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Art, Nature and the Negotiation of Memory in J. L. Carr's *A Month in the Country*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2018-0046>

Abstract: The present article analyses J. L. Carr's novel *A Month in the Country* (1980) in the light of an approach to traumatic experience as paradoxically relating destructiveness and survival. This view of trauma – already present in Freud and further elaborated in more recent theories like Cathy Caruth's – accentuates the possibility of constructing a new story that bears witness not only to the shattering effects of trauma but also to a departure from it. From this perspective, the author deals first with the role of art as a survival aid to the novel's traumatised protagonist, explaining how his restoration of a medieval mural helps him work through his troubled memories of the Great War. Repetitions and doublings link the two central characters, their discoveries and their recovery, creating layers of meaning that, it is argued, call for a 'palimpsestuous' reading, in Sarah Dillon's sense of the term. The author then focuses on the regenerative power of nature in the novel, relating its use of the pastoral to the frequent recourse to it in Great War literature, and interpreting Carr's text in line with critical approaches that reject escapism as the main trait of the pastoral mode. Finally, the protagonist's retrospective narration is discussed as a creative act that is also an aid to the survival of the self.¹

Introduction

In *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Cathy Caruth approaches trauma as not merely a shattering of the self, but also as “fundamentally, an enigma of survival” (1996: 57–58). Here as in later works she draws on Freud's theories in order to deal with

¹ The research carried out for the writing of this article was financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (FFI2015-65775-P and FFI2017-84258-P). The author is also grateful for the support of the Government of Aragón, the European Social Fund (H03_17R), and the European Development Fund.

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this “paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival” (Caruth 1996: 58), which is also what J. L. Carr’s novel is about. In “Parting Words” (2001), for instance, Caruth refers again to the puzzle at the heart of Freud’s works, especially *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), in terms of a “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 which originates it” (2001: 7). In her more recent *Literature in the Ashes of History* (2013), Caruth posits the existence of “a language of the life drive”, which is used in the aftermath of traumatic experiences and is able to resist the pull of the death drive. This is a “language of departure [...] that does not repeat the unconscious origin of life as death, but creates a history by precisely departing toward survival” (2013: 9). The starting point of these reflections is Freud’s well-known description of his grandson’s self-invented *fort-da* game, which, Caruth insists, does not just repeat compulsively a history it doesn’t own but creates, in its repetition, something new (2013: 8). She follows Freud in regarding the struggle for life as subordinate to the death drive, but there is also an evolution in her approach to trauma, a reorientation that significantly “accentuates the *creative* elements at work in constructing history out of the repetitions of trauma (death drive), and the subsequent possibility of creating a *new* history (life drive) out of it” (Ong 2014: 102).

Emerging from psychological and deconstructive criticism, Caruth’s work has played an important part in the development of trauma theory. What became the dominant model in trauma studies was first formulated by Yale School critics in the early 1990s, in particular Cathy Caruth, but also others like Geoffrey Hartman and Shoshana Felman. Caruth’s approach has been as influential as it has been questioned due to an excessive emphasis on trauma as silence and a view of traumatic experience as a permanent cycle of repetitions that lead to stagnation, rather than to understanding and working through. An ideal of unrepresentability is fostered by this theory of trauma, whose focus on narrative impossibility is linked with an equally criticised disinclination to consider the possibility of healing and recovery. As many critics and intellectuals have claimed, this discourse on trauma has its limitations.² And yet, it is equally important to recognise, as Jean-Michel Ganteau does, that there has been an evolution towards a more positive vision of trauma, which was nonetheless already present in the older model as well as in the writings of Freud and Ferenczi (Ganteau 2017: 23). As I have done in the paragraph above, Ganteau quotes from Caruth’s *Literature in the*

² Ruth Leys influentially criticised Cathy Caruth in *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000). With varying emphases, the same can be said of Kansteiner (2004), Luckhurst (2008), Fassin and Rechtman (2009), Craps (2010) and Berlant (2011), among others.

Ashes of History to further his argument that there has been “a change of inflection, and even a change in valence, as trauma is no longer considered in negative terms, as dependent on a pathological attachment to or rather presence of the past, but rather as a creative possibility, a creative ‘parting’ couched in ‘the language of the life drive’” (Ganteau 2017: 24).

It is against this background that I will approach J. L. Carr’s *A Month in the Country*. The novel tells the story of a Great War veteran’s evolution from trauma and isolation to reconnection, a reconnection of the shattered self’s broken pieces as well as a reconnection of the self with others. This reconnection is mediated by two spaces – the space of art and the idyllic landscape of rural England – which get protagonist John Birkin in touch with a creative force that counterbalances the pull of death.³ In what follows, I will analyse the role of repetitions and doublings in the novel and their connection with traumatic experience, focusing on how they bring back the main character’s war past in a way that facilitates his departure towards survival. This departure will also be explained in the light of the novel’s use of the pastoral, which I will relate first to the recourse to this mode in Great War literature as theorised by Paul Fussell, and then to Paul Alpers’ reading of the pastoral, heavily influenced by William Empson. Alpers’ approach builds upon the above-mentioned dynamics between destruction and survival: in his view, the pastoral should not be interpreted as an escape from reality – in the sense of a flight from the destabilising, the painful, the violent – but rather as the negotiation of vulnerability and the rise of belief in future possibility that emerges from an awareness of human limitations and suffering.

Narrated by Birkin in his old age, *A Month in the Country* can throw some light on Caruth’s “language of the life drive”, which she refers to as a fundamental but elusive concern (2017: 10). The concept can be related to how art and nature become vehicles for creatively mirroring, refracting, and healing the protagonist’s war trauma, but it can also be connected with the novel’s retrospective narration. The narrative is the result of old Birkin’s (re)creation of that summer in Yorkshire, which turns his memories into a story that is also an aid to the survival of the self in its fight against the passage of time.

³ John Birkin’s surname recalls that of the main character in D. H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, a novel written during some of the darkest days of the Great War and published in 1920, the year when the action of Carr’s novel takes place. Its title coincides with Ivan Turgenev’s play *A Month in the Country* (1855), although the author was thinking of Hardy and not of Turgenev when he made a start on the novel. As he points out in the foreword, his initial plan “was to write an easy-going story, a rural idyll along the lines of Thomas Hardy’s *Under the Greenwood Tree*” (Carr 1980/2000: xv). He also admits, though, that “[d]uring any prolonged activity one tends to forget original intentions” (Carr 1980/2000: xv) and indeed, the novel is deceptively simple.

Birkin's Mural Restoration: Doublings and the Spatialisation of Memory

The First World War “inaugurated the manufacture of mass death that the Second brought to a pitiless consummation” (Keegan 1998: n. pag.). We have knowledge of both World Wars, and of many other instances of armed conflict and mass death but, for those living in the early twentieth century, the encounter with mass death that came with the Great War took on a new dimension, since “[m]ore than twice as many men died in action or of their wounds in the First World War as were killed in all major wars between 1790 and 1914” (Mosse 1990: 3). When it comes to Great War narratives, as Cristina Pividori (2010: 90) claims, it is the returned soldier, physically and mentally wounded, who appears to be the most symbolic visual reminder of this historical episode. Pividori (2010: 92) draws on Wyatt Bonikowski (2005) to explain that the returned soldier does not bring death home, as he is a survivor; what he brings home is, instead, the death drive. Therefore, in evoking a liminal space between life and death, the trope of the return of the soldier can be approached in the light of the conflict between *eros* and *thanatos* that is at the heart of trauma and that allows us to see the Great War veteran as aligned with other literary representations of not only war trauma, but of trauma in a broader sense of the term.

The protagonist of *A Month in the Country* is a young Londoner who comes to the Yorkshire village of Oxbodby some time after the war's end. In the battlefield, Birkin was a signaller, one of the most dangerous duties at the front. Before that he trained as an art restorer, which explains why he has been hired to uncover a medieval wall-painting hidden under layers of whitewash in the little country church of Oxbodby. Local heiress Adelaide Hebron has died recently and there is an important sum she donated to the vicar's Fabric Fund, but there are also some conditions she stated in her will. One is the restoration of the medieval mural. The other has to do with finding a burial site, a task entrusted to archeologist Charles Moon. He has been hired to find the grave of Miss Hebron's forebear, Piers Hebron, who committed some unnamed transgression, was excommunicated and therefore buried outside the church graveyard.

Both Birkin and Moon are ex-combatants burdened by their traumatic memories. Birkin's stammering and nervous twitches are the physical signature of his unresolved war trauma. His condition is aggravated by the fact that his wife Vinny has left him for another man, which makes it even more difficult for him to adjust to the familiar spaces of his native London after his return from the front. For his part, Moon seems to be more self-confident and willing to talk about the war, but he is not only affected by war trauma, as his nightmares prove, but also by something else that he never mentions. As Birkin learns during a chance meeting with another

war veteran, Moon was court-martialled for a homosexual relationship with his personal aide; he lost his rank, his military awards and decorations, and he spent some time in a military prison. This secret is paralleled by another one, which he does reveal to Birkin: he has accepted the job of searching for Piers Hebron's grave in order to excavate the field for evidence of an Anglo-Saxon building, but he will say nothing about this until he can publish his findings. Although Moon verbalises what Birkin cannot, there is much about his painful war memories that he has no intention or no power to unearth. He talks about the strain of battle and hides his homosexual affair and its consequences, just as his search of Piers Hebron's grave is used as a cover for his work on the Anglo-Saxon ruins.

The physical space Birkin and Moon occupy, in the church and in the yard, respectively, is explicitly connected with their war past. Birkin sleeps in the church belfry and works up a scaffold during the day; Moon excavates by day and sleeps in a tent in the church yard, which he has pitched over a pit. As he tells Birkin: "You up your ladder, me down my hole...we're survivors" (Carr 1980/2000: 17). Birkin once refers to Moon as his "secret sharer" (Carr 1980/2000: 7) and, in fact, it is as if they were two halves of the same battle-scarred personality. The parallelisms and contrasts that bind them together find an extension in the way in which their healing is facilitated by the jobs for which they have been hired, and this creates, in turn, another doubling. As Stanley Kauffman argues, the double process of uncovering and recovering from the past involves Birkin and Moon: "The men's recovery and their discoveries are linked" (1988: 24–25).⁴ The tasks entrusted to Birkin and Moon require of them to uncover what has been buried or hidden, thus bringing to the fore an image of depth as spatialised time. The restoration of the church mural is carried out by carefully removing the layers of whitewash that hide it and Moon's archeological enterprise is based on excavation, an excavation that will uncover the Anglo-Saxon ruins, and also, eventually, Piers Hebron's remains. Revisiting the space of trauma needs to be mediated by other spaces, and so, it is through their professional tasks that the two characters reveal and are faced with their memories of the past, which marks the beginning of their recovery, their departure towards survival.

Brian McHale refers to the figure of depth as one of the most outstanding master tropes of modernist writing, although he states that this "archeological master-trope" did not lose its vitality after modernism (1999: 241). McHale argues that the spatial dimension of the verticality of depth is coupled with a temporal dimension and, in that sense, depth can be seen as spatialised time, "the past

⁴ Kauffman was writing about Pat O'Connor's 1988 film adaptation of Carr's novel, but his remarks are equally apposite to the latter.

(whether personal and psychological or collective and historical) deposited in strata” (1999: 240). This view perfectly applies to Carr’s novel, where depth is both spatial and temporal, and where mural restoration and archeological excavation have a spatial nature that unveils different though interconnected temporal layers: the far (medieval) past, when the mural was painted and Piers Hebron was buried, and the near past of Birkin’s and Moon’s war experiences. Just as space has a temporal dimension, memory is also spatialised – the spatialisation of memory being a trope already present in some of Freud’s works, where psychic processes are explained by comparing memory with a layered archeological site.⁵

Birkin’s removing the layers of whitewash from the mural and Moon’s excavation and unearthing of Piers Hebron’s remains reveal something onto which they can project the memories of a past they have not yet worked through. It is as if by the removal of what covers the painting and the grave they discovered an underlying script, like the underlying script of a palimpsest, and so, they can ‘read’ their own personal histories – buried, but present, just as the first writing on the manuscript is erased, albeit imperfectly – thanks to the medieval artist’s work and Piers Hebron’s remains. This palimpsest metaphor has its limitations, which are, however, worth exploring. Both men use their findings, what is visible, in order to confront their past. But this past is not there, as the underlying script in a manuscript is. They do not uncover a further layer but, instead, they add it by projecting the invisible onto the visible. Theirs is a form of palimpsesting rather than palimpsest reading. Moreover, while the texts in a palimpsest inhabit the same space but have no connection, what is interesting here is precisely the opposite: the way in which the two men’s findings are related to their pasts. The reader’s perceiving these connections – of which the characters are sometimes, but not always aware – involves him/her in a palimpsestuous reading of sorts.

Sarah Dillon has reflected on the neologism “palimpsestuous”,⁶ which she uses as a near synonym of the term “involute” coined by Thomas De Quincey:

“Involute” is De Quincey’s name for the way in which “our deepest thoughts and feelings pass to us through perplexed combinations of *concrete* objects [...] in compound experiences incapable of being disentangled.”⁷ [...] The adjective “involute” describes the relationship

5 The archeological analogy appears in Freud’s writings of the 1890s and although he modified it during the course of his work, he never abandoned it entirely. In *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), Freud described his first full-length analysis of hysteria noting that he had arrived at a “procedure which I later developed into a regular method and employed deliberately. This procedure was one of clearing away the pathogenic psychical material layer by layer, and we liked to compare it with the technique of excavating a buried city” (Freud 1955: 139).

6 It first appeared in print in French in Gérard Genette’s *Palimpsestes* (1982).

7 Dillon is quoting here from De Quincey’s *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845/1998: 104).

between the texts that inhabit the palimpsest as a result of its palimpsesting and subsequent textual reappearance. The palimpsest is thus an involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other. [...] Where “palimpsestic” (the official adjective from “palimpsest”) refers to the process of layering that produces a palimpsest, “palimpsestuous” describes the structure that one is presented as a result of that process. (Dillon 2007: 4)

Thus, it could be argued that Birkin’s and Moon’s palimpsesting is the way in which their deepest thoughts and feelings come to the surface as they pass through the concrete objects that are their findings. This process partakes of the creativity that, as we have seen, Caruth sees in the *construction of something new* that does not deny the past, the trauma, but departs from it in a flight to survival. Creativity relates here to the fact that the characters not only uncover what was covered but also construct stories for their findings. By blending these stories with their own they begin to negotiate their memories through their tasks, creating an involuted structure that helps them in their working through and that, as mentioned above, calls for a palimpsestuous reading – attentive to the way in which layers are interconnected – on the reader’s part. Let us see how this works in more detail.

The church mural that Birkin works on turns out to be a painting of the Last Judgement, which he dates to the “fourteenth century, after the Black Death, when surviving magnates were swallowing dead neighbours’ estates at disaster prices and while fear for their own skins was still sweating out some of their profits” (Carr 1980/2000: 7). The conjectural nature of Birkin’s estimate is emphasised in the text and, in fact, Birkin can be seen to jump to conclusions. But, as Rosemarie McGerr (2005: 367) argues, these conclusions are interesting in that they reveal Birkin’s thinking may be shaped by the common association of the Great War with the Black Death: the latter was often cited by contemporaries on account of the staggering number of casualties and the horrifying forms of suffering experienced in this war.

The first section of the mural that Birkin uncovers is a Christ different from that in other medieval representations: “This was no catalogue Christ, insufferably ethereal. This was a wintry hard-liner. Justice, yes there would be justice. But no mercy” (Carr 1980/2000: 20). This Christ was “uncompromising...no, more – threatening. ‘This is what you did to me. And for this, many shall suffer the torment, for thus it was with me’” (Carr 1980/2000: 20). The starkness of Christ’s features, which point to a merciless God, blends with Birkin’s war experience, and even seems to provide him with “a reason for his own suffering, an almost divine justification of the incomprehensible carnage of the Somme in a world where God seemed to have abandoned men” (Cavalié 2012: 206–207). On having tea at the Sykes’, a family cut up by the loss of their nineteen-year-old son at the front, the unfair death of many leads Birkin to yell out on his way back home: “God? Ha! There is no God” (Carr

1980/2000: 55). These words are just the final part of his outburst, which throws light on his loss of faith in a compassionate God, a God that cares, and which brings the reader back to the mural Christ, all harshness, no mercy.

There is also an obvious parallelism between the vision of hell as depicted in the mural and the carnage of the trenches. It is Moon who verbalises the connection: “do you know, in some ways, it brings back the whole bloody business in France” (Carr 1980/2000: 47). Birkin reflects that he “didn’t see it like that. No doubt I didn’t want to. [...] To me, this was just a medieval wall-painting, something peculiar to its time and nothing more” (Carr 1980/2000: 47). But even if he refuses to see the link, the words he uses to describe the mural have the effect of reinforcing it. For instance, he explains how his uncovering of the painting revealed “torrents of human flesh” and how each day he “released a few more inches of a seething cascade of bones and worn-riddled vitals frothing over the fiery weir”, while he refers to the damned in the painting as “no more than fire fodder” (Carr 1980/2000: 46). No wonder that, when the sight of the mural prompts the vicar’s wife to ask Birkin if he believes in hell, he should immediately think of the war: “Passchendaele had been hell. Bodies split, heads blown off, grovelling fear, shrieking fear, unspeakable fear! The world made mud! But I knew it was bible hell she had in mind” (Carr 1980/2000: 59).

The mural turns out to be unexpectedly good, and Birkin provides explanations about technical details that bear witness to the artist’s calibre. His art and Birkin’s work to preserve it make him feel “Somebody already” (Carr 1980/2000: 10), whose expertise will rescue a masterpiece from oblivion and preserve it for the future. He imagines this was the artist’s wish (Carr 1980/2000: 21) and even infers from the painting details about his physical appearance (Carr 1980/2000: 18). Little by little, he constructs the skeleton of a story for him, which may be seen as not less hypothetical than his initial dating of the mural, but that is part of the process of creating meaning after a war experience utterly devoid of it, and a homage to (artistic) beauty after so much horror. And yet, there are two details that baffle him and disrupt his narrative on the painter and his work. The artist seems to be responsible for even the easiest parts of the mural, which suggests, to Birkin, that he did not trust his apprentice. However, there is a small part of the painting, a corner of hell, that is a rather rough job, so Birkin cannot understand “why he handed over to his lad when his nose was at the winning post” (Carr 1980/2000: 18). Even more puzzling is a damned figure with a crescent-shaped scar on his forehead, falling headfirst into hell. This could not be the typically symbolic representation of a heretic. It looked more like a portrait of an individual, which had been whitewashed much earlier than the rest of the mural, probably just after its completion. He is repeatedly referred to as “the falling man” (Carr 1980/2000: 48, *passim*) and in this novel, where doublings make for meaning, it is just apposite

that Birkin should conclude (with, again, no proof) that the artist must have fallen from the scaffold just before completing his work, which was then finished by his apprentice (Carr 1980/2000: 58). In one more doubling, Moon's discovery of Piers Hebron's grave is what solves the other mystery, as the falling man in the mural and the dead man in the grave are seen by Birkin and Moon as the same person (Carr 1980/2000: 80). "Falling man" is, however, a phrase packed with meanings due to its connections with not only the man in the painting and the supposed demise of the painter, but also with the two central characters, their war experience (comparable, as the novel encourages us to see it, with falling into hell), and the ensuing trauma (the 'falling' of the self, in the sense of its collapse, break-up or dissolution).

When Moon excavates the site of Piers Hebron's unmarked grave, what he and Birkin find is the skeleton of a man buried with a crescent moon pendant. As he was a soldier in the days of the Crusades, Moon concludes that he was punished for converting to Islam, and that the falling man in the medieval wall painting inside the church must be a portrait of the same person. Moon's words about the excommunicated man downplay his transgression by providing a reason for it and highlighting, instead, the harshness of others: "Good God, they really had it in for the poor devil. [...] Caught in some expedition and then became a convert to save his skin" (Carr 1980/2000: 79). In fact, it is out of sympathy for him that Moon decides to suppress his discovery of the pendant, as it would do further damage to Hebron's reputation. Like Birkin with the mural, Moon might be seen as jumping to conclusions here as to his explanation of why the crescent moon pendant is in the grave.⁸ Similarly, what these conclusions reveal is the way in which his past history blends with the interpretation of his findings. As McGerr (2005: 360) argues, Moon's name encourages the connection between him and the medieval soldier – a connection strengthened by the fact that in war poems, recruitment posters and war memorials twentieth-century soldiers are often portrayed as medieval knights – and, on this basis, the archeologist's sympathy for Hebron may well be accounted for by the fact that Moon *projects* his own experience on him, thus suggesting a parallel between the two men and the punishment inflicted on them for their unorthodox behaviour (the medieval soldier's conversion to Islam and Moon's homosexual relationship). Shortly before Moon finds the grave, Birkin has learned about his friend's homosexual affair and its consequences. Birkin knows, and "from that day, Moon knew that I knew" (Carr 1980/2000: 70). The unveiling of Moon's secret, the digging out of Piers Hebron's remains and the solution to the mystery of the falling man in the mural take place at barely the same time, thus reinforcing the many spatio-temporal doublings and connections that have been established throughout the narra-

⁸ For other possible explanations, see McGerr (2005: 362).

tive. To round things up, Birkin uses the phrase “my secret sharer” (Carr 1980/2000: 85) a second time at this point, referring on this occasion to the medieval artist who painted the fresco and revealed through it his knowledge of the reasons why Piers Hebron had been excommunicated.

Even if the four men – Birkin, Moon, the artist, Piers Hebron – are related and bound together by the image – literal or metaphorical – of the falling man, the first two are able to revert their collapse, to a great extent due to their findings about the other two and the stories they unravel, or rather construct, about them. They turn them and these narratives into a mirror of their own experiences, and so, into an indirect representation of their traumatic memories that facilitates their working through. In “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”, Michel Foucault outlines the features of these two kinds of spaces that every society creates, and briefly comments on the mirror as combining elements of the unreal but consoling utopias, and the real but disquieting heterotopias. The mirror

is, after all, a utopia, in that it is a place without a place. In it, I see myself where I am not, in an unreal space that opens up potentially beyond its surface; there I am down there where I am not, a sort of shadow that makes my appearance visible to myself, allowing me to look at myself where I do not exist: utopia of the mirror. At the same time, we are dealing with a heterotopia. The mirror really exists and has a kind of comeback effect on the place that I occupy [...]. Starting from that gaze which to some extent is brought to bear on me, from the depths of that virtual space which is on the other side of the mirror, I turn back on myself, beginning to turn my eyes on myself and reconstitute myself where I am in reality. (Foucault 1997: 332)

In much the same way, Birkin and Moon see themselves where they are not, but it is precisely by palimpsesting the mural, the artist, Piers Hebron and his transgression – by superimposing on them a layer of narrative that testifies to the way in which they see themselves in them – that they become visible to themselves, so that they can turn back on themselves and begin to reconstitute themselves where they are.

War and Nature: Pain and Healing in the Pastoral Mode

All these events take place in the summer of 1920. The English landscape is described as endowed with regenerative powers. On the day after his arrival, Birkin wakes up and looks out of the belfry window to see

the hills heaving up like the back of some great sea-creature, dark woods washing down its sides into the Vale.

And then, God help me, on my first morning, in the first few minutes of my first morning, I felt that this alien northern countryside was friendly, that I'd turned a corner and that this summer of 1920, which was to smoulder on until the first leaves fell, was to be a propitious season of living, a blessed time. (Carr 1980/2000: 11)

As Cavalié explains, Carr's novel revisits a pastoral topos – the perfect summer glorifying the English countryside – deeply linked with the concept of Englishness. Moreover, as Carr does, earlier writers like Edward Thomas and Siegfried Sassoon, but also later ones like Pat Barker and Ian McEwan have blended the distress of war with the evocation of a pastoral, healing countryside (Cavalié 2012: 193–194). It is no wonder that it should be so, since the use of the pastoral to hint at war has been there since its conception. This is Seamus O'Malley's point when he argues that Virgil's pastorals were already, to an important extent, meditations on violence and war that used language about landscapes and *otium* (leisure) in order to emphasise the chaos and conflict that defined the context in which the poet's work was written (the last phases of the Roman civil wars) and that also affects his characters (2014: 97). Thus, by intertwining the pastoral with Great War narratives, writers like Rebecca West, Ford Madox Ford, and those mentioned above were updating it, but they were also, to use O'Malley's words, “rooting it in its older incarnations” (O'Malley 2014: 98).

In *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), Paul Fussell argues that the experience of the Great War and the pastoral experience are inextricably related since, on being antithetical but connected with outdoor spaces, each evokes the other. The horror of war can be best measured through contrast with its opposite, the pastoral ideal. This being so, recourse to the pastoral

is an English mode of both gauging the calamities of the Great War and imaginatively protecting oneself against them. Pastoral reference, whether to literature or to actual rural localities and objects, is a way of invoking a code to hint by antithesis at the indescribable; at the same time, it is a comfort in itself, like rum, a deep dug-out, or a woolly vest. (Fussell 1975: 235)

In line with this, the rural pleasures of Oxbodby in Carr's novel, the warmth of the villagers and the beauty of the countryside are a source of comfort to Birkin, all the more so, the reader realises, on account of the contrast they provide with the front. They are also a standard of measurement to gauge the horror that is still fresh in his mind and that, as we have seen, is indirectly brought back to him by the mural. Moreover, given the fact that Birkin narrates the story and focalises it through his younger self, it is the character and not an external narrator and focaliser that conveys his experience in pastoral terms, thus turning it, like the mural, into an indirect means to hint at what cannot be directly presented. As the vicar tells Birkin: “You have come back from a place where you have seen things beyond

belief, things which you cannot talk of yet can't forget" (Carr 1980/2000: 75). For this reason, this Arcadian world is never utopian, its beauty never prelapsarian, as it is rendered through the eyes of a man who has gone through war, one of the clearest exponents of the injustice and inhumanity of a fallen world.

Drawing on Erwin Panofsky (1936), Fussel (1975: 245–246) explains that the English made a special sense of the classical tag *Et in arcadia ego*, which is connected with the emblem juxtaposing skulls and roses. Instead of taking it to mean "And I have dwelt in Arcadia too", they understood it in a sense long forgotten on the continent but that remained familiar in England: "Even in Arcadia, I, Death, hold sway". The skulls and roses thus convey that the power of Death cannot be excluded even from the "safe" world of pastoral, which has always been, after all, "a favoured mode for elegy" (Fussel 1975: 253). This can be related to the way in which Birkin's month in the country is interspersed with elements that work as a powerful *memento mori* (Cavalié 2012: 198). Interestingly, they break the harmony and peace felt by Birkin like shafts that simultaneously point to the future (the transience of life, and of that summer, which will inevitably end) and to the past (the remembrance of the many deaths he witnessed during the war). As examples of the above-mentioned meaning of the *Ego in arcadia* in the novel, and therefore of the pastoral as not excluding a dark side, one could mention a beautiful summer day when Birkin joins the villagers for a picnic in the countryside, and that ends with the news of the death of a young girl whom he had visited earlier in the narrative. There is the invitation to have tea at the Sykes', a nice afternoon shattered by the memories of a son killed in battle and Birkin's ensuing reflection on a God that does not intervene. Moon's losses deeply upset Birkin, especially "the idea of an independent man, a proud spirit, being shut up like an animal in a military prison [...] that's what appalled me" (Carr 1980/2000: 70). And there is the unhappy couple made by the vicar and his wife, who somehow taint the picture of rural happiness evoked by other characters. Mr Keach, the chilly Anglican vicar, is disliked by most neighbours, Methodist worshippers. Alice Keach is a beauty that makes Birkin feel love again and who is portrayed as suffocated by her life.⁹ The natural elements rendered as soothing everywhere else in the novel are used to highlight her feeling of anguish through the vegetation that surrounds the vicarage. It is this vegetation that appears in her nightmare of trees closing in on her and making the house feel like a compression chamber, which reminds Birkin of when a shell exploded and the air in a dug-out was sucked out and then blown in

⁹ The relationship, or what could have been a relationship, between Birkin and Alice Keach is an important aspect of the story, but not the main one. Birkin never finds the courage to express his feelings for her, but what is in their minds when they meet, and the fact that she brings him apples when she visits, add another dimension to the phrase 'falling man'.

(Carr 1980/2000: 34). The same episode that uses nature to evoke a threat to life (her unhappy marriage, his war experience) significantly ends with a conversation on the beautiful roses that Mrs Keach grows – an old variety, Sara van Fleet, with sharp thorns, she says, but that keeps on blooming (Carr 1980/2000: 37). The rose that she then gives Birkin, and that he still keeps pressed and dried in a book at the time when he narrates the story, becomes a powerful symbol of timelessness and transience, happiness and woundedness, death and survival. One should not forget, either, that even if the rose is traditionally associated with love, as is also the case in the novel, roses, together with poppies, are inseparable from writings about the Great War (cf. Fussell 1975: 243–254). This ties back with the skulls-and-roses emblem, the use of the pastoral in Great War narratives and, as I will explain in what follows, the connection of the pastoral with vulnerability and the acceptance of suffering, rather than with escapism.

Leo Marx distinguishes between “the complex and sentimental kinds of pastoralism” (1964: 25) or, in other terms, “the pastoral of sentiment and the pastoral of mind” (1964: 32). The sentimental kind is the escapist and simplistic version of pastoral, in consonance with the pejorative uses of the term. In contrast to this, Marx posits another pastoral that requires “an effort of mind and spirit” (1964: 70) and whose complexity has to do with the fact that the notion of idyllic retreat is always qualified in it, and questioned by counterforces that undercut the idyll. Marx’s “pastoral of the mind” can be related to Paul Alpers’ views in *What is Pastoral?* (1996) and his invitation to consider the mode’s complexity and implicit realism. As he argues, the landscapes that often account for an association with the idealised and the escapist are “rather an interpretation, a selective emphasis determined by individual or cultural motives, of the central fiction that shepherds’ lives represent human lives” (Alpers 1996: 27). Alpers draws on Virgil’s transformation of Theocritean bucolic in the first *Eclogue*, which portrays two shepherds who have gone through the Roman civil wars, in order to relate the pastoral mode to an ethos that makes vulnerability representative of the human condition: “In their simplicity and vulnerability, shepherds fittingly represent those whose lives are determined by the actions of powerful men or by events and circumstances over which they have no control” (1996: 24). What is more, vulnerability, powerlessness and suffering are negotiated communally in the pastoral, as opposed to epic and tragedy, with their ideas of heroic autonomy and isolation. The pastoral takes human life to be inherently a matter of common plights and common pleasures, which are shared and accepted, but not in a naïve way, because pastoralism retains “an awareness of [...] the limitations that are seen to define, in a literal sense, any life, and their intensification in situations of separation and loss that can and must be dealt with, but are not to be denied or overcome” (Alpers 1996: 93). Such an awareness does not exclude but rather provides a ground for hope, as Alpers also

stresses the way in which the pastoral is open to change, to future possibility. All through the book, but especially in his analysis of *The Winter's Tale*, Alpers conveys the idea that the power of the pastoral, beautifully illustrated by Shakespeare's play, is the power of transformation:

The possibility of exchange – which is to say, the possibility of action and utterance that establish connections between separate persons, the recognition of likeness in apparent difference (Perdita's imagined rebuke to Polixenes), the possibility represented by the grafting Polixenes defends when it is understood in the spirit of Perdita (i.e. when we understand the art-nature dialogue as responsive song, not debate) – these pastoral usages and thematics are the means by which the play transforms the disasters with which it began. (1996: 221)

There are then the wounds and disasters that are represented and that stand for other, unrepresented ones, and there is also the setting in motion of a future change that transforms them. And yet, the dissonance intrinsic to the pastoral, between sadness and happiness, vulnerability and tranquillity, creates disparities and conflicts that are never fully resolved. Alpers accordingly describes the pastoral mood in terms of “suspension”: in contrast to words such as “resolve”, ‘reconcile’, ‘transcend’, ‘suspend’ implies no permanently achieved relation, while at the same time it conveys absorption in the moment” (1996: 68).

The title of Carr's novel already calls attention to a moment suspended in time, upon which the narrative dwells as a revisitation, through memory. This suspension is also felt throughout the narrative, not only as connected to the main character's mood and the comments of the older narrator, but also as an experience of reading. The frequent use of dialogue, the dwelling of the story on apparently trivial things/events – as in the exchange between Birkin and the vicar about the old stove in the church, or Birkin's conversations with Kathy Ellerbeck, the station master's daughter, who visits him while he is at work – also contribute to the novel's pastoral quality, as the pastoral privileges dialogue over action and has the power, in William Empson's famous definition, of “putting the complex into the simple” (qtd. in Alpers 1996: 41).

The story begins in a way that emphasises Birkin's solitariness and alienation. He arrives at Osgodby on a rainy day and the station master offers him an umbrella in a northern accent that he hardly understands. Birkin's first impression is one of the village as “enemy country” (Carr 1980/2000: 3), but such unpropitious beginning is soon superseded by a process of reconnection: of a shattered self, of self and others, of self and place. When he meets Moon, he meets one like him. Then the friendliness of the villagers, the way in which they invite him to their homes, their Wesleyan chapel services and their Sunday outings, make him feel again that he is part of a community, and that they also

have their wounds. As mentioned above, Birkin's idyllic summer contains elements that undercut the idyll. His month in the country is permeated by the death and losses of others, which have the effect of helping Birkin work through his own just as the love of the villagers reawaken in him a lost potential for love, of others and of life. As in the pastoral, suffering and healing, pain and pleasure, are communal in the novel. But even before he begins to create bonds with others, it is the healing effect of the countryside that he feels. The beautiful sunny day after his arrival in the rain already announces a change to come, and with the beauty of nature, reborn with each new day, Birkin starts to believe in the power of transformation at the core of the pastoral, as explained above: "The marvellous thing was coming into this haven of calm water [...]. And, afterwards, perhaps I could make a new start, forget what the War and the rows with Vinny had done to me [...]. This is what I need, I thought – a new start, and, afterwards, maybe I won't be a casualty anymore" (Carr 1980/2000: 12).

In an article on place in Holocaust consciousness and Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*, Dalia Kandiyoti uses the phrase "'surrogate' places of partial belonging" (2004: 301) in an attempt to affirm the possibility of a place-based consciousness even within the framework of destruction and exile. Through spatial doublings and translations, surrogate places of partial belonging facilitate an imagined continuity between past and present places, between past memories and the present self of someone who may be exiled, displaced, traumatised, but who can develop strategies of survival and partial belonging in "surrogate" geography (Kandiyoti 2004: 301, 314). This, I think, provides an interesting perspective from which to approach Carr's novel and all its doublings and parallelisms between spaces that also have a temporal dimension, as seen above. That this surrogate geography is rendered as pastoral also contributes to highlighting the dissociation and contrasts that, according to Alpers, are never definitely solved in the pastoral mode. In Kandiyoti's terms, it could be said that place facilitates the continuity between Birkin's traumatic past and the character's present self, and so, what allows for the negotiation of painful memories is to a great extent what breaks the idyll of the pastoral and turns it, rather, into a vehicle for coping with wounds that surface throughout the narrative. Echoing Caruth's views as summarised at the beginning of the article, the drive to life at the heart of *A Month in the Country* is a form of survival that *both* bears witness to a traumatic past *and* turns away from it. As Moon tells Birkin, "now we're different. We know. We're men apart. [...] I keep reminding myself that I'm still a bit round the bend and perhaps always shall be.' He laughed. 'You too?' It was a question he didn't expect to be answered: the side of my face had been clicking away as he talked" (Carr 1980/2000: 60–61). Healing *begins* that summer in Yorkshire, but is never presented as easily or entirely accomplished.

Conclusion

As we read about the older Birkin's recollection of his stay in Oxgodby, we feel that his month in the country worked to restore him, but also that his memories of that time have carried him forward to the present from which he narrates the story. From another perspective, the fact that the narrative is a memory also makes us ponder on the extent to which it *constructs* his past experiences. Just as we sense that the stories that Birkin and Moon weave around their professional discoveries show what is in their minds (their traumatic pasts) more than they uncover the truth about their findings, we may wonder whether Birkin's rendering of a place of blissful calm is faithful to his past experience, or whether the pastoral is a template that the older Birkin uses to give his memories narrative form, creating as much as recreating what he describes. He himself reflects on his rendering and how it may differ from what he felt then, as in the following passage:

Day after day, mist rose from the meadow as the sky lightened and hedges, barns and woods took shape until, at last, the long curving back of the hills lifted away from the Plain. [...] Day after day it was like that and each morning I leaned on the yard gate dragging at my first fag and (*I'd like to think*) marvelling at this splendid backcloth. But *it can't have been so*; I'm not the marvelling kind. Or was I then? (Carr 1980/2000: 37, my emphases)

At the end of the novel, the narrator says that all that happened stays in his memory as "in a sealed room furnished by the past, airless still, ink long dry on a put-down pen" (Carr 1980/2000: 85). This suggests that he is telling things exactly as they were, that the past can be uncovered through memory, unaltered by the passing of time. And yet, it is difficult to trust the narrator's final remarks as the previous narrative has been, among other things, an exploration of the ambiguous relationship between memory and experience. Talking about the church mural, Birkin acknowledges that it is impossible to revert an old painting to what it was once: "At best, I aimed at approximation, uniformity, something that *looked right*" (Carr 1980/2000: 28). In the same way, the scars of past wounds cannot be erased: "Like their [Birkin's and Moon's] search for the medieval past, their personal recovery does not completely restore an original state" (McGerr 2005: 358). This is also the case with Birkin's narrative, a record of the past that testifies to "a time irrecoverably lost" (Carr 1980/2000: xv), as well as to its (unavoidably partial/distorted) preservation in memory.¹⁰

¹⁰ Carr himself explains in the foreword that he "wanted [his novel's] narrator to look back regretfully across forty or fifty years but, recalling a time irrecoverably lost, still feel a tug at the heart" (1980/2000: xv). Then he relates this to his own experience of writing the novel, which he initially conceived in terms of his own memories of the past. He was born in Yorkshire and certain

Christopher Bollas (1995) has suggested that the passing of time is intrinsically traumatic, as it involves the loss of the self. Birkin's war trauma is an example of historical trauma, but there is also structural trauma and within this latter frame it would not be farfetched to think of the trauma of time, the trauma which is time.¹¹ A traumatic experience like war faces the individual with the possibility of death, and so do, in a different way, old age, the passing of time and the sustained remembrance of the past. The past is, in Bollas' terms, "a cemeterial concept", one that agglomerates "the fine details of lived experience under a word that signifies the eradication of the self" (1995: 134).

When someone is asked about his past, s/he focuses on the people, events, and choices that seem to bear a heavy weight, Bollas explains, but historians and psychoanalysts know about the importance of those things that have a kind of Wordsworthian simplicity, and that turn out to be laden with significance (1995: 135). Thus, even if the past means the loss of the self, Bollas goes on to suggest that "screen memories" (1995: 135) – not necessarily screening more painful or significant memories, as in Freud's use of the term – allow for the preservation of the past. He defines them as condensations of psychically intense experience in something simple – the evocativeness of the commonplace – which, when recollected, perform "a kind of screen function within the self, as the small memory evokes the self state that prevailed at the time: remembering the small episodes of life revives selves from the past, even if the past as a totality remains chained to its dumb facts and reveals comparatively little" (Bollas 1995: 140). Birkin's narrative can accordingly be approached in the light of Bollas' screen memories and his view that they yield images which can transform the destruction of the past into new stories of meaning. This is, Bollas emphasises, a deeply creative process, propelled by "the work of the imaginary and the symbolic *upon* the real" (1995: 143). Birkin's act of telling can therefore be seen as the novel's ultimate creative act and illustration of the departure towards survival posited by Caruth, which can be related to the above-mentioned transformation of the real into imaginary and symbolic registers. As the novel shows, and in line with Caruth's arguments, a traumatic past may

characters and events in the story are inspired by real-fact ones, belonging to the author's past. However, he has to admit that, when one writes about the past, one cannot prevent the story from being coloured by one's own present. Thus, the window onto the past that his writing of the novel opened eventually showed "a darker landscape inhabited by neither the present nor the past" (Carr 1980/2000: xv).

¹¹ Dominick LaCapra (1998: 47) makes a distinction between these two types of trauma, which he explains in the following terms: historical trauma "is related to specific events, such as the Shoah or the dropping of the atom bomb"; structural trauma is "existential trauma [that] appears in different ways in all societies [...] in terms of the passage from nature to culture [...] the encounter with the Real, the inevitable generation of aporia, and so forth".

result into a pathology, but it is not devoid of creative possibility, of the possibility of a “parting” from it couched in the language of the life drive. Birkin’s story of survival eventually becomes the survival of a story, and so, of the possibility of *creating* something not only out of the loss of the character’s pre-war self due to the experience of combat, but also out of the loss of the narrator’s self as a consequence of the passing of time. It is to counteract the latter that the older Birkin rescues a simple but evocative episode of his past and gives it narrative form.

As Bollas puts it, “the trauma of time passing is unconsciously managed by screen memories, which become underground wells in the deserts of time. Once tapped [...] what was partially erased by the trauma of passing time is restored through free association to screen memory” (1995: 141). “[T]app[ing]” can be related here to narrative (and, in the light of the author’s foreword, not only to Birkin’s narrating his story, but also to Carr’s writing the novel). Loss follows loss, in the novel as in life, but new meanings are produced through the creative energy that comes with the very act of (discursive) retrieval of the past, especially of those intense experiences that Bollas sees as condensed in screen memories, and that one may at least try to revive through stories that make them available for the self’s present, and the self’s future. As “underground wells in the deserts of time”, to use Bollas’ words quoted above, they can help heal the wounds caused by those more traumatic episodes inhabiting the past. This involves, as Carr’s novel shows, a fight that may well be a flight, the flight to survival.

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