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**“Something was set between
the words and the world”: Trauma and
Testimony in the Poetry of World War II**

**Sara Frasnó Viñuelas
SUPERVISOR: Melania Rodríguez Román
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Theoretical Framework: Trauma and Testimony.....	3
2.1 Trauma.....	3
2.2 Testimony.....	5
3. Poetry from the Frontline.....	7
4. Conclusion.....	13
References	17

Abstract

Research in trauma theory in literature has gained prominence in the last couple of decades, especially since 1996, with the publication of Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* and Tal's *Worlds of Hurt*. Trauma studies, however, had already been advanced in the late 1890s in psychiatry by Freud, who devoted much of his later career to figuring out how the human mind responds to traumatic experiences. His view of trauma as a "wound inflicted upon the mind" helps to account for the fragmentation of the self evident in the poetry of World War II. Because war poetry tends to be dominated by intimate accounts of personal experiences and feelings, Felman and Laub's claim that victims feel compelled to offer their testimony in order to process the traumatic event is taken as the basis for the analysis. While most critical works on trauma and testimony in literature, however, focus on texts where the traumatic event is told in retrospect, this dissertation explores the representation of the traumatic event at the precise moment of its first occurrence. By analysing the responses of several poets to their experiences during the war, this paper aims at understanding how they try to make sense of the traumatic event through the written word. To this end, the poets selected all served in the frontline either as soldiers, doctors or pilots. The testimonies of those who suffered through the conflict prove some of the best historical evidence we have to this day to help us comprehend how the traumatic event affects victims psychologically. The poets' personal, unique responses to the war eventually collide with a common, relentless commitment to tell their stories, and the use of similar coping mechanisms. As a result, I argue that poetry is the literary genre most suited to illustrating the impact of the traumatic event.

Keywords: conflict, World War II, trauma, testimony, poetry.

1. Introduction

Like love, war is a constant theme in poetry. The terms “war poet” and “war poetry” were coined in English literature during World War I (1914-1919), and their origin is found in the poetry written by soldier-poets who fought in France and Flanders (Reilly, 1986, p. xii). Reilly wonders why there was significantly less poetry written during and about World War II, despite expansion in the publishing trade and considering the fact that World War II affected a greater number of people, especially when compared to the Great War (1986, p. vii). Still, we find a comprehensive corpus of poetry by soldier-poets.

During the six years of conflict and also during the postwar, suffering and trauma were common among the population all over the world. World War II affected all areas of human experience, including literature, that unavoidable aspect of humanity essential not only to communicate personal experiences, but also historical facts that have contributed to our understanding of the world as it is today. Because poetry is able to show the most intimate feelings of those who write in a determined historical period, MacKay (2009) states that “the renewed interest in poetry was being boosted by the power of unexpressed feeling wartime generates, especially in superheated propagandized and censored environment” (2009, p. 16). In addition to this, poetry proved to be the most adequate genre for war literature, since “the brevity and concentration of poetry suited the intensities and fractured experiences of wartime during the long hours of waiting in shelter, camp, hospital, and transport” (Mackay, 2009, p. 15).

Although many trauma researchers argue that trauma is not caused by a single traumatic event, but rather the accumulation of related experiences, Herman (1997) suggests that trauma can indeed be traced back to a specific moment when the traumatic event comes into being, leaving the victim helpless. The representation of that specific traumatic moment in poetry is what this dissertation explores, that “something [that is] set between the words and the world.” The problems raised by attempts to analyse immediate responses to the traumatic event are evident if one considers, as Radstone explains, that “witnessed testimonies belong to the context of their remembrance—a historical, cultural and psychical context that mediates memories at the point of their redemption” (2001, p. 62). Because in the case of war poetry, I argue, the context is provided by the very occurrence of the traumatic event, which shuts down the individual’s ability to make sense of the world, representation—for the poets—and interpretation—for this study—become serious challenges.

Tal considers that “[t]he Holocaust has become a metonym, not for the actual series of events that occurred in Germany and the occupied territories before and during World War II, but for the set of symbols that reflect the formal codification of that experience” (1996, p. 6). Likewise, the poetry written during the war allows poets to process the traumatic event and offer it to the world. However, because war poetry, and by extension war literature, is composed by testimonies and personal experiences, it cannot be considered fully objective, so descriptions of historical events may respond to personal feeling which in turn might alter reality in some cases.

Poetry, though, has the added value of offering the author a more graphic account of the historical event, which ultimately sets it apart from other genres (Reilly, 1986, p. xii). According to Graham, “[w]hat emerges from this period is a poetry capable of conveying the vast and terrible sweep of war” (2011, p. 1). Following on this, this paper analyzes how the selected poets manage—sometimes try—to capture the horror and subsequent psychological implications of the traumatic event in words. There is a tendency to believe that victims—especially the poets of World War II, due to the shortage of war poetry in comparison to World War I—had been silenced by the magnitude of the war; that because such atrocities had heretofore been unimaginable, they found these impossible to write about. In contrast, as will be proven in my analysis, quite the opposite turns out to be true: the poets of this period resisted the all too human defense mechanism that is silence, since its consequences would have been far more damaging to the traumatized self. In breaking their silence, the poets produced a considerable corpus which begs examination.

According to Fussell (1991, p. 62), the most salient poets of World War II were almost all related to universities in some way; either they worked as university teachers, or aspired to. However, those who were not directly related with these institutions were closer to intellectual and artistic ideas which followed the views held by the university. This is certainly true of the six poets explored in this study, so it is interesting to see how they attempt to reconcile their intellectual ideas with the horror of the war. By analysing the responses of several poets to their experiences during the war, this paper aims at understanding how they try to make sense of the traumatic event through the written word. To this end, the poets selected all served in the frontline either as soldiers, doctors or pilots, and wrote their poems while in the front, either during intimate moments between battles or while recovering from wounds.

The eight poems selected are Keith Douglas’s “Desert Flowers” (1943), Roy Fuller’s “Soliloquy in an Air-Raid” (1941) and “The Middle of a War” (1942), Sidney Keyes’s “War Poet” (1942), Karl Shapiro’s “Going to the War” (1942) and “Troop Train” (1944), Stanley

Kunitz's "Reflection by a Mailbox" and John Ciardi's "On a Photograph of a German Soldier Dead in Poland" (1940).

The methodology adopted in this study combines both theoretical research and practical analysis. Trauma and testimony theories will provide the basis for the analysis, as the poems selected are characterised both for containing a high amount of traumatic features and for representing evidence of the poets' compulsion to testimony. My focus is on the content of the poems, rather than on formal qualities, since the position adopted by the poet in relation to the conflict and the graphic descriptions of war are key to exploring the victims' portrayal of their own trauma. Therein, I argue, lies the value that these poems possess today not only as examples of trauma in literature but as historical accounts of the Second World War period of history. In the poetry of this particular era, text and context thus become inextricable: the text helps to understand the context as much as the context helps to understand the text.

2. Theoretical Framework: Trauma and Testimony

2.1 Trauma

According to Balaev, the concept of trauma is one impossible to define, since interpretations of trauma theory in literature "might best be understood in terms of the changing psychological definitions of trauma as well as the semiotic, rhetorical, and social concerns that are part of the study of trauma in literature and society" (2014, p. 2). Balaev argues that, due to the many contradictory views, definitions of the term vary considerably. An appropriate starting point, nevertheless, may be found in early explorations of trauma by Sigmund Freud. In medical and psychiatric literature, but especially in Freud's writings, the term trauma is associated with accident victims and war veterans. In his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922), Freud defined trauma as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind, and explained that this wound was unlike a wound inflicted upon the body in that it is not immediately assimilated. This would explain the many iterations of loss, absence or longing in war poetry.

War throws into question everything we think we know about ourselves and the world, which in turn generates fragmentation and leads to a crisis of identity. As Herman explains, the traumatic experience "destroy[s] the victim's fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation" (1992, p.51). Insofar

as the traumatic event forces individuals to reassess their understanding of themselves and the world, there follows a shutting down of all cognitive systems which translates into a perceived, sometimes real, lack of agency. According to LaCapra, “[t]rauma is itself a shattering experience that disrupts or even threatens to destroy experience in the sense of an integrated or at least viably articulated life” (2004, p. 117). The victim succumbs thus to helplessness, and unable to understand their circumstances or express themselves, the only possible means of expression left is through the use of disturbing images.

In this sense, the concept of “belatedness” postulated by Freud becomes central to the theory of trauma. Freud explained that traumatic events can only ever be understood by the victim in retrospect, which is why trauma is extremely difficult to heal. Caruth, expanding on Freud’s notion of belatedness, states that trauma is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (1996, p. 4). Inability or difficulty to articulate trauma and/or make sense of the traumatic event at the moment of its occurrence is perhaps the most common of traits displayed by all victims of war.

Caruth highlights the fact that Freud, albeit a neurologist, became interested in descriptions of trauma in literature, arguing that “literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (1996, p. 3). In other words, literature and psychoanalysis are both concerned with the problem of representation. Since it is precisely that liminal space between the traumatic event and its belated understanding that the poetry analysed in this dissertation inhabits, there follows the problem of representation.

When discussing the concept of belatedness, most trauma critics point to the victims’ struggle to put their experiences into words, to represent and talk about their trauma effectively. Language becomes an inadequate tool insufficient to encompass the gravity of their circumstances. This dissertation, however, is more in line with Stampf’s perspective on the issues raised by the representability, or lack thereof, of trauma. While he concedes that talking about the traumatic event requires a great deal of self awareness and it may seem like language is not suited to the needs of the survivor, he disagrees with the Manichean trope of “the unspeakable,” whose “identifying feature is the explicit admission of the inadequacy of language in a given case” (2014, p. 15). The poems analysed in this work are evidence that while the victim-poet may not be fully aware of the extent and psychological implications of his trauma, he is nevertheless intent on making his story heard. In this regard, the concept of testimony will be helpful in acknowledging the poets’ efforts.

2.2 Testimony

Two of the main proponents of the victims' undeniable necessity to express themselves are Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992). In his analysis of the testimonies of victims of the Holocaust, Laub argues that these are essentially driven by an "imperative to tell," since "[t]he longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor's conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events" (1992, p. 79). For Herman, too, accounts of traumatic events are caught in a dilemma between the individual's tendency to refuse to acknowledge such atrocities and a "will to proclaim them aloud" (1997, p. 1). War poets, therefore, can be said to be impelled by the same unconscious urge to offer their testimony.

Because testimony draws on the victim's memory of an event that has not yet been fully comprehended, though, the relationship between language and experience is a particular one. As Felman argues, "[w]hat the testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constation of verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge" (Felman, 1992, p. 5). Arruti puts it best when she conceives of this representation problem as an *aporia* (2007), an attempt to express what cannot be expressed, a recurrent idea in the poems analysed, as the poets try to describe the conflict but cannot find words that will ever be true to such horror. As I argued earlier, however, the difficulty of expressing their feelings in light of the inadequacy of language, as terrifying and paralyzing as it is at times, does not deter the victims' accounts.

In this sense, the poet finds himself in a special position as a victim due to his close relationship with language and his innate inclination to express his feelings. Literature then becomes "perhaps the only witness" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. xviii) capable of testifying "to a fact that one really cannot bear witness to" (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 178). According to Felman, "[i]t is precisely because history as holocaust proceeds from a *failure to imagine*, that it takes an *imaginative* medium like [literature] to gain an insight into its historical *reality*, as well as into the attested historicity of its unimaginability" (Felman, 1992, p. 105).

For victims of trauma, offering their testimony serves as therapy, as a healing method in their efforts to regain the agency that has been taken from them by the traumatic event. By taking control of their responses, they are also taking back control of their circumstances and the world around them. For Laub, the importance for victims to bear witness to their own traumatic experiences lies in the fact not only that survivors "need to survive so that they could

tell their story; they also need to tell their story in order to survive” (1992, p. 78). However, for this therapeutic method to be effective, there needs to be someone who will listen: not only do victims feel the need to testify, but they also need their stories “to be *heard*” (Laub, 1992, p. 85). Following this idea, Radstone writes that “[w]hether the witnesser is understood as “reader/listener/spectator or as a construct internal to testimonial texts or discourses, it is witnessing that enables testimony” (2001, p. 62). The witnesser, therefore, plays a key role in the victims’ understanding and resolution of their own trauma, in “the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world” (Herman, 1997, p. 70). It is this active “working-through” that helps trauma victims cope with extreme situations and the resulting trauma in allowing them to make sense of the world once again and to restore temporal order, “to distinguish (...) between present, past, and future” (LaCapra, 2004, p. 103).

Testimony, though, is useful both to the individual and the community at large, since, by “[appealing] to a community” (Felman, 1992, p. 204), testifiers are not only (re)creating their own identity, but contributing to a collective, or shared, memory as well. As LaCapra (2004) defends, for this “working-through” to be successful, it needs to become a collective effort rather than an individual’s own hermetic process of healing. Individual traumatic experiences are thus fused into a larger shared identity resulting from the event.

For this reason, silence—though hard to resist—becomes the least appropriate response in light of a traumatic experience. The need, both for the individual and for the community, to offer and listen to testimony, respectively, is essential if we wish to make sense of historical traumatic events, so as not to concede what Laub calls “an event without a witness,” Arruti (2007) claims. Because of its severe implications, then, silence is not an option. Breaking silence and exposing the truth of an occurrence therefore become an act of responsibility on the part of the victim toward the community (Felman, 1992, p. 204).

The poems analysed in this paper all answer to the twofold purpose of testimony: on the one hand, poets cannot resist the compulsion to express their feelings and the nature of their trauma in their struggle to understand the horror of war; on the other hand, their testimonies prove essential to preventing such atrocities from ever happening again. This is what ultimately renders the poetry of World War II a compelling and valuable source of information for us today. As Reilly puts it, “[t]he incidents of war did not make the poetry; the poetry was made by the poets’ honest responses” (Reilly, 1986, p. xiv).

3. Poetry from the Frontline

To begin my analysis, it is necessary to remark that nearly all poems are written from a first person point of view. In offering their testimonies of war, the poet identifies himself with the poetic persona of the poem, since no other point of view would adequately convey his own experiences and the internal conflict that results from them. In the case of the only exception in this regard, Ciardi's "On a Photograph of a German Soldier Dead in Poland," the shift of focus serves the specific purpose of trying to understand a Nazi soldier's motives for committing such heinous crimes.

As I argued earlier, because traumatic experiences make victims question everything they think they know about themselves and the world, war leads to a crisis of identity. In "The Middle of a War," Fuller fails to recognise himself anymore, mentioning that "[his] photograph already looks historic" (line 1). In "Reflection by a Mailbox," Kunitz, too, struggles to grab onto his identity as his turn to join the war approaches. He therefore summons his Jewish ancestors and refers to his "American bones" (line 3), as if reaffirming himself of his own identity. Fuller's "Soliloquy in an Air-Raid" imagines opposing voices fighting for control inside the poet's head: "I am the old life, which promises even less / (...) and I the new, in which your function and / Your form will be dependent of my end" (lines 33-36). The poets' refusal to accept themselves as soldiers in a war that they do not agree with forces the self to reevaluate itself, eventually leading to what they perceive as a paralyzing lack of agency. Douglas' "Desert Flowers" exemplifies this in the line "I see men as trees suffering" (13): the image of men as trees, stuck in place, unable to move or act in any way, testifies to the victim's state of shock. Similarly, Fuller, in "Soliloquy in an Air-Raid" and later in "The Middle of a War," alludes to a destiny over which the poet-soldier has no agency whatsoever: "The will dissolves" (line 1); "Its position is already indicated" (line 5) and "His fate so obviously preordained" (line 8), respectively. In the latter, besides the lack of agency previously mentioned, there emerges also a feeling of resignation. The poet accepts his possible destiny, i.e. death. In Shapiro's "Troop Train," the lines "out of his hand / Dealer, deal me my luck" (25-26), "The good-bad boys of circumstance and chance" (19), or "Luck also travels and not all come back" (line 32), in addition to highlighting the victim's inability to act, add a perverted element of luck to the poets' fate. "On a Photograph of a German Soldier Dead in Poland" by Ciardi further explores this lack of agency in wondering what it is that drives a young man to fight for the Nazis. Here Ciardi ironically concedes that "honor's name drew him" (line 9), but that honor is shallow and eventually proves deceptive. "The dream of heroes" (line 20) is

revealed to be a lie when the soldier dies fighting for his nation for the wrong reasons, namely, fame and honor.

The imminence of death is one of the central issue in the poems analysed, and perhaps the major source of trauma for the poets, as they were convinced that death is where their destiny would lead them. Many of these poems reveal the witnesses' anguish over their own inevitable death. In "The Middle of the War," Fuller anticipates his death in the very first stanza: "This one is remembered for a lyric" (line 3). The "Loud fluttering aircraft slope above his head" (line 10), points to a constant feeling that death is always nearby, always in the back of his head. In "Going to the War," Karl Shapiro envisions his journey toward a sure death as "deep and slow" (line 9), but shows resignation and acceptance, since there is nothing he can do about it: "With the neither joy nor grief I go / to meet my life or death" (lines 11-12). Other times, death is expressed metaphorically, as in Douglas' "Desert Flowers," where the word "coin" (lines 10 and 14) refers to the coin paid to the ferryman of Hades, Charon, who transported the souls of the dead across the river Styx.

Trauma caused by the presence of death is recurrent, especially in the poem "Troop Train" by Shapiro, where the figure of the train acts as a reminder of death: "It stops the town we come through" (line 1). The train carrying soldiers comes to the station, where ordinary people go about their lives, reminding them that there is a war going on. Insofar as the image of a train during the Second World War immediately transports the reader's imagination to the concentration camps, the train is a reminder of death. Eventually, Shapiro introduces the inevitability of death in the lines "Trains lead to ships and ships to death or trains, / And trains to death or trucks, and trucks to death, / Or trucks lead to the march, the march to death" (lines 33-35). There is no escape from death, it awaits the poet-soldier at the end of each journey. The train could also be interpreted as a metaphor for war itself: war is like the train that arrives to change the lives of ordinary people. The poem is laden with images of death, such as "murdered bodies" (line 21), "guns" (line 22), or "Diamonds and hearts are red but spades are black, / And spades are spades and clubs are clovers—black" (lines 28-29), where spades and clubs acquire the double meaning of the suits in a deck of cards, but also of tools or implements used to exert violence. The distance between life and death shortens in the lines "And distance like a strap adjusted shrinks, / Tightens across the shoulder and holds firm" (23-24), the thought of death constantly lurking in the back of the soldiers' minds, a weight upon their shoulders.

The imminence of death often translates into grotesque and violent images. In "The Middle of a War," Fuller looks over a deserted landscape such as the battlefield, where only "the dead / Remain, and the once inestimable caskets" (lines 13-14). Especially significant is

the fact that caskets have lost all value because of the excessive amount of people dying around him. Therefore, caskets have become an ordinary object to which he has become accustomed, and which remind him of his own death. This same poet ends “Soliloquy in an Air-Raid” with the line with the image “vermilion on rocks” that evokes the bright red color of blood, the blood of soldiers killed in action. In “Desert Flowers,” the line “Living in a landscape are the flowers” is a seemingly beautiful image, but a second look proves otherwise. Douglas did not consider himself a naturalist, but here he mentions some flowers in a fertile landscape, fertile due to the dead bodies as a consequence of the war. It is a beautiful image in a landscape of war and death, featured again in the line “but the body can fill / the hungry flowers” (lines 5-6).

In “Reflection by a Mailbox” we find words like “hatchets” or “skulls” (both in line 13), but especially significant is the phrase “my American bones” (line 3). The use of the word “bones” creates a horrific image; instead of using “roots” or any other neutral word to refer to his origins, Kunitz uses the word “bones” because after death the bones are what remain. Knowing that he is destined to die, the poet expresses his anguish over the fact. Though he has not yet gone to war, he anxiously awaits the postman that will bring the letter that will condemn him to a sure destiny, his “passport to the war” (23), turning a seemingly ordinary scene into a traumatic event. “On a Photograph of a German Soldier Dead in Poland,” Ciardi describes the invaded country, Poland, as “raped” (line 26), imbuing the poem with extremely macabre overtones. In Shapiro’s “Troop Train” and Douglas’s “Desert Flowers,” the night is associated with obscurity. It is the moment when people sleep, and sleep is in turn also related with the idea of death, the outcome of war. Further instances of images generally associated with the idea of death are found in poems such as “On a Photograph of a German Soldier Dead in Poland” and “Soliloquy in an Air-Raid,” where the winter season is used to illustrate the obscurity and coldness of war.

Fear, or resignation over death, nevertheless, does not allow the poets to relish the possibility of survival. In the last four lines of “Troop train,” the poet briefly entertains the idea of surviving the horror: “Or that survival which is all our hope” (line 36), but swiftly realises that should he survive, all he would find is a nation in ruins. He hopes for, but ultimately dreads survival, as his consternation over the traumatic event’s possibly aftereffects outweighs any prospect of peace. Images of decay and ruin dominate the poems, the most graphic perhaps being “A billion tons of broken glass and rubble, / Blockade of chaos, the other requisites / For the reduction of Europe to a rabble” (lines 20-22) from “Soliloquy in an Air-Raid.”

Instances of blurred vision throughout the poems signal the poets’ refusal to accept the reality of the traumatic experience. As they cannot possibly comprehend the severity of their

circumstances, the soldiers “confound the detail and the horizon” (“Desert Flowers,” line 14), or find “[Their] own eyes barbed” (“War Poet,” line 2). The victims’ inability to cope with the reality of their circumstances is reflected in lines 5-6 of “War Poet,” where Keyes declares “I am the builder whose firm walls surround / A slipping land,” as he tries to grapple with the new circumstances to no avail. As Felman explains, since “our perception of reality is molded by frames of reference, what is outside them, however imminent and otherwise conspicuous, remains historically invisible, unreal, and can only be encountered by a systematic disbelief” (1992, p. 103). This state of disbelief that Felman speaks about is best captured by Fuller when in “Soliloquy in an Air-Raid” he uses the words “actors” (line 49) and “play” (line 50) to describe the war and the soldiers fighting it.

As a result of their inner conflict, the poets find themselves overwhelmed by a need to cry for help. In “Soliloquy in an Air-Raid” we find several rhetorical questions that illustrate Fuller’s suffering in trying to find meaning to such horror in order to calm his pain, but being unable to. Examples of this are “But who shall I speak to with this poem?” (line 7), “Who can observe this save as a frightened child / Or careful diarist?” (line 24), or “And who can speak / And still retain the tones of this civilization?” (line 25). Following the same pattern, in his poem “Reflection by a Mailbox,” Kunitz seems to wonder if this is what humanity has come to. His rhetorical questions do not have any possible answer: He asks himself, expecting no answer, “How shall we uncreate that lawless energy?” (line 20), since war defies all logic and rationale. Because there is no answer or help possible, the soldier-poets “crawl” (“Troop Train,” line 18), which can be interpreted as the literal act of crawling in the trenches or in a metaphorical sense of struggling to survive amid such horror, which ultimately leads them to “bang the empty wall” (line 20) in their helplessness. There is no meaning to be found in war, for it is absurd and pointless. Ciardi’s “On a Photograph of a German Soldier Death in Poland” is yet another example of this absurdity. Here the poet describes the acts of a Nazi soldier who is not acting following his convictions, he is fighting looking for a supposed glory and honour, though in the end he finds nothing but death. The poet ironically praises his deeds, calling him a hero and an athlete, only to pity him at the end of the poem in acknowledging that he was just a human who would have sold his soul for fame.

The idea of trauma as a wound of the mind stated by Freud is reflected in several of the poems analysed. In “Desert Flowers,” Douglas explicitly mentions the acts of war “slaying / the mind” (lines 4-5). As Freud (1922) explained, the wound of the mind resulting from trauma is a difficult one to heal, which causes extreme damage to the victims. One of the side effect of traumatic experiences is difficulty of sleep due to recurrent nightmares, which “[leave] the

mind awake” (line 9). In “Reflection by a Mailbox,” Stanley Kunitz also makes reference to the mind’s wound, when in the very first line he alludes to Hitler—without naming him—, and says: “I stand in the center of that man’s madness, deep in his trauma, as in the center of a wound” (lines 1-2). In talking about Hitler as a victim of trauma, Kunitz is—consciously, I argue—, epitomizing one of the tenets of trauma theory: the fact that trauma is passed down. The transformative power of the traumatic event pervades the poems, and the poets that have witnessed the war will never be able to “return to a state of previous innocence” (Tal, 1996, p. 119), as their trauma conditions the way in which they see the world and their art now.

According to Laub, the “traumatic event, although real, [takes] place outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after” (1992, p. 69). This is why representations of traumatic events are generally characterised by “interruptions, temporal disorder, refusal of easy readerly identification, disarming play with narrative framing, disjunct movements in style, tense, focalization or discourse, and a resistance to closure that is demonstrated in compulsive telling and retelling” (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 88-89). As regards temporal disorder, it is important to highlight the fact that none of the poets offer any clues as to the precise temporal settings of the poems; the traumatic event has destroyed their sense of temporal order and so their poems seem to inhabit a sort of limbo where jumps back and forth in time, and the conflation of current events and memory are common. The use of repetitions, too, is recurrent in these poems. By repeating certain words or phrases, the poets unconsciously point to the source of their trauma. In “Troop Train,” Shapiro’s repetition of the word death at the end of some of the lines of this poem reinforces the idea that, at the end of the “journey” he is most probably going to die. In addition, the repetition of the word “death” creates an atmosphere of anxiety in which the reader is able to identify with the poet. Similarly, in “War Poet,” Keyes repeats the phrase “I am” (lines 1, 3 and 5) in an attempt to affirm his identity and refuse his new facet as a soldier, to grab onto his peaceful past. Freud ascribes this repetition-compulsion, “to the repressed element in the unconscious” (1922, p. 19), and as Luckhurst explains, it “is an attempt to bind this energy, to assimilate it, and return the psyche to a state of quiescence once more” (2008, 83), which eventually leads the victim to the conscious act of “working-through.”

Before the victim has had time to process the traumatic event, therefore, communication is nearly futile regardless of how hard the poets try to express themselves. In Keyes’s “War Poet,” the phrase “moving words” point to the fact that words escape the victim of trauma, he is not able to communicate his feelings. In this same poem, the lines “I am the man who groped

for words and found / An arrow in my hand” (3-4) and in “Soliloquy in an Air-Raid”’s “And formulations of feeling are lost in action / Which hourly transmutes the basis of common speech” seem to affirm that the only possible means of communication for the witnesser of such violence is violence itself. War, then, interrupts speech; the precise moment of the traumatic experience yields a shutting down of any possibility of communication. The English language which was “The verse that was the speech of observation,” has ceased to be an appropriate means of communication and instead “Is sunk in the throat between the opposing voices” (lines 26 and 32). “Fuller notices this fact, although unable to name it, when he writes that “Something was set between the words and the world” (line 8).

Despite difficulty of communication, the poets feel an unrestrained desire to tell their stories. In “Desert Flowers,” Keith Douglas points to the usefulness of testimony by ending the poem with the lines “I will sing of what the others never set eyes on” (lines 15-16), Douglas vows to testify to the horrors of war so that people who have not experienced it understand what it does to a person, and in hopes that it never happens again.. The recurrent descriptive tone of the poems lies in the need to offer a detailed account of war, while retaining a subjective perspective. But just as they need to tell their experiences, they need someone who will listen as well. This is apparent in “Soliloquy in an Air-Raid,” where Fuller asks himself “But who shall I speak to with this poem?” (line 7). The absence of a listener renders the testimony, that act of self-scrutiny, useless. Time, however, has finally given Fuller and his fellow poets an audience for their expressions of trauma, proving that their efforts were not in vain.

Finally, it is of particular relevance that some of the authors call in their poems to other victims of trauma, including other war poets who came before them. In doing so, they are driven by a wish to find someone they can relate to, amid their isolation and suffering. In “Desert Flowers,” for example, Douglas establishes a dialogue with a poet called Rosenberg, who wrote during World War I: “Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying—” (line 2). Shapiro too in “Going to the War” mentions one John Cornford, a soldier-poet who died fighting in the Spanish Civil War, and incidentally the great grandson of Charles Darwin: “Since youthful Cornford fell” (line 6). Likewise, in “Reflection by a Mailbox,” Kunitz pays homage to “[his] ancestors” (line 3), when he describes how they suffered through the pogroms—lynchings of Jews—back in Europe. He tries to bridge the gap between himself and his ancestors, who are “One generation past, two days by plane” (line 8).

4. Conclusion

The relevance of trauma studies to literature is becomes evident when one analyses responses to horrific historical events such as the case of World War II. Trauma and testimony theories help us achieve a comprehensive understanding of the psychological impact of war upon the poetic persona. By focusing on poems written exclusively during the war by poets who witnessed the horror firsthand, this study represents an original approach in exploring how the written word portrays the victims' attempts to make sense of the specific traumatic moment that shatters their previous views of the world.

As expected, most war poetry is concerned with the impact of war on a personal and social level. The poems analysed in this paper display an enormous amount of traumatic features, the common "illness" of society during the war and the following years, portraying some of the most important tenets of trauma theory via specific lexis with negative connotations or graphic descriptions of horrific events. Ultimately, the central theme of the poems is the cruelty and absurdity of war. Central to their nature is the imminence of death as a source of anguish, which eventually translates into indifference or resignation. Because the poets were aware that they could die at any moment, they made it their duty to offer their testimonies as a warning for future generations. Their struggle to make sense of what was happening to them led them to adopt similar assimilation, or refusal, strategies in spite of their poetic idiosyncrasies.

Poetry is the literary genre which most successfully evokes the feelings of helplessness of the victims. Because poetry is, by nature, deeply reflective, it proves the most effective genre to describe the experiences of victims of trauma. While other literary genres such as the novel or the short story might be more suitable for retrospective, detailed accounts of trauma, poetry can capture the disjunctions, interruptions and inability to give a fully-formed narration that are central to the traumatic event like no other. For all the violent imagery in their accounts, however, these poets ultimately refuse to succumb to hate; instead, a "belief in a whole and positive love persists, and the poet gives the impression that he looks forward with hope to the "day-break" of times to come" (Stepanchev, 1943, p. 51).

It emerges as well, from this analysis, that the poets were not, at the moment of the traumatic event, fully conscious of the extent and importance of their experiences, and how valuable their testimony would be more than half a century later. Nonetheless, their testimonies are essentially an unconscious justification of the notion posited by Felman and Laub that victims of traumatic events are compelled by a natural force to tell their stories. By giving us their testimonies, war poets have contributed to the creation of a collective memory that has

survived to our days. The testimonies of those who witnessed and suffered the war have become essential to understanding the atrocities committed during this period.

Therefore, war literature, and especially the poetry of this period, proves one of the finest sources of information regarding the historical period of World War II. Poetry expresses the most intimate feelings of those who are writing, and thanks to the testimonies of these poets we are able to imagine the situation from the perspective of the soldiers fighting in the frontline. While historical accounts of war are only able to offer the facts, poetry captures the effects of the traumatic experience of the human psyche, the “something [that] was set between the words and the world,” the horror that would otherwise have rendered the victim speechless.

Inside the poets the words are changed to desire,
And formulations of feeling are lost in action
Which hourly transmutes the basis of common speech.

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