



Challenging Darl Bundren's insanity

A study on trauma

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I. Abstract

William Faulkner's fifth novel, *As I Lay Dying* (1930) (henceforth *AILD*) is the author's *tour the force* as he delves into the depths of the family sphere and skilfully portrays the complex, almost pathological universe of several individuals. Narrating the vicissitudes which the Bundrens face on their journey to the city of Jefferson, where they are to take the matriarch Addie Bundren's dead body, the family's nine-day trip concludes with a ruinous end for almost all of its members. For Darl Bundren, this price is the confinement in an insane asylum. As a consequence, literary criticism has frequently read Darl Bundren as a mentally deranged individual. The aim of this paper is to challenge the label of insane attached to Darl, interpreting him as a traumatized subject instead. Using Contemporary trauma theory as a critical tool, we will bring forward those symptoms which account for Darl suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a state triggered by his participation in WWI. Moreover, we will examine those aspects accounting for the complexity of his trauma, as the maternal abandonment he has been exposed to. Finally, our argumentation will allow us to dismiss the assumption that Darl is a schizophrenic. We will conclude by emphasizing the relevance trauma theory has in Darl's characterization and suggesting further research contributing to unveiling the construal of the character's insanity.

Keywords: Darl Bundren, trauma theory, post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, insanity.

II. Introduction

William Faulkner's fifth novel, *As I Lay Dying* (1930) (*AILD*) is the author's *tour the force* as he delves into the depths of the family sphere to skillfully portray the vicissitudes which the Bundrens face on their journey to the city of Jefferson, where they are to take the matriarch Addie Bundren's dead body. The family's nine-day trip to the burial site unveils an intricate, almost pathological web of interfamilial relations and concludes with a ruinous end for almost all of its members. For Darl Bundren, the second of the brothers whom the author endows with an almost supernatural perceptive power, this price is the confinement in Jackson's city insane asylum.

Defended as a «pivotal» (Anderson 1996, 114-115) figure in Faulkner's *AILD* due to his centrality in the narration, Darl Bundren's character has spurred a hoard of critical reactions devoted to tackle the nature of his arguable insanity. While for some critics such as Charles Palliser identifying Darl as a mentally deranged character is a

complex task (1978, 619), most seem to be in systematic consonance when referring to him as insane (Anderson 1996; Delville 1994; Palliser 1978). More concretely, for authors such as the already mentioned John K. Simon (1963) and Michel Deville (1994), Darl's behavior must be encompassed in the frame of schizophrenia, a diagnosis which as early as 1963 «establishes a precedent» (Hallgarth 2013, 1) in Darl's characterization. Criticisms such as Calvin Bedient (1968, 267), Eric Sundquist (1983, 294-295) or John Anderson (1996, 113) coincide that Darl's insanity is preceded by his inability «[t]o contain his consciousness within the boundaries of sanity» (Sundquist 1983, 294) reflected in his mental fragmentation depicted at the end of the novel. On the other side, for commentators such as Susan Scott Parish (2015) and William Branch (1977), Darl's unbalance is mainly explained by his participation in the Great War, the triggering event of his subsequent madness.

Only more recently criticism in the works of Southard Marybeth (2013) or Jared R. McSwain (2016) has questioned Darl's madness. They have done so by setting the construal of the character's alleged insanity against the socio-economic and political background where the narration takes place, as a means of unveiling the ideological and cultural variables that contribute to the portrayal of Darl as a deviant figure. Similarly, Neil Hallgarth (2013) dismisses Darl as straightaway insane and chooses to interpret him as a neurodiverse character instead.

In line with recent criticism, my aim is to further question Darl's canonical consideration as a madman. My claim is that, in terms of contemporary trauma theory, Darl is not an insane character but a traumatized one, and as such, he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In order to support this claim, I will focus on his participation in the WWI as the main event triggering his trauma, while mentioning those factors aside from war which have contributed to the combat shock to have an even greater impact upon the character's psyche. Finally, my discussion will allow me to dismiss Darl's psychological split occurring in the last episode of the novel as the psychotic episode of a schizophrenic and read it as a trauma-induced dissociative episode instead. As such, his internment in the Jackson insane asylum will rest upon secondary considerations which, due to space constraints, I will shortly suggest as a topic for further discussion.

III. Theoretical framework: Contemporary trauma theory

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Trauma Studies as a tool in contemporary literary criticism has its rise in the early 1990's, forwarded by theorists from the Yale School among whom Cathy Caruth (1995) is perhaps the leading figure (Visser 2014, 273). For Cathy Caruth, a traumatic event corresponds

to «the blow of a hard, overwhelming reality upon the psyche» (Forter 2015, 94). This reality may correspond to having one's life endangered by natural disasters, witnessing death in an armed conflict or suffering sexual abuse, among others. What essentially links these events is their destabilizing magnitude and unruliness; as such, they cannot be apprehended by a consciousness which is not prepared to assimilate their devastating reality. In the introduction of the collective work *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth eloquently summarizes: «the trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge [...] and thus continually returns, in its exactness at a later time» (1995, 153).

In this sense, studies upon the notion of trauma have crystallized in the 1980 inclusion of post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD in the third edition of the *Disorders Statistics Manual* (DSM-III). Briefly said, PTSD is originated by a «recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone» (Kaplan cited in Visser 2011, 271). This stressor is a limit experience which may correspond to experiencing physical or psychological abuse, or else facing a natural or armed catastrophe. For Cathy Caruth, PTSD is central to the articulation of trauma theory and she defines it as «the imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taken over by the mind [...] of events it cannot control» (1996, 58).

Essential for our analysis is to note that, in terms of its clinical manifestation, PTSD is characterized by a «persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event» which paradoxically coexists with an equally «persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma» (DSM-III cited in Loughran 2010, 103). Thus, as it will be argued, for Darl Bundren trauma is a reality that *is* and *is not*. However, Darl's participation in the WWI allows us to read him as an individual suffering from PTSD, a diagnosis which has been commonly obviated by criticism, except for Neil Hallgarth. For him as well, «PTSD stemming from war combat is a likely explanation for Darl's state of mind» (2013, 12). Hence, in what follows, we are going to trace in Darl's narrative those linguistic and behavioural aspects allowing us to trace the enormity of his trauma.

IV. Trauma and war

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At the end of the novel when Darl is on the train to the Jackson state insane asylum, he reveals us that «[he] had a little spy-glass he got in France at the war» (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 146). This revelation of his participation as a soldier in the WWI coincides with the stressor or destabilizing blow anticipated by Caruth, whose corrosiveness caused an irreparable psychological weariness upon



Darl's psyche (Branch 1997, 42). The aforementioned Cathy Caruth specifically insists upon the close link between war and trauma: «the experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbed state [...] is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century» (1996, 11). The war factor is even more decisive if, as Susan Scott Parish claims, we consider that «Darl was sane before he was draft and sent to Europe» (2015, 73). For us this assumption is supported by Anse saying that «[Darl] was alright *at first*, with the eyes full of the land, because the land laid up-and down ways then. It wasn't till that ere road come and *switched land*» (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 22, my emphasis). Thus, this switching of land reflected in Darl's eyes is arguably bound to be interpreted as the abandoning of his homeland Mississippi for the French soil.

Nonetheless, one is left wondering about the peripheral treatment of war in the novel; given the prominence we are attributing to it, it is unusual that Darl does not explicitly mention it up until the very last scene. This may of course be understood in terms of authorial choice. However, I should like to suggest that it actually coincides with the tendency of the traumatized subject of unconsciously avoiding direct references to the traumatic episode. Indeed, given its magnitude and severity, the traumatic event is never fully apprehended, hence any voluntary reference is not only emotionally problematic for the traumatized subject, but accessing it willingly seems an impossibility in itself. It is therefore vital to note that what triggers an open yet delayed recollection of Darl's experience in France in the final scene of the novel is precisely another traumatic episode: his imminent internment in a psychiatric institution. It is as if only something equally horrifying as facing confinement in a mad house could unveil the horror of the war years.

Plunging further into the character's consciousness we learn that one of the traces left by his participation in an armed conflict is the dislocation he seems to consistently experience. Indeed, Darl informs us of «[h]ow often [has he] lain beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home» (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 47). Given that it was infrequent for white trash to abandon their hometown, authors such as John Limon (2004, 248) have hypothesized about the topographical distance alluded at in this passage and the internal displacement it suggests, as being accounted for in terms of war. Moreover, the dislocation Darl experiences can also be retrieved from Dewey Dell's account: «Darl [...] sits at the supper table with his eyes [...] filled with distance beyond the land» (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 17). This idea is emphasized and later on repeated by Darl's sister when she mentions that «[t]he land runs out of Darl's eyes» (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 69). From these passages, we can sense

how Darl never feels himself fully reinserted in the reality of his hometown but the estrangement he suffers is a continuous reality.

Furthermore, the shocking war experience resurfaces through Darl's subconscious imagery who systematically alludes to the muddiness surrounding him, in what we can interpret as inadvertent references to the muddiness of the trenches where «infantry lived [...] and died» (Limon 2004, 251), still haunting him.

[T]he mud flying beneath the flicking drive of the hooves. Then he slows a little, light and erect in the saddle, the horse mincing through the mud. [W]e go on, the wagon creaking, the mud whispering on the wheels. [E]ven the mud there is not still. It has a chill, scouring quality (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 62-91).

In this line, coinciding with Erin P. Finley's idea of trauma «as [being] a matter of sensation and perception» (2012, 263) we can see how remnant traces of war combat flood Darl's sensory system, as he filters some of his physical experiences through the imagery of the battlefield. There is, for instance, an episode where, having started to rain, Darl makes the following observation «[the raindrops are] warm as though *fired from a gun*» (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 44, my emphasis). This comparison may seem fortuitous, but one feels compelled to establish a parallelism between Darl and Erich Maria Remarque's hero Paul Bäumer's and his description of the battlefield: «It is quiet, the front is still except for the crackle of rifle fire. The *bullets rain* over, they are not fired haphazard, but shrewdly aimed from all sides» (1931, 126, my emphasis).

Similarly, if trauma is an experience whose latency resurfaces years later defying the traumatized subject's own understanding, it is not less puzzling for the family. Darl experiences several blackouts, as we might call them, which the family is not able to understand. For instance, Anse alludes at how «[Darl has] got his eyes full of the land all the time» (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 22). We have pointed before at the partial non-functionality of Darl's sensory-perceptual apparatus and something analogous seems to occur to Darl's vision. His eyes somehow bear witness to the battlefield experience, once again supporting Finley's that «[t]rauma may come as a shock – to the ears [and] the eyes [...]» (2012, 264). This shock must not be understood in physical terms, for Darl is not visually impaired. Rather, the damage he suffers, being more psychological than anatomical in nature, is an all the more lasting one, as it is irretrievable for the rest of the family.

V. Multiple pathos

We have highlighted war as the main event accounting for Darl's shock. However, if one intends to grasp the amplitude of Darl's



trauma, one must be aware that it arises from the interplay of several factors. Thus, if war participation meant facing and witnessing death, losing his mother, Addie Bundren – both physically and affectively–, is an equally traumatizing experience. We know that even before he was born, Darl is expelled from the realm of maternal love. This is so because Addie sees in him the confirmation of the deception that words and the reality construed by these words are:

Then I found I had Darl. [...] It was as though [Anse] had tricked me [...]. But then I realized I was tricked by words older than Anse or love [...]and my revenge would be that he would never know that I was taking revenge (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 99-100).

As such, Addie's denial of Darl seemingly departs from Caruth's notion of trauma as the punctual, convulsive event which produces a neuropsychological imbalance. Nonetheless, it constitutes an all the more acute and perdurable trauma, as it throws into question the subject's own identity. Indeed, Darl's sense of self gravitates towards the mother recognizance. For him, «Jewel is, so Addie Bundren must be» (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 47). Unlike Jewel, he is not loved, and thus he doubts himself: «I dont know what I am. I dont know if I am or not» (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 46). In words of Calvin Bedient «the created postulates the creator. But Darl maintains that he has no mother, and the absence of the creator throws into doubt the reality of the created» (1968, 268).

Not only does he doubt the reality of his own being but, as a consequence, Darl perceives himself as a fragmented individual. In this sense, in her study on trauma and maternal abandonment, Linda A. Chernus illustrates how «emotional abuse during childhood specifically affects the developing self of the child often resulting in dissociative [...] symptomology and inability to form emotionally intimate [...] relationships» (2008, 452). In fact, a sense of depersonalization can be assessed in the young man even before his being drafted to war. There is a scene where it is patent that Darl has out-of body experiences, dissociating himself from his persona as he was «feeling [him]self without touching [him]self» (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 8).

This ongoingness of a trauma originated in his childhood is perhaps what best accounts for Darl's fragile sense of being, which caused war barbarity to have an even greater impact upon his already frail psyche. Linda Chernus goes on to insist on how «individuals with a strong sense of self [...] will have a relatively good capacity to heal from the impact of traumatic experience» (2008, 451). Clearly enough, Darl's weak sense of self is likely to impinge on the character's ability to efficiently process trauma. This renders him unable to heal from the war shock and allows his traumatic disorder to carve an even deeper damage on his being.

VI. Trauma and schizophrenia

Knowing as we do about the fragility of Darl's being and his «vulnerability to fragmentation» (Chernus 2008, 521), we are now able to better assess the scope of war's damage upon the character.

As mentioned in the introduction, what has mainly prompted critics to read into his behaviour that of a schizophrenic, are his linguistic manifestations, especially those accompanying his arguable psychotic episode at the end of the novel. Neal Hallgarth claims that «outside the linguistic evidence of Darl's dissociated mental state at the end of the novel, Faulkner gives little evidence to an exact psychological or neurological condition» (2013, 10). On the other side, early critics such as J. K. Simon are concerned with Darl's problematic splitting: «the primary factor of shock in Darl's final short monologue is his transfer of himself to the third person» (1963, 104). In a similar vein, Anderson insists on highlighting that «the most dramatic sign of his madness is that he refers to himself in the third person» (1996, 116).

On a closer look, what triggers the character's internment is arguably the novel's most climatic scene: the burning of Gillespie's barn. If until now Darl's insanity has been conjectured, in this scene it acquires a performative quality endangering the communal safety. At least Cash sees it in this way: «But I don't reckon nothing excuses setting fire to a man's barn and endangering his stock and destroying his property. That's how I reckon a man is crazy [...]. And I reckon they ain't nothing else to do with him but what most folks say it's right» (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 135).

However, Cash's judgement is strongly determined by social or moral considerations, since what is in essence a criminal action against private property (McSwain 2016, 3-4), for him is a symptom of his brother's madness. Not only is this assumption debatable, but his immediate pairing of criminality with mental instability exhibits a biased thinking very much mediated by social prejudices towards the mad. Michael Foucault comments upon this tendency where «madness was strangely twinned with crime, at least linked with it by a proximity which had not yet been called into question» (1998: 228).

It is in this context where Darl's handcuffing is to be placed. What surprises is the virulence with which he is taken away, «throw[n] [like] a poor devil in the street and handcuff[ed]like a criminal», seconds after Dewey Dell «jumped on him like a wild cat» while Jewel saying «kill him. Kill he son of a bitch» (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 137-138). One must have all these variables present when considering Darl's tremendous collapse for, as we have been pointing all throughout our paper, it is nothing but the culmination of a series of traumatic events. Essentially, Darl's psychological split has

less of a schizophrenic episode than being the response of an individual who, having experienced a cumulation of traumatic events and being «fragmentation prone» (Chernus 2008, 451), suffers a last shock as he is about to get confined in a mental institution.

In essence, psychotic episodes are characterized by an absolute loss of touch with reality, including the experiencing of verbal and auditory hallucinations sometimes paired with schizophasia: «unintelligible speech in which neither the individual words nor the sentences being strung together seem to correspond to any discernible overall meaning» (Kuperberg 2010, 8). For most part of his discourse, Darl does not experience said absolute disconnection with reality nor does his discourse present such derailed word patterning. It is predominantly the first part of his dramatic monologue the most puzzling part of his speech in terms of content, for he is mixing a series of apparently unrelated ideas, his word patterning exhibiting a degree of disjointedness which trespasses the limits of conventional language.

One of them had to ride backward because the state's money has a face to each backside and a backside to each face, and they are riding on the state's money which is incest. A nickel has a woman on one side and a buffalo on the other; two faces and no back. I dont know what that is. Darl has a little spy-glass he got in France at the war (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 146).

For us, these seemingly disconnected ideas are but his consciousness' attempt at conceptualizing a situation otherwise too destabilizing. This very much coincides with the fact that «the [traumatic] event [...] destabilizes language and demands a vocabulary and syntax in some sense incommensurable with what went before» (Berger 1997, 6). That is to say, there is no other means of apprehending the appalling absurdity of his confinement, but through a preposterous discourse. Thus, as Darl is at a loss with words he relies on non-normative usage. Moreover, in line with our introductory suggestion, this scene allows us to observe how the magnitude of war and the proximity of confinement are two events so extreme that one calls upon the other.

What, however, might correspond to a potential sign of «schizophrenic solipsism» (Anderson 1996, 116) is Darl's referring to himself in the third person, as this is arguably the clearest evidence of Darl's split consciousness. Nonetheless, rather than being an *a priori* sign of a fractured cognition, this splitting is triggered by an external stressor: his imminent internment.

Darl has gone to Jackson. They put him on the train, laughing, down the long car laughing, the heads turning like the heads of owls when he passed. «What are you laughing at?» I said. «Yes yes yes yes

yes.[...] Darl is our brother, our brother Darl (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 146).

It is perhaps in the episode presented above, where the nature of trauma as a dissociative phenomenon in which the psyche departs from the context where a horrific event occurs, is better exemplified. Indeed, severance from one's identity in the context of a dissociative episode is a recurrent pattern in victims exposed to trauma. However, failing to see Darl's dissociation as a «trauma-based illness» (Welton cited in Haycock 2010, para. 5), criticism has incurred in the frequent error of misdiagnosing schizophrenia for individuals suffering from dissociative disorder (Haycock 2010). As we believe, the fact of facing psychiatric confinement and the context surrounding this event are stressor which may trigger Darl's extreme reaction. We have mentioned the crudeness with which he is taken away and its unexpected occurrence. The perspective of being interned in the Jackson asylum, where he sees himself «in a cage [with] his grimed hands lying light in the quiet interstices, [...] foam[ing]» (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 146) is unbearable. Thus, it is no wonder that Darl wants to escape the ruthlessness of this forthcoming reality by disengaging himself from his persona. On the other side, referring to himself as *our brother* bears some undeniable irony, a cutting remark aiming at bitterly denouncing the frailty and the deception of that familial bond.

VII. Conclusion

The initial aim of this paper was to challenge Darl's Bundren alleged mental insanity as voiced by criticism. We intended to do so by highlighting the strategic relevance WWI had in terms of accounting for the character's psychological state, positing next that, as an ex combatant, Darl could be better understood in the framework of Contemporary Trauma Theory, suffering from PTSD.

Further, the leading diagnosis of schizophrenia oftentimes attributed to him has proven incomplete as an explanation for Darl, as, in interpreting the character's last breakdown as a schizophrenic episode, criticism failed to take into consideration the totality of those factors from which it might have resulted.

All things considered, our explanation of Darl's insanity is nothing but a starting point and it feels incomplete unless inserted in the framework of a broader analysis which, due to space constraints, we have not been able to provide. Indeed, in consonance with our final conclusion, there are two aspects which could ask for further research. By providing a contemporary alternative reading of Darl's insanity, his confinement is no longer justified in clinical terms, but on two other external motives: social and interfamilial.

The societal label of queer –read as insane in the novel’s context– attached to him may serve as partially legitimizing his confinement, for one may erroneously see in Darl’s breakdown the expected reaction of a deranged person, without inquiring what actually provoked it. Thus, it is worth exploring how this label or social diagnosis is deeply rooted in Darl’s non-allegiance to a culturally constructed standard behaviour. That is, the character’s marginalization lays in his being «lazy» and an intellectual who «thinks by himself too much» (Faulkner and Gorra 2010, 15-41) – in sum, an unprofitable individual. On the other side, Darl is sent to Jackson not only because he seemed a burden for his family, but also because he was a threat. Indeed, his interment was the retribution for the burning of Gillespie’s burn as much as the response to Darl’s potential ability to disclose Dewey Dell’s pregnancy or Anse’s selfish nature. As such, it is worth inquiring upon the social and domestic factors of Darl’s confinement.

Finally, contemporary trauma theory is a magnificent tool which would enable criticism to carry a much more in-depth study of Darl’s character. For instance, we have not dealt with the trauma of natural disasters (Faulkner and Gorra 2010) and merely hinted at mother’s abandonment trauma, which would in turn shed further light upon the character.

VIII. References

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