represent two separated realms that are completely unable to comprehend each other due to their dissimilar values and divergent objectives in life.

From Bardamu's perspective, judging a person who belongs to a different social class is inappropriate, because one cannot make an objective judgement when lacking a comprehensive understanding of the circumstances — in other words, judging someone who has endured different life experiences is utterly unfair. Each class has its own norms and values which are not applicable to any other social stratum and, as a result, in any given situation, people belonging to different social classes will act according to their own set of rules.

By means of this socio-cultural premise, Céline essentially asks the reader to consider a parallel moral standard for the people who belong to the working class, thereby inviting them to accept that the actions and thoughts of the characters are conceived in a world that, from an ethical point of view, is separated from the norms and values of 'country n. 1'.

The conversation between Arthur and Bardamu moreover addresses the French nationalist rhetoric in the years that preceded the Great War. As previously mentioned, the first world conflict was preceded throughout Europe by an intense militarist propaganda, aimed at encouraging young men to enlist in the army and serve their country in the imminent conflict. Bardamu stated that he is an anarchist, thereby he holds no interest nor admiration for the French army or the aforesaid militarist rhetoric of glory and patriotism. After openly expressing his distaste towards France, the army and the war, a colonel marches past the café where the two men are conversing and

Bardamu voluntarily enlists in the army, providing no explanation to the reader for his paradoxical decision, except for a vague 'I'll just go see if that's the way it is!'[155].

As previously mentioned, Céline declared that his decision to join the army was conceived as an act of rebellion against his parents, however, the reasons behind Bardamu's inconsequential action are unclear. Actually, this seemingly nonsensical action acquires a profound social significance in the novel: Céline aims to demonstrate that people like Bardamu, people from 'country n. 2', cannot escape history — the war is coming and there is nothing that they could do in order to prevent it. When a war or any pivotal historical event calls, people like Bardamu are left no choice but to answer.

> The music had stopped. "Come to think of it," I said to myself, when I saw what was what, "this is no fun any more! I'd better try something else!" I was about to clear out. Too late! They'd quietly shut the gate behind us civilians. We were caught like rats.[156]

The concluding phrase stands as an exemplary portrayal of the asphyxiating feeling of entrapment, that in this passage is specifically inherent to the context of the first world conflict, and that persists throughout the novel as an irremediable condition that will follow Bardamu throughout his journey. The aforementioned passage concludes the first section of the novel, which is followed by an ellipsis of a couple of years. The second section of opens on the battlefield — the Great War broke out and Bardamu is directly involved in military operations.

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[155] Ibidem, p. 9.

[156] Ibidem, pp. 9-10.

> You can be a virgin in horror the same as in sex. How, when I left the Place Clichy, could I have imagined such horror? Who could have suspected, before getting really into the war, all the ingredients that go to make up the rotten, heroic, good-for-nothing soul of man? And there I was, caught up in a mass flight into collective murder, into the fiery furnace…[157]

Within this context emerges another fundamental theme of the novel, hence Bardamu's anti-militarism. Although Bardamu is aware of the historical and ideological reasons behind the conflict, on a human and existential level, he experiences some difficulties in understanding why the soldiers are mercilessly shooting at each other.

> Maybe our colonel knew why they were shooting, maybe the Germans knew, but I, so help me, hadn't the vaguest idea. As far back as I could search my memory, I hadn't done a thing to the Germans, I'd always treated them friendly and polite. I knew the Germans pretty well, I'd even gone to school in their country when I was little, near Hanover. I'd spoken their language.[158]

The descriptions of the scenes of war are extremely crude, drawn from Céline's own experience on the battlefield — the image of the mangled bodies and the rivers of blood project the reader into the harrowing reality of the conflict. Such a graphic portrayal of the massacre emphasises the idiocy of a war that, according to Bardamu, follows no ideal — 'This war, in fact, made no sense at all'[159]. Céline's purpose in the wartime sequence lies precisely in exposing the futility and the horror of the conflict.

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[157] Ibidem, p. 12.

[158] Ibidem, p. 10.

[159] Ibidem.

The war is essentially a fatal lie disguised by a façade of glory and heroism, a smoke screen concealing the interests of people who profit from the war, at the expense of people like Bardamu, people for whom escaping history is not an alternative. As a matter of fact, people from country n. 2 merely serve as pawns — although they were led to believe that their heroism and glory would not be forgotten and that sacrifice was necessary, in the economy of war, they are merely meat for slaughter. Deceived by a fit of enthusiasm and naïve idealism, Bardamu becomes a victim of this perverse mechanism that transforms human beings in raging beasts intent on survival, thus incurring in the risk of dying for a country that he never loved nor respected.

> The poetry of heroism holds an irresistible appeal for people who aren't involved in a war, especially when they're making piles of money out of one. It's only natural.[160]

During a nocturnal mission, Bardamu meets Léon Robinson, a French army reservist who, exhausted to fight, confesses his plans to surrender to the Germans, in an attempt to seek refuge from the war in the relative safety of the prisoner war camp. The two men thus proceed to a French town, only to discover that there are no Germans to whom surrender. Disappointed, they part ways. After this first encounter on the battlefield, the lives of Bardamu and Robinson will intersect several times.

Similarly to Céline's experience during the first world conflict, Bardamu's military deployment is relatively brief, because he remains severely wounded in action. The wartime sequence is followed by another ellipsis, which furthermore separates the space of the battlefield from the streets of an extremely patriotic Paris. For instance, at the beginning of section three, the war is still in progress and Bardamu is on convalescent

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[160] Ibidem, p. 67.

leave in Paris. During his recovery, Bardamu meets Lola, an American volunteer nurse with whom he initiates an intimate relationship.

Bardamu's relationship with Lola is purely physical, because he declared to have abandoned his faith in love after the war: 'You can't trust the heart, not at all. I'd learnt that in the war'[161]. It is crucial to highlight that even before the war, Bardamu did not hold a particularly favourable opinion of love, that he defined as 'the infinite placed within the reach of poodles'[162] in his conversation with Ganate — the experience of the war undoubtedly intensified his bleak disposition.

Furthermore, this attitude does not pertain exclusively to love, but it extends to any positive emotion — for instance, after experiencing the carnage of the Great War, Bardamu realises that 'Men are the thing to be afraid of, always, men and nothing else'[163], thereby completely losing any faith in humanity. Fighting in the war irreversibly exacerbated Bardamu's cynical and misanthropic vision of life. By contrast, Lola is naïvely optimistic[164], enthusiastic, full of life — Bardamu describes her as follows:

> Obviously Lola was bursting with happiness and optimism, like all people on the good side of life, the ones with privilege, health, security, who still have a long time to live.[165]

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161 Ibidem, p. 43.

162 Ibidem, p. 8.

163 Ibidem, p. 13.

164 The juxtaposition between the American optimistic attitude and the European disenchanted and cynical perspective is a literary cliché.

165 Ibidem, p. 44.

Lola was born on the good side of life: she is healthy, beautiful and she is free to return to the United States whenever she desires. Bardamu, on the other hand, was born on the wrong side of life — from the beginning of his life he has endured misery, hindrance and instability. Moreover, he experienced the dark reality of war, the mangled corpses, the constant feeling of terror, the consuming awareness that any moment may be the last. Although Bardamu and Lola have diametrically antithetical opinions, perspectives and attitudes towards life, Bardamu never contradicts her for fear of jeopardising their affair.

> To Lola's way of thinking, France was some sort of chivalric being, not very clearly defined in space or time, but at the moment dangerously wounded and for that very reason very exciting. When anybody mentioned France to me, I instantly thought of my guts, so I wasn't nearly so open to patriotic ardour.[166]

A similar concept is illustrated through a brilliant anecdote that Céline employs in order to delineate the substantial difference between Bardamu and Lola: during her first month in Paris, Lola develops a fondness for fritters, resulting in a slight increase in weight that she nevertheless perceives as a catastrophic event. In the narration of this episode, Bardamu provides a desecrating commentary in which he compares Lola's fear of the fritters to his own fear of artillery fire: 'Soon she was as afraid of fritters as I was of shellfire'[167].

One afternoon, during a walk in a desolate carnival with Lola, Bardamu starts exhibiting signs of psychological distress. After observing the scene of a wedding composed of tin

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[166] Ibidem, p. 43.

[167] Ibidem.

figures which functioned as targets at the abandoned shooting gallery, Bardamu notices the ‘little white dots’, hence the indentations left by the bullets on the little targets. Bardamu’s description of the tin wedding abruptly turns into his own experience at the front:

> In the last row behind the wedding, another row was daubed in, the town hall with its flag. People must have shot at the town hall, too, when the gallery was working […] and they even shot at the little tin flag. And they’d shot at the regiment marching on an incline nearby, like mine on the Place Clichy, […] People had shot at those things for all they were worth, and now they were shooting at me, yesterday and tomorrow[168].

Conceivably, the image of the tin wedding served as a trigger, hence an external element that forced Bardamu into an unconscious recollection of the traumatic event. Although the scene that Bardamu observes at the shooting gallery seems totally unrelated to the originating accident, it indirectly triggered a series of memories and perceptions that, in Bardamu’s mind, are associated to the battlefield — hence the space of the traumatic experience. In Bardamu’s tormented psyche, the tin wedding represents a frozen miniature world that exhibits the signs of human brutality.

This post-traumatic manifestation culminates in an involuntary enunciation, conceivably an intrusion: ‘“They’re shooting at me, too, Lola!” I cried. It slipped out of me’[169]. In this instance, Bardamu has the perception of re-living the traumatic past as a contemporary experience — as previously mentioned, intrusive manifestations are characterised by the disruption of the continuity of time. After leaving the shooting gallery, Bardamu’s thoughts are still fixated upon the tin wedding, which induces his mind in a state of increasing agitation.

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[168] Ibidem, p. 49.

[169] Ibidem.

> She held my by the hand, hers was tiny, but I couldn't think of anything but the tin wedding at the shooting gallery up there, which we had left behind us in the shadow of the trees. I even forgot to kiss Lola, something had come over me, I felt very funny. I think it was then that my head became so agitated, with all the ideas going around in it.

Bardamu later suffers a nervous breakdown whilst he is at dinner with Lola — upon their arrival at the restaurant, he develops the paranoid delusion that the Germans are on the verge of shooting the people who are dining there. Bardamu's mind was severely damaged by the horrors of war and, as a consequence, he encounters significant difficulties in re-adjusting to civilian life.

In this episode, Bardamu exhibits a series of fundamental features of post-traumatic affect, namely intrusive symptoms, paranoid thoughts and the incapability of discerning past from present. After a period of latency, the lingering cost of the battlefield starts to exert its control over the psyche through involuntary recollections of the traumatic occurrence, thereby demonstrating that the shadow of war has crept into Bardamu's mind.

> We'd hardly sat down when the place struck me as monstrous. I got the idea that these people sitting in rows around us were waiting for bullets to be fired at them from all sides while they where eating. "Get out!" I warned them. "Beat it! They're going to shoot! They're going to kill you! The whole lot of you!"[170]

[170] Ibidem, p. 50.

In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of Bardamu's psychological status in this precise moment of the story, it is crucial to take into consideration that, when the nervous breakdown occurs, Bardamu is still unaware of the outcome of his own future — for instance, he may be recalled to active duty. As a consequence, in addition to the lingering psychological effects of war, Bardamu is consumed by the fear that the nightmare might not be over. After his nervous breakdown, Bardamu is hospitalised and, during a conversation with Lola, he confesses his affliction:

> "Is it true that you've gone mad Ferdinand?" she asked me one Thursday.
> "It's true!" I admitted.
> "But they'll treat you here?"
> "There's no treatment for fear, Lola."[171]

This passage contains a moment of disarming sincerity and vulnerability. Bardamu seems to be aware of the cause of his fragile psychological stability — he is afflicted by a condition that defies treatment, namely an irremediable fear. In his conversation with Lola, Bardamu moreover declares that he rejects the war, thus advocating against the prevalent rhetoric of patriotism and glory that trapped him in the horrific reality of the trenches.

In addition, Bardamu admits to Lola the reason at the basis of his fear: 'I don't want to die'[172]. His point of view is clear and persuasive: a person belonging to the working class like him does not own anything, thereby he is afraid of losing the only thing he has — his life. After this disclosure, Lola calls Bardamu a coward and leaves him. Bardamu opens the following sequence of the novel by declaring that he was pronounced psychologically unfit for military service.

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[171] Ibidem, p. 54.

[172] Ibidem.

> The army finally dropped me. I'd saved my guts, but my brains were scrambled for good. Undeniably. "Beat it!…" they said. "You're no good for anything any more!…"[173]

Although he feels relieved to have eluded the tug of war, Bardamu affirms that his experience on the battlefield left him with serious psychological consequences. Despite the nightmare being over, the ghost of war will continue to haunt Bardamu's mind for the rest of his life.

3.2.3 The true nature of colonialism

After being officially dismissed from the army, Bardamu leaves for the French African colonies with a private company. In that period, people who were considered unfit for military service or those who could not be of any use in their country were sent to work in the colonies — this process was rather frequent during the era of colonialism. However, in Bardamu's case, the decision to leave France may also be read as an attempt to depart from the space of the trauma — Bardamu himself affirms 'Personally I just wanted to get away'[174].

Bardamu leaves for this new adventure with great expectations about his work in Africa because he heard that it is possible to pursue a career in the colonies. During his journey, Bardamu's expectations with respect to the African landscape reflect the stereotypical imaginary of the coloniser, envisioning the wilderness, the dark,

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[173] Ibidem, p. 92.

[174] Ibidem.

impenetrable forests, the fetid swamps[175]. Nevertheless, after spending some time in Africa, Bardamu's perspective radically changes. For instance, Bardamu's conception of the African colonies shifts from exoticism to criticism the moment he discovers the reality of the colonial enterprise.

> In this colony of Bambola-Bragamance the Governor reigned triumphant over everybody. His soldiers and civil servants hardly dared breathe when he deigned to let his eyes fall on them. Far below these notables, the resident traders seemed to thieve and thrive more easily than in Europe. Not one coconut, not one peanut in the entire colony evaded their brigandage.[176]

As soon as Bardamu arrives in the imaginary colony of Bambola-Bragamance, he begins to grasp the reality of colonialism — like war, it is merely a façade concealing unspeakable atrocities and economic interests at the expenses of the native population. The colonies are in a state of degradation and abandonment, the natives and the territories are unabashedly exploited by the corruption and the greed of the French officers, who bring forth their brigandage undisturbed[177]. While reflecting on the condition of oppression and mistreatment of the native population of the colonies, Bardamu compares them to the members of the working class in France:

> Those blacks stink of their misery, their interminable vanities and their repugnant resignation; actually, they're just like our poor people, except they have more children, less dirty washing and less red wine.[178]

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175 Ibidem, p. 93.

176 Ibidem, p. 104.

177 This section of *Journey to the End of the Night* contains a direct, fierce criticism of colonialism.

178 Ibidem, p. 119.

The aforementioned reflection lacks any consideration inherent to cultural specificity or the criminal enterprise of colonialism, thus demonstrating that Bardamu is unable to fully comprehend the condition of the colonised population, due to his tendency to project his own reality on the lives and struggles of other people. For instance, Bardamu transforms the world through the filter of his gaze, which often results in a distorted and flawed conception of the reality around him.

As a case in point, Bardamu's understanding of the colonial phenomenon is significantly limited to his perception — his interest in relation to the colonised population is confined to the fact that they are poor and oppressed. Bardamu is therefore unable to empathise with the natives — he may feel sympathy, perhaps compassion, but still, his French-centric gaze prevents him from establishing a true empathetical connection with these people.

In this remote place, Bardamu meets Alcide, a fellow officer who volunteered for another stint in the colonies, earning a small wage in an effort to support his niece after the death of her parents. More precisely, Alcide is sacrificing his whole life in order to grant his orphaned niece an education and a future. Bardamu is deeply impressed by this instance of selfless generosity, even though he deems it foolish — still, this is the first time in the novel in which Bardamu feels admiration for an act of human kindness. Although until this moment Bardamu seemed almost incapable of feeling empathy or compassion for another human being, these rare instances of kindness reveal his tendency to search for the meaning of suffering.

For instance, the hopeless and at times even tortured search for meaning is a crucial trait of Bardamu's character — in this specific case, Bardamu is wondering about the

meaning of generosity and altruism in a world that seems to be eternally devoid of innocence.

> With hardly a thought of what he was doing, he had consented to years of torture, to the crushing of his life in this torrid monotony for the sake of a little girl to whom he was vaguely related. Motivated by nothing but his good heart, he had set no conditions and asked nothing in return.[179]

Nevertheless, in *Journey to the End of the Night*, feelings and characters are portrayed with depth and complexity, blurring the distinction between good and evil, which are often inextricably intertwined. As a result, feelings and characters in this novel are never solely positive or negative, but rather nuanced in shades of human experience. For this reason, potentially positive characters are tainted by a negative aspect — this is the case of Alcide. Although Alcide's selflessness and generosity towards his niece are undeniable, in order to succeed in his endeavour, he shamelessly exploits the natives. Bardamu is profoundly impressed, perhaps even moved, by Alcide's good heart, nevertheless, he neglects an important part of the story.

After a period in the colonies, Bardamu is forced to return to France due to ill-health and, during his journey, he experiences an improbable adventure: he accidentally passes through an African Spanish colony, where he is made captive by the Spaniards. With the aid of Spanish slave traders, Bardamu is eventually sold as a galley slave to a ship bound to New York — thereby fulfilling Bardamu's dream of travelling to the United States.

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[179] Ibidem, pp. 134-135.

The travel sequence that narrates Bardamu's journey from the African colonies to the United States is depicted through a sort of feverish dream, which moreover serves as the exemplification of Céline's pursuit of realism — while the descriptions of the events are hyper-realistic, the transitions between the episodes are utterly implausible, as in the abovementioned instance.

3.2.4 The physical horror of the factory

The United States hold a particular significance for Bardamu, who envisions this nation as a sort of modern Promise Land. Bardamu's ideal with respect the United States was already evident during his affair with Lola — on several occasions, Bardamu depicted America as a land of prosperity and opportunities where he intended to 'take a trip, or call it a pilgrimage'[180] sooner or later. Despite this favourable premise, Bardamu will be profoundly disappointed by his experience in the New World.

From his first glance at the skyline of New York, Bardamu is fascinated by the verticality, solidity and stability of this glittering New World that he describes through subtle notes of eroticism. Bardamu is captivated by the opulence that he encounters in 'the banking heart and centre of the present-day world'[181], hence Manhattan.

In this 'priceless district', Bardamu's attention is captured by a hole in the pavement, which resembles the *Métro* of Paris — in reality, he noticed the underground public toilets, located in the middle of the new financial centre of the world. The description of

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[180] Ibidem, p. 45.

[181] Ibidem, p. 159.

Bardamu's descent into the public toilets resembles a *katabasis*[182], an epic journey to the underworld. Nevertheless, Bardamu is not a hero like Ulysses, Orpheus or Hercules and he is not entering the land of the dead — he is literally just going to the public toilets. Still, the portrayal of the events occurring underneath the priceless district is characterised by an epic, grandiose atmosphere.

Céline's purpose in this sequence consists in degrading the opulence of the gold district by means of a parodic katabasis, thus illustrating that everything that glimmers is composed by two sides which are often dissimilar. Manhattan is golden, but it merely gleams on the surface, because it conceals something entirely different underneath. The abovementioned portrayal of the reality of Manhattan serves as a synecdoche for the entire American society which, according to Céline, exhibits a sharp contrast between what is displayed on the surface and what is hidden underneath.

The theme of money seems to assume an increasingly central role in the American portion of the novel — as a case in point, Bardamu is homeless because he cannot afford a place to live in New York. Poor, homeless and unemployed, Bardamu feels like an invisible man within the American society. Aimlessly walking around the streets of Manhattan, Bardamu observes the furnished rooms from outside and wonders 'Is the poor man's aesthetic torment to have no end?'[183], thus addressing the feeling of frustration that derives from the condition of being poor — Bardamu is tormented by the beauty and refinement that surround him, exemplification of a world that will always be inaccessible to a man like him. Disappointed and frustrated by his experience in New York, Bardamu moves to Detroit in order to find a job.

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182 *Katabasis* means 'descent' in ancient Greek — this term is often used in mythology and literature to indicate the journey of a living person to the land of the dead. A katabasis is usually succeeded by an *anabasis*, hence an ascent.

183 Ibidem, p. 164.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the city of Detroit was one of the most important industrial hubs in the United States, especially as far as automotive production[184] is concerned. Within the framework of the novel, Detroit is configured as the embodiment of Western capitalism, which furthermore enables Céline to provide a harsh critique of the conditions of factory workers, who are regularly subjected to oppression, brutality and alienation. The inhumanity of the industrial environment is evident from Bardamu's first impression of the factory:

> I saw some big squat buildings all of glass, enormous dollhouses, inside which you could see men moving, but hardly moving, as if they were struggling against something impossible. […] And then all around me and above me as far as the sky, the heavy, composite, muffled roar of torrents of machines, hard, wheels obstinately turning, grinding, groaning, always on the point of breaking down but never breaking down.[185]

After observing the men working at Ford Motor Company from outside, Bardamu concludes that 'Actually, it was worse than everywhere else'[186]. Although Bardamu grew up in the poor suburbs of Paris and experienced the horrific reality of war and the colonies, he asserts that the working environment of a factory is worse than anywhere else. As a member of the working class, Bardamu is particularly sensitive towards the climate of alienation and subjugation that factory workers must tolerate on a daily basis.

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184 At the beginning of the twentieth century, the headquarters of notorious automobile producers such as Ford Motor Company, General Motors and Cadillac Motor Car Division were located in Detroit — for this reason, Detroit is also known as the Motor City.

185 Ibidem, p. 184.

186 Ibidem.

Factory workers are not required to think, their sole purpose lies in repeatedly performing small tasks for hours, for days, for the rest of their lives. They are moreover alienated from what they produce, because it does not belong to them — it belongs to the factory. In this respect, when Bardamu mentions his studies to the doctor who conduces the physical examinations at Ford, the latter answers:

> You're not here to think, you're here to make the movements you're told to. We don't need imaginative types in our factory. What we need is chimpanzees… Let me give you a piece of advice. Never mention your intelligence again![187]

Industrialised America is portrayed as a dehumanising machine that turns thinking and feeling humans into well-trained chimpanzees. After being employed in the assembly line at Ford, Bardamu directly experiences 'the physical horror of the factory'[188] — thus far in the novel, Céline never employed such strong and direct words. Although the critiques against war and colonialism are fierce and explicit, in the portrayal of the dehumanising reality of the factory, Céline's discourse adopts a blunter and harsher tone, as though he were describing the most dreadful place on earth — for instance, a sort of infernal circle.

> You give in to noise as you give in to war. At the machines you let yourself go with the two-three ideas that are wobbling about at the top of your head. And that's the end. […] All of a sudden you've become disgustingly old. All outside life must be done away with, made into steel, into something useful. We didn't love it enough the way it was, that's why.[189]

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187 Ibidem, p. 185.

188 Ibidem, p. 187-188.

189 Ibidem, p. 186.

Céline's depiction of the working environment in the factory resembles some sort of hell — the description of the overpowering noise and the intense smell of oil elicits the senses of the reader, moreover triggering a sensation of physical discomfort that allows them to grasp the unsettling conditions experienced by the factory workers.

At the end of his interminable shifts, Bardamu is in desperate need for an antidote to the daily dose of dehumanisation that he endures in the factory. This pursuit for consolation takes Bardamu to a brothel, where he meets Molly, a prostitute with whom he falls in love. As previously stated, in *Journey to the End of the Night*, positive feelings and characters are often tainted by a negative aspect — an exemplary case is represented by Alcide, the selfless officer that sacrificed his life in order to provide for his niece, but that was however shamelessly exploiting the colonised population in the process. Within this framework, Molly is the only exception — she is the only truly positive character of the novel that moreover exemplifies the rarity of disinterested human kindness. Molly reciprocates Bardamu's feelings and is genuinely concerned about his well-being, so that she asks him to quit his job at the factory.

> Molly pleaded: "Don't go back to Ford's! Get yourself a little job in an office… as a translator, for instance… That's the thing for you… You like books…" Her advice was kindly given, she wanted me to be happy. For the first time somebody was taking an interest in me, looking at me from the inside so to speak, taking my egoism into account, putting herself in my place, not judging me from her point of view like everyone else.[190]

[190] Ibidem, p. 189.

For the first time in his life, Bardamu has encountered somebody who is truly interested in him, somebody who accepts him and cares for him without an ulterior motive. Nevertheless, Bardamu feels the urge of escaping from this situation, because he believes that it is too late for him to alter the course of his life and thus attain genuine happiness.

> If only I had met Molly sooner, when it was still possible to choose one road rather than another! Before that bitch Musyne and that little turd Lola crimped my enthusiasm! But it was too late to start being young again. I didn't believe in it any more! We grow old so quickly and, what's more, irremediably. You can tell by the way you start loving your misery in spite of yourself.[191]

Although this observation pertains to the issue of ageing, it is crucial to remark that at this point in the novel Bardamu is barely thirty years old. Nonetheless, the horrors of his past weigh heavy on Bardamu, causing him to feel old, devoid of enthusiasm and out of time.

Amongst the dysfunctional behaviours that Bardamu adopts throughout the novel, his decision to leave Molly is the most vivid example of his masochistic tendencies. Bardamu's decision to leave the only woman whom he truly loved demonstrates his instinct to escape from any positive situation as well as his incurable restlessness. Within this context, restlessness is conceived as a condition of existential inquietude that dominates Bardamu's life and prevents him from embracing instances of happiness and stability — it is a destiny, or rather a condemnation. Bardamu is a nomad, condemned to aimlessly wander in search for something that, perhaps, he will never find.

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[191] Ibidem.

> I had started out as the restless type. Little by little, without realising it, you begin to take your role and fate seriously, and before you know it, it's too late to change. You're a hundred per cent restless, and it's set that way for good.[192]

Notwithstanding this, in the subsequent passage, Bardamu expresses regret for his decision, thus stating: 'To leave her I certainly had to be mad, and in a cold, disgusting way'[193]. It is not clear whether Bardamu is making this consideration in retrospect, or if he was already aware of the disastrous consequences of his action at the time of his decision to leave Molly, Still, Bardamu recognises that his choice to leave Molly meant depriving himself of the only positive aspect of his life — perhaps his sole opportunity for genuine happiness.

It is conceivable that Bardamu tends to sabotage his own happiness because he believes that he does not deserve it. In this respect, later in the novel, Bardamu will address the constant feeling of guilt that accompanied him throughout his life, a tendency that he recognised also in his mother, and that perhaps is the reason behind his mania to escape and his inclination towards self-sabotage:

> Like my mother, I could never feel entirely innocent of any horrible thing that happened.[194]

Self-destructive behaviour and lingering sense of guilt are typical characteristics of trauma survivors. According to the clinical classification of post-traumatic stress disorder, trauma victims may develop a distorted perception regarding themselves of the

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[192] Ibidem.

[193] Ibidem, p. 195.

[194] Ibidem, p. 228.

people around them, which often culminates in persistent feelings of guilt, shame or unmotivated anger. Moreover, trauma victims are inclined to adopt self-destructive habits either as a punishment or as a method to avoid confrontation with trauma-related feelings.

3.2.5 Darkness in the city of light

The American section of the novel is followed by an ellipsis of five years circa. After leaving the United States, Bardamu returns to France and resumes his medical studies. After completing his studies, Bardamu establishes a medical practice in the degraded fictional suburb of La Garenne-Rancy, amongst the members of the working class, who are often too poor to pay him — Bardamu could have chosen to open his medical practice in any area of Paris, yet he decided to remain faithful to the working class, thus refusing to profit from his profession. Although admirable, this decision takes the form of self-margination.

From this point forward, the overall atmosphere of the novel becomes increasingly bleaker and darker. Analogously, darkness descends on the character of Bardamu, who is no longer the indignant and idealistic character of the first sections of the novel, but rather seems resigned and disillusioned — as his hopes and expectations regarding the war, the colonies and the United States were profoundly deluded, he returned to the Parisian suburbs, the exact point where he first embarked upon his aimless pilgrimage in search for meaning.

The brutal description of the inhabitants of Rancy confers an authentic social dimension to the novel, which, from this point forward, comprises a critique of society that aims to

expose the state of abandonment of the Parisian suburbs. Similarly to Manhattan, the golden district that only glitters on the surface, *la ville lumière*[195] effectively conceals its darkest meanders, hence its degraded suburbs inhabited by masses of poor people. In this regard, Bardamu affirms that

> The city does a good job of hiding its crowds of dirty feet in those long electric sewers. […] You'd better stay indoors when they emerge. Just one Sunday watching their attempts to amuse themselves will permanently spoil your taste for pleasure. Around the Métro entrance, near the bastions, you catch the endemic, stagnant smell of long-drawn-out wars, of spoilt, half-burnt villages, aborted revolutions and bankrupt businesses.[196]

The sense of desolation that pervades Rancy should not be merely considered in economical terms, but also from a moral perspective. In his medical practice, Bardamu mainly deals with hopeless cases, secret abortions and patients that the others doctors refuse to treat. The moral misery of the inhabitants of Rancy is moreover exemplified by the episode of the young woman who suffers the potentially fatal complications of an abortion, after having endured said procedure multiple times. The girl's mother prioritises the family's honour over her daughter's life — for instance, the family refuses to take the young woman to a hospital, thus avoiding a scandal, but leaving her to slowly bleed to death.

During his occupation as a working-class doctor, Bardamu does not want to impose on poor people because he believes that accepting even the smallest amount of money from somebody who cannot afford to spend it is a shameful act — this choice implies a strong ethical claim. Although throughout the novel Bardamu has often spoken against morality, this action reveals a solid social conscience.

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[195] Lit. transl. 'the city of light'.

[196] Ibidem, p. 198.

> I was too easy with everybody, I knew that. Nobody paid me. I treated them all free of charge, mostly out of curiosity. That's a mistake. People avenge themselves for the favours done them. […] I let things ride. I let them lie to me. I gave them what they wanted.[197]

Although Bardamu's humanitarianism is evident in the compassionate treatment of his patients, his description of the people living in the suburbs is ambivalent — in these excerpts Bardamu illustrates his feelings towards his patients, which fluctuate between revulsion and compassion[198].

> My patients had me in their clutches. Every day they snivelled more, they had me at their mercy. And while they were at it they showed me all the ugliness they kept hidden behind the doors of their souls and exhibited to no one but me. The fee for witnessing such horrors can never be high enough. They slither through your fingers like slimy snakes.[199]

After this passage, where Bardamu defined his patients as 'slimy snakes' who took advantage of him, the narration abruptly delves into direct speech, in an alleged outburst of rage, and then the conversation with Bébert[200] and his aunt carries on as though nothing occurred, leaving the reader both intrigued and confused.

> "Listen, you scum! Let me do you favours for a few years more. Don't kill me yet. Looking so servile and defenceless; I'll tell the whole story. You'll fade away like the oozing caterpillars in Africa that came into my shack to shit… I'll make you into subtler cowards and skunks than you are, and maybe it'll kill you in the end."[201]

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197 Ibidem, pp. 201-202.

198 Yet another instance in which positive and negative feelings are inextricably interlaced.

199 Ibidem.

200 Bébert is a young patient of Bardamu, affected by typhoid.

201 Ibidem, p. 202.

While reading this passage, several questions come to mind — is Bardamu addressing his patients? Is he addressing the reader or an imaginary audience? Why is he not telling the entire story? What is he concealing?

Whether it comprises an intrusive thought or an outburst of rage, this excerpt is configured as a breach in the mimetic regime of the novel which serves the function of breaking the illusion of the narration. This passage moreover exemplifies the aforementioned narrative polyphony, for it may be interpreted as another voice which emerges within Bardamu's narration.

Bardamu leaves Rancy and finds employment in a mental asylum on the outskirts of Paris directed by Doctor Baryton, an esteemed alienist. Bardamu is undeniably drawn to unhappiness, as evidenced by his keen interest in 'the lunatics', hence the patients of the asylum. Similarly to his feelings towards the natives of the colonies or the factory workers in Detroit, Bardamu's fascination for the patients of the asylum stems from their status as outcasts. After contemplating the patients' perspective of the world, Bardamu comes to the conclusion that the only genuine expressions of human nature are war and insanity — two realities that he experienced directly:

> When I think now of all the lunatics I knew at Baryton's, I can't help suspecting that the only true manifestations of our innermost being are war and insanity, those two absolute nightmares.[202]

[202] Ibidem, p. 337.

3.2.6 Approaching the end of the night: the finale of the novel

In the final sections of the novel, Bardamu's considerations are exceedingly bitter and, as a consequence, the general atmosphere of the novel descends into its most profound darkness. Bardamu's obsessive pursuit for meaning is even more tormented — his thoughts and reflections are permeated with a degree of desperation and cynicism that seems excessive even for a character like Bardamu.

> That horrible little regret is all we have left of life, we've vomited up the rest along the way, with a good deal of effort and misery. We're nothing now but an old lamp-post with memories on a street where hardly anyone passes any more.[203]

Bardamu's bleak observations mainly centre upon surviving the psychological impact of time's unrelenting passage that inexorably leads towards death with the awareness that 'the world leaves us long before we leave it for good'[204]. At this point of his story, Bardamu feels hollow, drained, worn out by life — like an old lamp-post on a remote, desolate street. Throughout his life, Bardamu has experienced several traumatic events which have truly hurt him, and perhaps he is no longer able to heal.

> Now and then the sound of steps rose up to me and the echo came in louder and louder, droning, then dying away… Silence. I looked out again to see if anything was happening across the way. Nothing was happening except inside me, still asking myself the same questions. I was so tired from walking and finding nothing that I finally fell asleep in my coffin, my private night.[205]

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[203] Ibidem, p. 371.

[204] Ibidem.

[205] Ibidem, p. 238.

Bardamu perceives his life as a quest in the night that ultimately culminates in death[206]. Amidst his unanswered questions and the chaos that torments his mind, there is only darkness — an inescapable presence that he deeply feels within himself. After spending his entire life looking for a meaning to existence, a meaning that he was never able to find, Bardamu is tired of aimlessly wandering and thus seeks solace in his own private night. The abovementioned reflection takes the form of an epiphany, moreover inaugurating a series of profound and illuminating moments.

The epiphany is a defining characteristic of Modernist novels, which consists in a genuine moment of sudden revelation and clarity — prominent authors such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust largely employed epiphanies in their works. Several modernist authors believed that it was possible to access the continuum of existence, moreover gaining insight into something beyond the perceivable world and ultimately grasping deeper meaning. In Sartre's *Nausea*, the protagonist Antoine Roquentin experiences negative epiphanies, which he defines 'nausea'[207], representing the dreadful feeling of being alive — these instances bear a strong resemblance to Bardamu's moments of bleak clarity in the concluding sections of the novel.

In the finale of the novel, Robinson returns to Paris with his partner Madelon, and after a night out with Bardamu and his lover Sophie, they share a taxi back to the asylum. During the taxi ride, Robinson issues a statement that radically changes the course of the night — he declares that love disgusts him.

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[206] Similarly to the song of the Swiss Guards that Céline employed as the first epigraph of the novel, Bardamu's existence is dominated by the condition of looking for a way in a sky without light.

[207] Sartre, *Nausea*.

> What a stupid thing to get steamed up about!… Why do you have to make love, considering all the things that are happening?… All the things we see around us!… Or are you blind?… More likely you just don't give a damn! You wallow sentiment when you're a worse brute than anybody… You want to eat rotten meat?… With love sauce?…[208]

Robinson's declaration undoubtedly comprises an extreme point of view: rejecting love, perhaps the only element that imbues life with purpose means, in a certain sense, rejecting life itself. Although controversial, Robinson's position is understandable — for a person like him, somebody who has struggled his whole life to survive, love is not a priority. It is conceivable that Robinson's excessive reaction is intended as a form of rebellion against the bourgeoise ideal of love that Madelon conveys — a sugar-coated conception of feelings which stands in stark contrast with the values of a quintessential proletarian like Robinson. Against this background, love may be conceived as a luxury for the people belonging to 'country n. 2'.

Another concept that may be found at the core of Robinson's argument is the inability to love. Perhaps Robinson is no longer able to love and he is refusing to be loved because of the atrocities he has faced and suffered throughout his life, which have slowly drained him until he was utterly incapable of experiencing positive feelings and emotions — similarly to the reason behind Bardamu's decision to part ways with Molly, Robinson rejects any positive emotion because he deems himself unworthy.

Although its premises are deeply flawed, Robinson's argument is powerful and almost convincing: it essentially emphasises the stupidity of talking about love, or even believing in love, considering all the terrible events that were occurring in the world at the time. Is it possible to talk about love in a world that has become completely

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[208] Ibidem, p. 400.

indifferent to human suffering? Is it possible to love in a world dominated by hypocrisy, brutality and malice? How is it possible to love when the world is a putrid infection?

Although understandable, this radical position costs Robinson his life because his partner Madelon, irritated by his argument, shoots him and flees. Robinson dies, leaving Bardamu alone with his bitter reflections on life and death. The last passage of the novel reads:

> Far in the distance the tugboat whistled; its call passed the bridge, one more arch, then another, the lock, another bridge, farther and farther […]. It was summoning all the barges on the river, every last one, and the whole city and the sky and the countryside, and ourselves, to carry us all away, the Seine too — and that would be the end of us.[209]

Bardamu observes a tugboat navigating in the Seine which, in his perception, is summoning and drawing away the other boats on the river, the whole city, the sky, the entire world. And this is the end — perhaps silence and darkness are swallowing everything, perhaps death is descending upon the earth, perhaps Bardamu is surrendering his story to the night. However, determining whether this scene is a figment of Bardamu's imagination or a metaphor depicting the end of the night is challenging for a variety of reasons, primarily due to the narrator's unreliability.

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[209] Ibidem, p. 409.

3.3 Bardamu's unreliability: a literary symptom of trauma

Ferdinand Bardamu is a paradigmatic example of unreliable narrator — as stated in the previous chapter, unreliability is a fundamental characteristic of trauma narratives. Throughout the novel Bardamu provides several declarations that suggest his unreliability as a narrator. As a case in point, towards the end of the novel he asserts: 'I therefore conclude, that we are never suspicious enough of words'[210] — these comments are purposely employed in an attempt to arouse suspicion in the reader that the narrator is not completely sincere.

In another passage, Bardamu speaks against the truth by way of comparing it to death, an assertion that inevitably undermines the relationship of trust that is usually established between the narrator and the reader — a relationship that, however, Céline sought to undermine from the beginning of the novel, perhaps from the paratext.

> The truth is an endless death agony. The truth is death. You have to choose: death or lies. I've never been able to kill myself.[211]

In the abovementioned excerpt, Bardamu indirectly admits that he is a liar — he claims to be more interested in falsehood than in the truth, perhaps because the truth is too painful. Conceivably, there is something that Bardamu is not disclosing to the reader, but that perhaps is a crucial element of his life — the key to understanding his paradoxical and bleak vision of humanity.

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[210] Ibidem, p. 395.

[211] Ibidem, p. 166.

Moreover, before the aforementioned outburst of rage, Bardamu declares: 'I'll tell you the whole story some day if I live long enough'[212]. This phrase comprises a clear admission that Bardamu is not completely sincere with the reader and that there is a part of the story that he is deliberately omitting.

The reader is often doubtful that the events that Bardamu describes truly occur. In addition to his frequent admissions of unreliability, there are several points in the novel where the reader perceives that Bardamu is describing a figment of his imagination, fabricated by a feverish dream or perhaps a sort of hallucinatory delirium. As far as the concept of delirium is concerned, Frédéric Vitoux argued that

> Delirium is the second state of existence that distances dull, prosaic reality, and an excess of which makes the writer (like his hero) incomparably clear-sighted in the very depths of his misery, enabling him to distinguish the true poetic and convulsive realities contained in life and death.[213]

3.3 The character of Léon Robinson

Unscrupulous, egoistic, without a consciousness — the character of Léon Robinson is the true embodiment of the social class to which he belongs, at least according to Céline's conception of the working class. Robinson has endured a miserable existence, working relentlessly in order to earn a living. From this perspective, Robinson bears a strong resemblance to Bardamu: they both belong to the working class, they both experienced a series of dreadful events in their lives and they are both inhabitants of the

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[212] Ibidem, p. 202.

[213] Vitoux, *Céline: a Biography*, p. 225.

night. However, unlike Bardamu, Robinson never had the opportunity to receive an education and, as a result, he lacks intelligence and depth.

Robinson agreed to murder his landlady, Madame Henrouille, for a thousand francs — however, his attempt at murder proves to be a total failure, because the booby trap that he prepared for the old lady explodes in his face, leaving him almost blind. Bardamu supervises Robinson's recovery from the accident and, in this instance of vulnerability, a particular episode enables the reader to grasp a deeper comprehension of this ambiguous character.

For the greater part of the novel, the character of Robinson elicits a sense of repulsion in the reader, due to his lack of depth and intelligence — qualities that, by contrast, render Bardamu a tolerable character in the eyes of the reader. Nevertheless, the reader's sentiment towards Robinson slightly changes after seeing the world through his eyes — the blind eyes of a desperate man, whose terrible life experiences have destroyed every fibre of his being.

> "I'll kill myself!" he announced when his misery seemed too great to bear. And yet he managed to bear his misery a little longer, like a weight that was much too heavy and infinitely useless, misery on a road where he met no one to whom he could speak of it, it was just too big and complicated. He couldn't have explained this misery of his, it exceeded his education.[214]

Additionally, Bardamu employs a similitude in an effort to illustrate Robinson's childhood:

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[214] Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, p. 268.

> Robinson's childhood had been so dismal he didn't know hat to say hen he thought of it. […] he couldn't find anything, even in the far recesses, that didn't make him sick with despair; it was like a house full of repugnant, foul-smelling objects: brooms, slop jars, housewives and smacks in the face…[215]

The abovementioned passage is endowed with an extraordinary evocative power. Through this climax, Céline enables the reader to feel the pain of Robinson's childhood by way of portraying a series of images and perceptions that hit the reader, indeed, like a smack in the face. This excerpt moreover conveys the impression that Robinson's childhood memories are composed by a series of fragments that, like the reminiscences of a traumatic experience, resurface in the form of flashbacks. Although the reader might consider Robinson an unbearable character, feeling compassion for him after catching a glimpse of his childhood is inevitable.

After their first encounter on the battlefield, Robinson becomes a steady presence in Bardamu's life, appearing in every pivotal moment of the novel, for instance Bardamu's experience at the front, in the African colonies, in the United States and finally in France. Moreover, Robinson's experiences throughout the novel often seem to prefigure Bardamu's own — when Bardamu meets Robinson at the front, the latter has already made plans to withdraw from the war; in the colonies Bardamu soon discovers that he is replacing Robinson, who alerts him about the true nature of the colonial enterprise; when the two men meet in the Detroit, Robinson expresses his desire to return to France.

Bardamu's relationship with Robinson is exceedingly complex, it is a sort of *odi et amo* relationship, which fluctuates between love and hatred — though the feeling of hatred

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[215] Ibidem, p. 269.

undoubtedly prevails. As soon as Bardamu sees an opening to rid himself of Robinson's troublesome presence, he does not hesitate to seize this opportunity. Despite Bardamu's attempt, Robinson's absence will be temporary — it seems that Bardamu cannot escape Robinson to the same extent that he cannot escape the night.

On this account, several critics have argued that the character of Robinson is not configured as a real person within the context of the novel and that he therefore might be a figment of Bardamu's imagination — in addition to the ambiguous relationship that binds the two men, their recurrent encounters around the world seem rather implausible. It is indeed highly improbable for a working-class man like Robinson to travel to the African colonies and to the United States — as previously stated, Robinson could barely afford to survive, thereby travelling would not have been feasible for him.

For the aforementioned reasons, the character of Robinson has been frequently interpreted as a projection of Bardamu's conscience. Nonetheless, throughout the novel Robinson is portrayed as Bardamu's unscrupulous double, an impulsive, irresponsible man who never considers the potential consequences of his words and actions — this reckless behaviour is the reason that ultimately leads to Robinson's death in the finale of the novel.

Taking into consideration Freud's structural model which comprises a tripartition of personality into Id, Ego and Superego, the conscience corresponds to the Ego, which is described as the portion of the psyche that mediates between the primal impulses of the Id and the moral impositions of the Superego — therefore, were Robinson a projection of Bardamu's conscience, he was supposed to be more cautious, rational, balanced. Conversely, his impulsive and unscrupulous behaviour which seldom takes into consideration the consequences of his actions, exhibits a stronger resemblance to the

impulses and repressed urges of the Id — conceivably, something that moves below the level of consciousness, namely a traumatic memory.

> Meeting Robinson again had given me a shock, and I seemed to be falling sick again. With the misery painted all over his face, I felt he was bringing back a bad dream that I'd been unable to get rid of all those years. It was driving me nuts. All of a sudden he turned up, I'd never see the last of him.[216]

Within this framework, the character of Robinson can be examined through the lens of a traumatic manifestation. As previously mentioned, throughout his life, Bardamu has endured some profoundly traumatising experiences that have truly hurt him, beginning with his childhood which he barely mentions, but that gives the impression of being a profoundly unhappy period, scarred by the absence of his father and the complex relationship with his mother[217]. Beyond his tormented youth, the psychological and emotional cost of war undoubtedly weighed on Bardamu's mind.

As far as this interpretation is concerned, another central element lies in the fact that Robinson and Bardamu met during the war — it is conceivable that after his harrowing experience at the front and the consequent reflections on the idiocy of war, Bardamu started exhibiting signs of psychological collapse which thus converged into the character of Robinson. Besides, Bardamu explicitly declared to have lost his mind during the war. As mentioned in the previous chapters, from a psychopathological point of view, visual and auditory hallucinations are core features of the symptomatic picture

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[216] Ibidem, p. 221.

[217] Ibidem, p. 269: 'I hadn't been to see my mother in a long time… And those visits had never done my nervous system any good… When it came to sadness, my mother was worse than me… Still in her little shop, she seemed after all those years and years to make a point of piling up disappointments around her…'

of post-traumatic stress disorder. For these reasons, the character of Robinson may be conceived as the embodiment of the war trauma that Bardamu endured.

As previously mentioned, the concepts of duality and division of the self are recurring elements in the literary representation of trauma, inspired by Pierre Janet's theorisation of disassociation, hence a fracture of the mind created by an extreme, overwhelming or disruptive experience. Against this background, it may be argued that the character of Robinson is the result of a schism in Bardamu's psyche that occurred as a response to his prolonged war trauma.

Not only is Robinson a figment of Bardamu's imagination, but he is a projection of his trauma, a sort of *doppelgänger* in which Bardamu concentrated his darkest impulses, thoughts and feelings — the most intolerable and unscrupulous part of him that he desires to leave behind but without which he cannot live[218]. After Robinson's death, Bardamu comments:

> I had tried to lose myself, I hadn't wanted to be face to face with my own life any more, but everywhere I kept finding it. I was always coming back to myself. My wanderings were over. No more knocking about for me… The world had closed in… We had come to the end![219]

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[218] This might be the reason behind Bardamu's incapability of distancing himself from Robinson.

[219] Ibidem, p. 405.

3.5 The metaphor of the night

Céline's masterpiece is a journey into the darkest depths of human experience, where suffering and death are the only certainties. *Journey to the End of the Night* portrays a poignant contemplation of modern life, delving into the misery of existence and the despair of the human condition. Human beings are lost souls, doomed to wander aimlessly in a hostile world in search for something that cannot be defined. In this sense, humanity's imperative quest for meaning is a merely shard of light which fades into the night.

The metaphor of the night is the fundamental paradigm of the novel, which symbolises the bleak and uncertain nature of existence. Life is a journey through darkness where hopelessness and despair prevail, especially for the inhabitants of the night — people like Bardamu, who have been irremediably scarred by harrowing ordeals.

Bardamu's story unfolds as an unending odyssey through this metaphorical darkness, which will ultimately culminate in death without achieving any concrete resolution or meaning. In this respect, Bardamu's journey may be defined as a katabasis without an anabasis, hence a descent into the underworld in search for meaning denoted by the impossibility to return to the land of the living. The feeling of entrapment that pervades the novel stems precisely from the impossibility to elude an existence which is dominated by darkness. The night has no exit but death.

The night therefore serves as a metaphor for an inescapable realm, encompassing not only Bardamu's experiences, but also broader historical events, namely the atrocities of the first war conflict, the rise of nationalisms and the horrific events that occurred in the inter-war period. The night essentially embodies the darkness and chaos inherent to both individual existence and collective human history.

The night is the historical context of the twentieth century, an era that transformed the world in the darkest hour of history, revealing the extremes of human cruelty and irrationality. The night is the incurable restlessness of looking for meaning in a world that seems permanently devoid of humanity. The night is the tortured mind of a person who has endured unspeakable events. The night is the absolute impossibility to elude one's fate. The night is the awareness that there is no exit.

The night is our very existence.

The night envelops us all.

The night is us.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this thesis has analysed the evolution of the trauma paradigm as a psychoanalytic, cultural and literary concept, moreover identifying the literary symptoms of trauma in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*.

The medical and psychiatric understanding of the concept of trauma has endured a significant evolution throughout the years, albeit with moments of stagnation. From the first systematic medical studies in the 1860s to the official recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder in 1980, the psychopathological concept of trauma has been subjected to controversial opinions regarding its aetiology and symptomatology. The central challenge for the physicians and psychologists who investigated the origin of traumatic manifestations consisted in conceptualising an invisible illness in the absence of an observable pathology.

The concept of trauma was significantly influenced by the social, historical and political circumstances concurrent to its evolution. As an instance, the increasing prominence that trauma acquired between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century was the result of a cultural paradigm shift that unfolded alongside modern society. Subsequently, the magnitude of the shell shock phenomenon during the Great War and the interbellum conferred social and political relevance to the psychological implications of overwhelming experiences, thus introducing the reality of traumatic experiences into the fabric of modern society.

The aftermath of the first world conflict was characterised by a fervent search for innovative modes of representation that could capture the essence of post-war modern society onto the written page. In this regard, it may be argued that modernist works produced in the decade following the Great War constitute a prototypical literature of

trauma which aimed to substantiate the spiritual malaise of disenchantment that enveloped the world during the interbellum. Although the interwar period was exceptionally prolific for the field of literature, the senselessness and brutality of the second world conflict left no margin for literary experimentation. The existential void that originated from the harrowing events of the Second World War constituted an epochal moment of rupture that completely redefined the meaning of language, history and testimony. The utmost impossibility of confronting the darkest hour of human history resulted in the emergence of an aporetic conception of trauma. The central concern of post-war society thus consisted in reconciling the necessity of a historical truth and moral imperative of testimony with the complexity of articulating a horrific reality that was moreover unprecedented and unknown.

The devastating consequences of the atrocious historical events of the twentieth century have lead several contemporary intellectuals to pose existential and epistemological questions in an attempt to analyse the dynamics of trauma from a variety of theoretical approaches. The late 1980s and early 1990s delineated a virtual explosion of the trauma paradigm, which furthermore inaugurated an interdisciplinary examination of overwhelming experiences. The psychiatric normalisation of trauma, coupled with the human necessity to convey the intensity of dreadful experiences, laid the foundation for the advent of trauma theory, a branch of the humanities whose purpose consisted in investigating the representation of trauma and its impact on language, literature and society.

The theoretical foundation of trauma studies extensively relies on Freudian psychoanalytical theory, which defines traumatic memories as unavailable to conscious recall and therefore inaccessible through traditional mnemonic operations. The initial development of the field leaned on the aforementioned assertion in an attempt to substantiate the fundamental impasse at the core of traumatic representation, hence the paradox of incommunicability. According to the traditional model, trauma is conceived

as a severely disruptive event which fragments consciousness and hinders linguistic representation. The insights of trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman initiated a fervent theoretical debate which explored the paradox of incommunicability, the issue of testimony and the literary performability of trauma. According to contemporary criticism, the representation of trauma in fiction is conveyed through a series of narrative techniques which mimic post-traumatic symptoms, namely non-linear narratives, the frequent repetition of trauma-related details, the employment of perspectival filters, the fragmentation of the narrative voice into a plurality of perspectives and narrative unreliability.

Unreliable narration is, for instance, a crucial trait of Ferdinand Bardamu, narrator and protagonist of *Journey to the End of the Night*. Céline's characterisation of Bardamu centres on unreliability, morally questionable views and a fervent yet paradoxical hatred towards humanity. During his relentless quest for meaning, Bardamu has encountered instances of brutality and social marginalisation, from his childhood in the poor suburbs of Paris, to the trenches of the First World War, the African colonies and the urbanised nightmare of the United States — experiences that further deepened his cynical and nihilistic vision of humanity.

Throughout the novel, the reader is often doubtful of Bardamu's sincerity, due to his frequent declarations of unreliability which suggest that he is deliberately omitting a part of the story. Moreover, the novel contains several episodes which leave the reader with the impression that Bardamu is describing a figment of his imagination, a sort of hallucinatory delirium stemming perhaps from a feverish dream or psychological distress. In this respect, the character of Robinson may be conceived as a projection of Bardamu's trauma, and more specifically as a post-traumatic hallucination that continuously resurfaces in the pivotal moments of the novel. *Journey to the End of the Night* comprises a nihilistic observation of the miserable and frail nature of the human condition, in which death and suffering are the only certainties. Similarly to Bardamu's

journey, human existence is an odyssey through an impenetrable and inescapable darkness which ultimately culminates in death, without attaining any meaning or resolution. Said metaphorical darkness is configured as an inescapable realm that not only envelops the individual experiences of the inhabitants of the night, but also encompasses the bleakest pages of collective human history.

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