

EROS AND THANATOS REVISITED: THE POETICS OF TRAUMA
IN REBECCA WEST'S *THE RETURN OF THE SOLDIER*

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Drawing on trauma theory and taking the figure of the shell-shocked soldier as my point of departure, I suggest that, unlike most of its contemporaries, the response to war trauma posed by Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* is not only an enactment of Freud's theory of the death drive but part of a peculiar experience of survival. Desire is used as the framework for healing, and the reunion with the lost love becomes essential to the soldier's bearing witness to trauma. Particular attention is paid to the active role of Margaret as *listener-companion* and to the function of *testimony* as a mode of access to the truth. In the context of the literature of the Great War, West's novel can be read as an *alignment between witnesses*. Trauma, thus, becomes a record that has to be made with the aid of the witness, the listener and the teller.

Keywords: trauma; death; desire; testimony; Rebecca West; *The Return of the Soldier*

EROS Y TÁNATOS REVISITADOS: LA POÉTICA DEL TRAUMA EN EL RETORNO
DEL SOLDADO DE REBECCA WEST

Basándome en la teoría del trauma y tomando la figura del soldado traumatizado como punto de partida, en este ensayo sugiero que la novela de Rebecca West, El retorno del soldado, a diferencia de sus contemporáneas, no sólo explora el trauma de guerra como expresión de la pulsión de muerte de Freud sino como parte de una particular experiencia de supervivencia. El deseo se usa como marco para la reparación y el reencuentro con el amor perdido se convierte en elemento esencial para que el soldado pueda dar testimonio del trauma padecido. Se enfatiza el rol activo de Margaret como compañera-interlocutora y la función del testimonio como modo de acceder a la verdad. En el contexto de la literatura de la Gran Guerra, la novela de West puede leerse como una alineación de testigos ya que el trauma se convierte en evidencia construida con la ayuda de testigo, interlocutor y narrador.

Palabras clave: trauma; muerte; deseo; testimonio; Rebecca West; El retorno del soldado

1. Introduction

The trope of the *return of the soldier* is a recurrent and controversial presence in the literature of the Great War: “nowhere do history and fantasy meet and clash more strongly than around the figure of the soldier returned from war” (Tate 1998: 96).¹ Although in the past decades canonical war literature portraying soldiers-survivors has undergone considerable criticism due to a claimed lack of historical precision, no one can deny that it has shaped the popular mind and brought about “the story of war that has evolved, and has come to be accepted as true” (Hynes 1998: IX). From West’s shell-shocked Chris Baldry in *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), to the restless Harold Krebs in Hemingway’s ‘Soldiers’ Home’ (1925), to Faulkner’s traumatized and injured Donald Mahon in *Soldier’s Pay* (1926) to the paralyzed Clifford Chatterley in Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), Great War narratives tend to contradict the ideas of atonement and peace that had often been associated with the homecoming tale and place war trauma as the dominant literary construction. In fact it is the physically and mentally wounded soldier – the veteran as a victim – that appears to be the most symbolic visual reminder of the Great War, a war that is revealed precisely as a “violation, intrusion, wound” (Bradbury 1976: 194) inflicted on humankind.

Without a doubt, there has been an outpouring of striking representations of the wounded male in the past century; most are presented, in Winter’s words, as “survivors perched on a mountain of corpses” (2003: 17). Being placed in a liminal space between life and death, soldier characters are forced to confront both the death of the other and their own mortality. Yet, the critical issue posed by most of these works is the soldier’s impossibility of bearing witness to war trauma. Literary depictions of traumatized masculinity continually revolve around fixed patterns, suggesting death as the only possible reality after war.²

The arrival of the returned soldier in literature can be seen as early as 1918 in West’s *The Return of the Soldier*. Because of an apparent reliance on the belief that soldiers were unable to confront death, the novel is said to have contributed significantly to the generally accepted ideas about the Great War. Although narrated in the first person by his cousin, *The Return of the Soldier* tells the story of Chris Baldry, an army-officer sent home from the Western Front suffering from shell-shock. Interestingly, the experience of war and of Chris’s own trauma is absent from the novel. It is only the wound – the shell-shock as the immediately visible effect of trauma – that readers are able to perceive. In fact, the characters themselves are made to use the word *wounded* to refer

¹ I would like to thank Prof. Andrew Monnickendam for his helpful comments on earlier versions of the article.

² Yet, the representation of the soldier as a traumatized victim has received much criticism from those who consider it unfair to the complexity of the Great War and the wider variety of experiences and attitudes emerging from it. Among these scholars is Cyril Falls who, referring to the *war books*, criticizes the limited number of experiences they portray, claiming that “the soldier is represented as a depressed and mournful spectre helplessly wandering about until death brought his miseries to an end” (1930: XI).

to Chris's mental disorder (West 1918: 20).³ By not specifying the origin of the 'wound', West switches the weight of attention to the soldier's emotional response rather than to the traumatic event itself. The only allusion to trauma is the devastating amnesia that has wiped out the last fifteen years of the character's life. Chris has been made to forget the death of his only son, Oliver, and his marriage with the selfish Kitty. Instead, he has regressed to the time of his young manhood in Monkey Island in which he was in love with Margaret, an innkeeper's daughter. Like most post-war writers dealing with the return of the soldier, West brings death home as "a haunting presence" (Hynes 1998: VIII), but she does it subtly enough, making it emerge as unknown or forgotten memory. Although shell-shock may indeed be understood as an effective literary device to bring attention to the mental wound and portray the soldier as a passive victim unable to cope with trauma, it is my contention that selective amnesia acts as an alibi for the soldier's escape from an unhappy life and as a safe passage to Margaret, both object of unfulfilled desire and path to survival.

Taking into account its narrative conflict and character development, Rebecca West's novel can be regarded as a fictional elaboration of Freud's theories on trauma. Yet, West writes in 1928: "My novel has fundamentally nothing to do with psychoanalysis" (1982: 68). The writer's interest in keeping a distance from Freud's theories is surprising as the story revolves around shell-shock, psychotherapy and cure as its main themes.⁴ Interestingly, it is the novel's association with psychoanalysis that has received the most adverse criticism, particularly in relation to Chris's magical cure, which has been labelled as "disappointing" (Sokoloff 1997: 213) and "clumsy" (Wolfe 1971: 34) or the use of the psychiatrist Dr Anderson, regarded as a "simple device" to justify Chris Baldry's final "moral choice" (Hynes 1998: V). Other critics have similarly questioned the "sentimental and irrelevant" trick (Tylee 1990: 147) used for the ultimate *cure* of the soldier, a cure that seems to suggest a return to traditional conventions of soldiering and masculinity – "the snobbery and vanity that destroyed Chris's inner peace" (Tylee 1990: 144). Even more unfortunate is the treatment given to the character of Margaret who, though playing an essential role in the process of Chris's recovery, has been the subject to, as Pinkerton clearly argues, "underestimation and general neglect" (2009: 1), probably because of her "belonging to that putative contrived 'romantic' dimension" (2009: 2).

This article argues that such criticism is one-sided and misdirected in relation to West's representation of war trauma and, most essentially, of Chris's struggle for survival, not taking sufficiently into account the psychological implications of such

³ Actually the word *trauma* enters the English Language in mid-seventeenth century from the ancient Greek *traumat* meaning "a wound, or external bodily injury in general; also the condition caused by this; traumatism" (OED 2nd edition, vol. XVIII).

⁴ Even more surprising is the fact that most psychological criticism is relatively recent. Among the most relevant critics, Susan Varney, Misha Kavka, Wyatt Bonikowski and Steve Pinkerton deserve special recognition. Varney (2000) studies the fantasy of the father's social omnipotence within the domestic space, Kavka (1998) explores the traumatized male soldier, Bonikowski (2005) studies Freud's theories of the death drive in relation to the return of the soldier and the trauma of the narrator and Pinkerton (2009) centres on the powerful role of Margaret in Chris's 'cure'.

disturbingly complex experience as the soldier's confrontation with death. I will, therefore, put forward the view that there is a need, according to recent studies in trauma theory (Felman and Laub 1992; Caruth 1995), to reformulate Freud's ideas that depict the problem of trauma as solely a problem of destruction and compulsive repetition of the nightmares of war. A close analysis of *The Return of the Soldier* suggests a move beyond Freudian models, acknowledging the soldier's post-traumatic desire to live and love and the enactment of a poetics of trauma that reassesses not only the importance of the traumatic experience itself but also, and most importantly, the meaning in the act of survival by bearing witness. Moreover, the character of Margaret is rescued from critical neglect and reappraised as participant and co-owner of the traumatic event. By exploring West's novel as a narrative of survival, I suggest not only new insights into the trope of the returning soldier but also the struggle of the text to convey a truth connected with a crisis of truth-telling.

2. Eros and the trauma of death

The Great War was a conflict unlike any that had taken place before: "One in eight was killed. Over one in four was wounded" (Winter 1998: 72). Equally important, battles were decided by a new kind of military confrontation characterized by the use of technology and more effective means of communication. There is little doubt then that the "encounter with mass death" (Mosse 1990: 3) was one of the defining features of the Great War, not only because of the long-lasting effects it had on the lives of those who fought in the trenches but also because it "called for a much greater effort to mask and transcend [it] than had ever been made before" (1990: 4). The most crucial link between *The Return of the Soldier* and trauma is precisely the haunting legacy of death, which Vickroy describes as "a universal/essential element of human experience that cannot be fully confronted but can be symbolized" (2002: 224).

Unable to provide any real possibilities of confronting the finality of death and the uncertainty that follows it, West uses the returning soldier as a symbol. Chris Baldry is in many ways one of the most emblematic representations of the shell-shocked soldier, a figure that disrupts the lives of Jenny, Kitty and Margaret, just as veteran soldiers disrupted a society unfamiliar and uncomfortable with trauma and death: "I never realized the horror of warfare until I saw my cousin..." (West 1918: 40), claims Frank Baldry. Indeed, Chris is presented as someone who has known death and whose knowledge of death shapes both his life and that of those around him. Drawing on the symbolic meaning of the returning soldier, Bonikowski claims:

The death of the soldier on the battlefield is this external notion of death, the death of the other that reveals to the living the fact of their own mortality. The *return* of the shell-shocked soldier, though, reveals an internal principle of death, a death *drive* that upsets not just the stability of civilization but the very foundations upon which each individual creates his or her sense of the self. The soldier who returns does not bring death home, since he is very much alive; he may not even bring home any evidence of the war with him, like Chris in West's novel, who has no physical wound and no memory of the war. Instead, the soldier brings home the death drive (2005: 518; emphasis in the original)

After Chris's return then, death permeates the domestic space in the form of a wound that cannot be fully healed. The magnitude of its impact is such that even the trivial Kitty seems to notice "that something as impassable as death lay between them" (West 1918: 120). Unlike so many others, Chris Baldry is made to survive death; yet, he is faced with the difficulty of comprehending a phenomenon that seems to lie beyond the limitations of consciousness.

The impact of trauma on war veterans is initially addressed in one of Freud's key works, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961), which, written immediately after World War One, attempts to understand traumatic neurosis and its relationship with violence throughout history. In his study of soldiers returning from World War One, Freud observes that there is a tendency to repeat or re-enact traumatic experiences, a phenomenon he calls "compulsion to repeat" (1961: 13). Taking two concepts that were inseparable in earlier Greek thought, Eros and Thanatos, Freud articulates his theory of the death drive as an effort to represent the cause of the repetition of these past traumatic events:

It would be in contradiction to the conservative nature of the instincts if the goal of life were a state of things which had never yet been attained. On the contrary, it must be an *old* state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads. If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for *internal* reasons – becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that '*the aim of all life is death*' and, looking backwards, that '*inanimate things existed before living ones*'. (1961: 32; emphasis in the original)

In this view, death instincts would cause traumatized soldiers to expose themselves, apparently compulsively, to situations evocative of the original trauma. Battle nightmares, flashbacks and other hallucinatory phenomena would bring them back, repeatedly and inevitably, to the moment of fright in which they originally witnessed death. The peculiarity of compulsive repetition, though, refers not only to the systematic return of the reality of death but also to the fright and unpreparedness for it. In Freud's view, consciousness, which arises to protect us from stimuli received from the outside world, is unprepared to grasp death. Trauma, thus, results from a compulsion to repeat an encounter with death that could not be grasped in the first place. Referring to the nightmares of battle, Freud claims that "these dreams are endeavoring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis" (1961: 26).⁵

⁵ In recent years, psychiatry has expressed a growing interest in the anxiety disorders caused by confrontation with near death. This has led to the study of *post-traumatic stress disorder* – PTSD – which essentially results from the unavoidable imposition on the mind of horrific events that the mind cannot control. As Young explains, the syndrome is "based on the idea that intensely frightening or disturbing experiences could produce memories that are concealed in automatic behaviours, repetitive acts [hallucinations, flashbacks and other intrusive phenomena] over which the affected person exercise[s] no conscious control" (1996: 4).

Not being able to consciously retrieve any image of death, West's soldier seems to grieve at the loss of the other and at the loss of his own life as well. The deep melancholic state in which he is steeped after his return to Baldry Court suggests that "the story of trauma... far from telling of an escape from reality – the escape from a death, or from its referential force – rather attests to its endless impact on a life" (Caruth 1996: 7). In fact, the first encounter with his cousin Jenny – and with "[the] little globe of ease" (West 1918: 9) representing his pre-war existence – illustrates the complexity and confusion of his feelings: "Chris, I went on, 'it's so wonderful to have you safe'. 'Safe', he repeated. He sighted very deeply and continued to hold my hands" (1918: 44).

The soldier's living experience of trauma suggests a continuous crisis of life and death that seems to reduce his existence to a state of absolute incomprehensibility. So much so that the women in his life are left to wonder whether he is mentally unstable, "either it means he's mad, our Chris, our splendid sane Chris, all broken and queer, not knowing us..." (West 1918: 32), or whether "he is pretending" (1918: 59). The indefinable quality of death not only leads to the incomprehension of Chris's behaviour but also to loss being spoken solely through Jenny's imagination: "By nights I saw Chris running across the brown rottenness of No-Man's-Land, starting back here because he trod upon a hand, not even looking there because of the awfulness of an unburied head..." (West 1918: 7). Nightmarish images bring death far beyond the time and space of the actual fighting and speak of its enigmatic and elusive quality.

Although shell-shock may be seen as the most explicit symbol of the soldier's encounter with death, conceiving Chris's amnesia as caused solely by a single occurrence would imply ignoring "a constellation of life experiences" (Erikson 1995: 185) that are already present from the moment he is made to enlist and go to war. Despite Jenny's constantly blaming the war for his cousin's 'illness', West makes it clear that Baldry Court had been permeated by the presence of death long before Chris's going to war. The reference to the loss of Chris's father at an early age, which not only suffocates a youth hungry for romantic adventure but also forces him "to take over a business that was weighted by the needs of a mob of female relatives" (West 1918: 13), reveals the more profound backgrounds of the soldier's distress. Similarly traumatic is the death of his son Oliver, whose presence is preserved in a room left untouched, "so full of whiteness and clear colors, so unendurably gay and familiar, which is kept in all respects as though there were still a child in the house" (West 1918: 3). The enduring emotional impact of earlier loss appears to set off a disturbing alchemy that merges past and present trauma and fractures the very experience of time in West's novel. Caruth provides a convincing explanation as to why trauma cannot be fully determined by, or found in, a given traumatic event:

[T]he pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself – which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally – nor can it be defined in terms of a *distortion* of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event (1995: 4-5, emphasis in the original).

Once it is understood that trauma cannot be located in time, it may well be interpreted in terms of absence rather than as presence – the absence of something that could not be clearly situated in time or place. Chris is made to go to war already possessed by this absence. Though Jenny tries to convince herself that “we had made happiness inevitable for him” (West 1918: 9), Chris’s “hopeless hope that some time he would have an experience that would act on his life like alchemy, turning to gold all the dark metals of events” (1918: 13) suggests otherwise, underpinning a sense of emptiness from which he is made to escape. Later on, it is Jenny herself who is made to acknowledge the absurdity of Chris’s pre-war pretended happiness: “nothing and everything was wrong’, I said at last. ‘I’ve always felt it’” (West 1918: 163).

More illustrative of the absence at the heart of trauma is the atemporal, ghostly quality of the wounds Chris finds himself coping with at his return. As Pinkerton puts it, “Chris’s amnesia articulates perfectly the paradox of being locked in a continuous knowing – which is simultaneously an unknowing – of an event that never stops happening yet never really occurs. Amnesia is Chris’s way of performing the untellable” (2009: 4). Because of this absence, Chris’s life is represented around its traumatic significance; he is so possessed by loss that he becomes, in Jenny’s mind, a living ghost: “I heard, amazed, his step ring strong upon the stone, for I had felt his absence as a kind of death from which he would emerge ghostlike, impalpable” (West 1918: 42). He is made to move silently through the house, remaining often “in the shadows” (1918: 43-44), troubled by the un-remembered dead and by a family he no longer recognizes as his own: “it was his furtiveness that was heartrending, it was as though he were an outcast, and we who love him stout policemen” (1918: 52). The will to deny what has happened and the will to speak it aloud appear as a characteristic trait in the dialectic of the soldier’s trauma.

But contradictory as it may seem, I suggest that what West encounters in the soldier’s shell-shock is not only the negative consequences of past traumatic events but, rather, a peculiar and bewildering experience of survival. Groundbreaking new work on trauma in literature and critical theory (Felman and Laub 1992; Caruth 1995) has recently reformulated Freud’s ideas arguing that to the extent trauma produces a violent paradigm shift, a break between life and death, it also opens up a new potential for perception and understanding. Caruth attempts to solve the puzzle at the heart of Freud’s work by stating “the surprising emergence, from within the theory of the death drive, of the drive to life, a form of survival that both witnesses and turns away from the trauma in which it originates” (2001: 7). One of her most insightful assumptions, then, is the possibility of the emergence of hope amidst stories of absence and loss: “the problem of trauma is not simply a problem of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival” (Caruth 1993: 24). In this way, compulsive repetition “is not the attempt to grasp that one has almost died, but more fundamentally and enigmatically, the vert *to clay attempim one’s own survival*” (Caruth 1993: 25; emphasis in the original). Indeed, even if Freud maintained that the repetition of trauma was a man’s tendency to return to his ancient starting point – that is, to death – he also implied that behind the compulsive repetition of the traumatic memory was the imperative to live that still remained not fully understood. In Freud’s words, “the attributes of life were at some

time awoken in inanimate matter by actions of a force of whose nature we can form no conception....” (1961: 32).

Based on Freud’s analysis of repetition compulsion, Caruth argues that a new relationship between consciousness and life is established: “In the traumatic encounter with death, life itself attempts to serve as the witness that consciousness cannot provide” (2001: 10). Unable to come to terms with the past, West’s soldier is immersed in the incomprehensible act of surviving – of waking into life – that he repeats by bearing witness to what remains ungrasped within his encounter with death. The soldier’s unsuccessful efforts to resume his pre-war existence illustrate this, permeating the story with dreamlike moments that not only affect the development of the character but also the perception of time: “Strangeness had come into the house, and everything was appalled by it, even time” (West 1918: 52). As Caruth puts it, “the witness of survival itself – the awakening that constitutes life – lies not only in the incomprehensible repetition of the past, that is, but in the incomprehensibility of a future that is not yet owned” (2001: 11).

In effect, West’s novel aims at the future, although it is only an expected future, not an actual one, as overcoming trauma implies a slow and arduous journey, which is made even more arduous by the soldier’s “resolution not to know” (West 1918: 134). From the unconscious reproduction of the disturbing past – which relates Chris’s memories of war to earlier domestic traumas – to its conscious acceptance and its assimilation and retelling as past, West needs to make Chris remember so that he can forget. The problem the writer faces is how to have her soldier narrate a past that he is still unable to consciously remember. For that, West resorts to Margaret, rescuing an ideal past that connects Chris to life. With the sadness implicit in the growing distance that separates her from her beloved Chris, Jenny is made to applaud the soldier’s choosing Margaret over death:

I felt a cold intellectual pride in his refusal to remember his prosperous maturity and his determined dwelling in the time of his first love. For it showed him so much saner than the rest of us, who take life as it comes, loaded with the unessential and the irritating. I was even willing to admit that this choice of what was to him reality out of all the appearances so copiously presented by the world, this adroit recovery of the dropped pearl of beauty, was the act of genius I had always expected from him. But that did not make less agonizing this exclusion from his life. (1918: 130)

Chris’s dream of happiness and peace seems to be recovered as the writer gradually moves towards a narrative of survival. It is curious that death not only appears as the sign under which Chris continues to live; interestingly, it also determines how he comes to love. The only way the soldier can look forward is by going back to the years in Monkey Island, where he was desired and loved. Indeed, Monkey Island is regarded as a healing place, as if it were “a magic state which largely explained the actions performed in it” (West 1918: 96).

Yet, this is only the beginning of the soldier’s recovery, not the end. His very act of surviving involves new ways of relating to the other as “the history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another” (1995: 10-11). West takes Chris and Margaret back to their pre-war idyllic world and makes their

relationship the context for healing. Margaret's willingness to listen is used to help Chris realize that his potential for survival depends on his act of giving testimony.

3. Desire, testimony and survival

As suggested above, overcoming trauma exposes West's soldier to painful isolation, but it also involves his vital necessity to reach out to the other. It is assumed that trauma survivors hold a story that needs to be spoken aloud: "a memory that by definition disrupts the continuity of identity or self (the trauma as discontinuity) but can also ground the survivor's identity or self (part of who I am is the trauma I remember and the trauma story I may tell)" (McKinney 2007: 270). It is not until this narrative imperative is performed that traumatic survival can have a healing value. West explores Chris's process of working through trauma and giving testimony, a process that simultaneously makes possible and is made possible by the relationship with Margaret. Although Chris does not seem to know what he knows, as he appears to exist in a condition of "speechlessness" (Laub 2005: 255), Margaret's presence helps him come out of denial and "offers the possibility and the protected holding space, within which the internal other, or Thou, can be re-established, necessary to face the traumatic event" (2005: 257).

Yet, it is not just this implicit need – the need to know – that brings Chris to Margaret; I also suggest there is a claim grounded in desire. Though not mentioned much in literary criticism, Eros is in fact an important presence in the novel. West portrays a veteran who, apart from containment and rest, needs romance to become restored as a man and to feel desired again. In a letter addressed to Jenny, Chris's cousin recounts his first meeting with the shell-shocked soldier and refers to what he interprets as a state of emotional instability, which, in plain language, is nothing more than Chris's sexual interest for Margaret to the point that he cannot find solace without her: "And then he began to rave about this woman. He said that he was consumed with desire for her and that he would never rest until he once more held her in his arms. I had no suspicion that Chris had this side to his nature, and it was almost a relief when he fainted again" (West 1918: 39). The problem West poses, then, is not only Chris's fear of death but also of wanting to live on as intensely as possible. This, of course, clashes against Edwardian moralist values and their tendency to suppress, disown and hide sexuality.

But desire is by no means limited to Eros. As Macy argues, it "carries connotations of wish, as well as passion and craving" (1975: 145) as it refers to

...a felt need for something, a wanting of something which is not yet in existence or not yet a part of oneself; it is the urge to remedy the sense of one's own incompleteness; it involves, therefore, by definition, and internal separation, a sense of duality between the subject and the object for which desire is felt. (1975: 146)

Chris's reaching out to Margaret expresses his special concern for a person whom he might regard as his future self. If, as argued above, the soldier's imperative to live emerges from traumatic events and near death experiences, desire, thus, is highlighted

as the motivating life force needed to relieve the pain and fill the void. In fact, it is desire that emerges as the last memory surviving the ravages of war and amnesia:

His love was changeless. Lifting her down from the niche, he told her so.... The columns that had stood so hard and black against the quivering tide of moonlight and starlight seemed to totter and dissolve. He was lying in a hateful world where barbed-wire entanglements showed impish knots against a livid sky full of blooming noise and splashes of fire and wails for water, and his head was hurting intolerably. (West 1918: 78-79)

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that Chris Baldry is made to survive because there is a person – Margaret – that justifies his living. The strong appeal of Margaret in the soldier's life is revealed in his anxiety to see her again after he returns from war: "if I do not see Margaret Allington I shall die" (West 1918: 58) and in her becoming a recurrent thought that not only intrudes on the soldier's mind but causes anxiety in the other two women of the family: "But as he spoke his gaze shifted to the shadows in the corners of the room, and the blood ran hot under his skin. He was thinking of another woman, of another beauty" (West 1918: 51).

The question that remains to be answered is whether Chris's desire is more compelling than his need or vice versa. Trauma seems to blur the boundaries between the two. In fact, Chris's need-desire for Margaret originates at a site where knowing and not knowing converge, where personal meaning is projected into the other and where the borders between one's needs and wants vanish. Margaret represents not only the soldier's desire to love and be loved but also his deepest search for meaning and purpose in a moment of both crisis and opportunity. This is clearly illustrated after their first encounter, as Chris seems to have found the peace of mind he seeks to make sense of what surrounds him: "After the automobile had taken Margaret away Chris came to us as we sat in the drawing-room, and, after standing for a while in the glow of the fire, hesitantly said: 'I want to tell you that I know it is all right. Margaret has explained to me'" (West 1918: 119). Margaret becomes, then, the much required "listener-companion" (Laub 2005: 257) and acquires vital significance as "a guide and an explorer, a companion in a journey onto an uncharted land, a journey the survivor cannot traverse or return from alone" (Laub 1992a: 59).

In spite of the critical "underestimation and general neglect" (Pinkerton 2009: 1) to which the fallen-on-hard-times Margaret has been subjected, she is the only one who is potentially capable of restoring Chris to health, "as though her embrace fed him" (West 1918: 118); her fully committed listening presence allows memory to flow again. In Pinkerton's words, "if the novel teaches us anything about Margaret, ... it is not to underestimate her" (2009: 2). Not only the character of Margaret herself should be vindicated; the active quality of her role as listener also deserves recognition: she is made both "participant and co-owner of the traumatic event" and "a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*" (Laub 1992a: 57). By addressing Margaret as listener-companion, Chris, from within the isolation of his own stance as witness, "becomes the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension beyond himself" (Felman and Laub 1992: 3).

Far from playing the traditional passive role of nurse and mother figure to which women tended to be drawn after the Great War, Margaret is placed in the unique situation of witness – and protagonist – of extreme human pain as “[she] comes to look for [and construct] something that is in fact nonexistent; a record that has yet to made” (Laub 1992a: 57). Chris’s story of trauma – the very process of bearing witness to it – does indeed begin with his testifying to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence. To Margaret, then, “it was a call” (West 1918: 127), a call to becoming “the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (Laub 1992a: 57), to experience trauma in herself. And she is made to assume her mission with resolution and strong agency.

Margaret knows that Chris has no prior knowledge, no memory of what has happened, that he may be afraid of this knowledge and that he may prefer not to talk and to protect himself from the fear of being listened to and of listening to himself. So she respects his silence, “sitting by him, just watching” (West 1918: 138); she seems to know that “while silence is defeat, it serves them both as a sanctuary and as a place of bondage. Silence is for them a fated exile, yet also a home, a destination, and a binding oath” (Laub 1992a: 58). Silence, then, becomes a sacred space, a bond of complicity so that they can no longer feel alone: “so it was not until now, when it happened to my friends, when it was my dear Chris and my dear Margaret who sat thus englobed in peace as in a crystal sphere, that I knew it was the most significant, as it was the loveliest, attitude in the world” (West 1918: 139). Bearing more implications than verbal expression, silence becomes therapeutic communication. Of the role of the listener before silence, Laub claims: “He or she must recognize, acknowledge and address that silence, even if this simply means respect – and knowing how to wait” (1992a: 58).

Indeed, Margaret is made to know about silence and more. Her resolution and independence of thought make her a guiding, and rare, presence in the household: “she had been generous to us all, for at her touch our lives had at last fallen into a pattern” (West 1918: 141), exclaims the surprised, and envious, Jenny. Even Dr Anderson addresses her as if she were a colleague: “He faced Margaret as though she were the nurse in charge of the case and gave her a brisk little nod” (West 1918: 147). What is more, she is made to become the voice of science when she suggests to Dr Anderson the final ‘trick’ – “Remind him of the boy” (West 1918: 165) – to bring Chris to recovery.

But becoming such an active agent causes a powerful effect on the character of Margaret as a human being. As Jenny puts it: “She was very different now, she had a little smile in her eyes, as though she were listening to a familiar air played far away” (West 1918: 126). Unleashing Chris’s narrative of suffering radically transforms Margaret’s world, deepening her sense of dignity and intensifying the trust and relatedness she feels to the soldier. Yet, in her role of witness she begins to feel emotionally overwhelmed. Not only does she take the role of the rescuer, she also experiences the same despair as the soldier. She is forced, as Caruth argues, “to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves” (1995: 11) and discovers that she has also been affected:

She was standing up, and in her hand she held the photograph of Oliver that I keep on my dressing-table. It is his last photograph, the one taken just a week before he died:

'Who is this?' she asked.
 'The only child Chris ever had. He died five years ago'.
 'Five years ago?'
 'Why did it matter so?'
 'Yes', I said
 'He died five years ago, my Dick'. Her eyes grew great. 'How old was he?'
 'Just two'.
 'My Dick was two'. We both were breathing hard. (West 1918: 155-56)

This shared transference provides a medium through which Margaret – and Jenny as both witness and teller – can express her own loss, experience it and begin to share it as well. Margaret is introduced as a separate human being who has also experienced trauma, but who is still made to carry out in her function of witness. While her pain is profoundly related to Chris's, she nonetheless does not become the victim – she preserves her position and perspective. This exchange emerges as a communal bearing of a destiny that affects one person – the soldier – far more harshly than it affects the others – the listeners. Without melodrama, Margaret discovers that she has also been deeply affected. Yet, this seems to turn her into a more reflective, more deeply connected human being. Margaret needs to address Chris's fear, confusion and dread if she is to carry out her role as a listener, and if trauma is to emerge at last. In effect, she takes part in Chris's struggle with the memories and remains of his – and her – own traumatic past.

4. The truth beyond testimony

Having discussed desire as the framework for healing and the active role of Margaret as *listener-companion*, I can move on to the last section of this article: the analysis of the text as both *testimony* and "ceaseless struggle" (Laub 1992b: 75) to knit together three different levels of witnessing: the soldier's, in the process of being a witness to himself within experience; Margaret's, in that of being a witness to the experience of the soldier; and, finally, the narrator's, on the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself.

In effect, viewed within the context of traumatic witnessing, West's novel provides one possible exploration of the language in which an "alignment between witnesses" (Felman and Laub 1992: 2) may be articulated. Testimonies of trauma are inexorably seen as unrepresentable insofar as they endeavour to convey a truth which is essentially connected with a crisis of truth-telling, what Cathy Caruth calls "crisis to whose truth there is no simple access" (1995: 6). The narrative of trauma not only carries with it the impossibility of representation; it also becomes a testimony the writer cannot completely possess since neither writer nor reader can utterly understand the horror of the event, or the full meaning of its narrative form. In many ways, this is the problem that West's novel poses, one in which the need to tell is inhibited by the impossibility of telling. The final scene of Chris's giving testimony illustrates this. It does not allow for textual representation, at least until after its occurrence: "there are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory and speech*" (Laub 1992b: 78; emphasis in the original). West's

decision not to represent the scene directly stresses not only the therapeutic power of silence as shared knowledge but also the pre-eminence of objects as “mementos” (Caruth 2001: 14) of the lost ones: “[Margaret] took the jersey and the ball, and clasped them as though they were a child. When she got to the door she stopped and leaned against the lintel. Her head fell back; her eyes closed; her mouth was contorted as though she swallowed bitter drink” (West 1918: 181)

Despite the difficulty to access a reality that seems to exist before or beyond representation, the text, either directly or indirectly, strives to construct the truth from the encounter and interplay of the three levels of witnessing mentioned above. Margaret, on the one hand, as “an intermediate receiver” (Laub 1992b: 76) of the soldier’s testimony, relives trauma even before Jenny the narrator does. In fact, Margaret takes on the responsibility of bearing witness that Jenny seems to bear on her own, and therefore cannot carry out. Jenny, in turn, being a witness of the process of witnessing itself, seems to move closer but then retreats from the experience itself, with the certainty that there is a truth that she should reach, but with the awareness that words do not seem to be reliable or adequate enough to verbalize it: “I lay face downward on the ottoman and presently heard her poor boots go creaking down the corridors. Through the feeling of doom that filled the room as tangibly as a scent I stretched out to the thought of Chris ” (West 1918: 181). Trauma has long been hidden and the horror of the past is only maintained as an elusive memory that does not seem to bear any reality. Comprehending its full significance becomes a process that demands the withdrawal of the narrator.

Still, there is the writer’s imperative to tell; the need to put on a convincing recovery that can only be such if the truth comes out: “the truth’s the truth, and he must know it” (West 1918: 180). Thus, the soldier is finally made to know the truth and, indirectly, readers are also led to it: “Out there Margaret was breaking his heart and hers, using words like a hammer, looking wise, doing it so well” (1918: 182-83). The text struggles to become testimony and “the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness: reconstitutes the internal ‘thou’, and thus the possibility of a witness or a listener inside himself” (Laub 1992b: 85). It is in fact assumed that repossessing the past by knowing the truth becomes in itself a form of going back to life. In Laub’s words, “the survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story so that they could survive” (1992b: 78). It is only through this process of testimony that Chris is made to return to sanity. Ironically, telling his story also means going back to war. The soldier who returns from Thanatos to recover Eros must go back to war, and probably to death:

It recalled to me that bad as we were, we were yet not the worst circumstance of his return. When we had lifted the yoke of our embraces from his shoulders he would go back to that flooded trench in Flanders, under that sky more full of flying death than clouds, to that No-Man’s-Land where bullets fall like rain on the rotting faces of the dead. (West 1918: 184)

The dangers Chris is made to face when bearing witness lead to a rethinking of the essential role that the protection of the truth plays in the process of survival and in the

soldier's ability to continue life after trauma. Although the truth provides new insights into the relationship between the text as testimony and survival, it also brings Chris to the realization that the lost ones are never coming back, that there will not be a healing reunion with those who are, and will continue to be, missing, that what life is all about is living with unsatisfied hopes and dreams.

The soldier that returns home with the "hard tread upon the heel" (West 1918: 184) no longer looks like the Chris of the past. Although made to recapture the lost truth, the realization of testimony is not the fulfilment of this promise, as the truth the soldier is made to find is not what he expects in his heart: "With his back turned on this fading unhappiness Chris walked across the lawn. He was looking up under his brows at the over-arching house as though it were a hated place to which, against all his hopes, business had forced him to return" (1918: 183). To the soldier, then, testimony is essentially made to stand as an act of facing loss, but also as the means for reconciling two worlds: the one that was destroyed by the war and the one he is made to return to. Yet, the reconciliation of these two worlds implies the repetition of this experience of loss as "[testimony] cannot bring back the dead, undo the horror or reestablish the safety, the authenticity and the harmony of what was home" (Laub 1992b: 91). Testimony can certainly not change the past, but, "neither does it succumb to death, nostalgia, memorializing, ongoing repetitious embattlements with the past or flight to superficiality or to the seductive temptation of the illusion of substitutions" (Laub 1992b: 91). Chris's testimony allows for a passage through the past to the future and, somehow, for a repossession of the two.

Referring to the necessity to "safeguard the dignity of the beloved" (West 1918: 179), Jenny claims that not knowing the truth would annihilate Chris as a man: "He who was as a flag flying from our tower would become a queer-shaped patch of eccentricity on the country-side, the full-mannered music of his being would become a witless piping in the bushes. He would not be quite a man" (1918: 180). Indeed, by setting the stage for a reliving, a reoccurrence of the traumatic event West restores Chris's integrity as a person. What is more, the soldier's testimony emphasises his will to live and his will to know, even in the most extreme situations, as knowing the truth means going back to war.

But West does not simply imply that the truth dignifies the soldier; she also suggests that Chris's ties to life are so strong that his will to live will remain unbroken, even if returning to the front. In Jenny's words, "there was a physical gallantry about him which would still, even when the worst had happened, leap sometimes to the joy of life" (West 1918: 182). Knowing the truth is proved to be costly, as reopening the past brings the soldier closer to death than to life, only this time with the awareness that he is not meant to be alone, that there is somebody else he can rely on. West's pledge to the truth "in a dialogic context and with an authentic listener" (Laub 1992b: 91), allows for the soldier to reconcile with life, which, in spite of its disappointments and sorrows, acts as a crucial safeguard against the otherness of death.

5. Concluding remarks

Although West reproduces some of the patterns and tropes of the soldier as a traumatized victim which are characteristic of the literature of the Great War,

particularly in relation to the vicissitudes of representing the elusiveness of death, the writer makes a clear move beyond contemporary beliefs: she allows for the possibility of survival. In this sense *The Return of the Soldier* not only struggles to break the sequence of compulsive repetition of trauma but also delineates an experience of survival beyond death which stresses the significance of desire as life-affirming and the need for the truth in the reconciliation with the past. Both truth and desire are firmly rooted in the character of Margaret, which is elevated from the passive role of 'nurse' and given the agency to become a protagonist of the traumatic event.

Moreover, the voices of the three witnesses – the soldier's, Margaret's and the narrator's – are woven in an attempt to repossess the past and situate it with respect to a reality which, in its elusiveness, is yet to be apprehended. Through this dialogic interplay, the text emerges as both testimony and act of survival and attempts a response to a crisis of representation which results from trauma itself.

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