

Putting War and Trauma in Order. Patterns of Mess in War and Post-War Literature

Abstract: War and trauma – be it related to war itself, or to other problematical issues such as collective or individual precariousness, struggle for gender and/or national identity, discovery of personal or historical truths – are often sublimated in literature by objective correlatives and structural features that simultaneously create an identity and enhance the idealization related to it. Of particular interest are those works in which characters build their identities through an accumulation of both material and immaterial objects, which can be either utterly messy or compulsively ordered, in both structure and content.

In Victorian and Edwardian England, Uranian poets and writers (John Galsworthy, John Addington Symonds, William Johnson Cory, Lord Alfred Douglas, Montague Summers, Frederick Rolfe, Charles Kains Jackson, E. E. Bradford, John Moray Stuart-Young, among many others) based the essence of their works on apparently ordered classical forms and paradigms to represent complex questions of sexuality and social restraint. They often referred to World War I and to trauma as well, especially when personally experienced, as in the case of Edmund Spenser and other canonical authors (see Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon), who were driven to write poetry to overcome shell shock. As Paul Fussell recognized, Uranian poetry formed the basis of World War I war poetry in terms of imagery, which drew on Greek myths and ideas to give structure to otherwise intolerable conflicts and emotions.

Responding to the virtuosistic experimentation of Modernism and Postmodernism and the new realism of some post-war fiction, some novelists of the late twentieth century either adopted similar tendencies to create order out of a chaotic reality or subverted formal order completely. The latter seems to be the case with Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), in which the precariousness of both the WWII and the post-9/11 world is spasmodically controlled by the characters' ambiguously 'rigid' search through history and by a formal coherence, in overlapping narratives and simultaneous, conflictual times and spaces, that intertwine lives in a mess of form and content.

This article aims to analyse these modulations of classical order and Uranian and/or post-war mess. Both such order and mess are arguably outcomes of disordered consciences and of attempts at using objects and myths to shape a suspect, often hostile, reality. This reading will tease out similar patterns in the representation of 'messiness' in contemporary British and American literature dealing with 'minoritarian subjects'.

Keywords: *Foer, Isherwood, mess, Uranian, war poetry*

Never such innocence,
Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word – the men
Leaving the gardens tidy,
The thousands of marriages
Lasting a little while longer:
Never such innocence again.
(Philip Larkin, *MCMXIV*)

Introduction

War and trauma – be it related to war itself, or to other problematical issues such as collective or individual precariousness, struggle for gender and/or national identity, or discovery of personal or historical truths – are often sublimated in literature by objective correlatives and structural features that simultaneously create an identity and enhance the idealisation related to it. Of particular interest are those works in which characters and lyrical voices fight for physical and/or emotional survival by building their identities through an accumulation and organization of elements, which can be either totally messy or compulsively ordered in both structure and content.

In Victorian and Edwardian England, Uranian poets and writers (John Galsworthy, John Addington Symonds, William Johnson Cory, Lord Alfred Douglas, Montague Summers, Frederick Rolfe, Charles Kains Jackson, E. E. Bradford, John Moray Stuart-Young, among many others) based the essence of their works on apparently ordered classical forms and paradigms to represent complex issues of sexuality and social restraint. In a later moment, they also made reference to World War I and trauma as well, especially when experienced in person, as in the case of Edmund Spenser and other canonical authors (see Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon), who were pushed to write poetry to overcome shell shock. As recognized by Paul Fussell, Uranian poetry was at the basis of war poetry in terms of imagery, which drew on Greek myths and ideas to give structure to otherwise unsustainable conflicts and emotions.

Ricocheting through the virtuosistic experimentation of both Modernism and Postmodernism and the new realism of some post-war fiction, novelists of the late twentieth century, when attempting at queering reality, either adopted similar tendencies to set it to order – see the 1953 war novel *The Charioteer* by Mary Renault – or subverted formal order more or less completely. An interesting example is Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*, where the world (sexual revolution, homosexual love, nuclear war, and death) is put into order, at least apparently, thanks to the symbols of bourgeois life and to an organic view of life, or, still more recently, the experimental novel *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), by Jonathan Safran Foer, in which the precariousness of both WWII and the post-9/11 world is spasmodically controlled by the ambiguous 'rigid' search of the characters through history and formal coherence, in overlapping narratives and simultaneous, conflictual times and spaces, intertwined lives in a mess of form and content.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse these modulations of classical order and/or post-war mess (queer identity, and war, ethnic issues, and genocide) – both outcomes of “disordered” consciences and attempts at using traditional imagery and myths to shape a suspect, often hostile reality. The critical framework will consist mainly of the studies by Paul Fussell on culture and war (*The Great War and*

Modern Memory, 1975, and *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, 1989), which, although relatively dated, still represent some of the best interpretations to look at how war has fashioned imagination. In addition, other critical texts will be used: the few canonical critical studies on Uranian poetry, the classic one edited by Brian Reade, *Sexual Heretics* (1970), and *Love in Earnest* (1970) by Timothy d'Arch Smith, and some of the works by Michael Adams, Elizabeth Freeman, Santanu Das, Samuel Hynes, Trudy Tate and Jay Winter for issue related to war, gender, and identity.

The three movements of this article will try to describe how the twentieth century shaped its historical and existential messiness – its set of political, religious, and gender-related uncertainties, doubts, and disquietedness – in different scales of order, starting from a brief introduction of how “sexual hereticism” was controlled and made acceptable to society through recognizable forms and images. Secondly, we will focus on how war trauma made use of some of the same patterns to expose in poetry otherwise unconceivable experiences; and finally the analysis will focus on an example of how in the sixties the novel, with new trauma and fears, could settle for new literary compromises and new aesthetics. The main purpose will be the identification of possible patterns in the representation of ‘messiness’ in contemporary British and American literature that deal with ‘minoritarian subjects’.

The Path to Unsettlement: Uranian Poetry and Greek (dis)Order

Our first step is introductory not only for the purpose of this paper but also, and most importantly, for what literature had to become at the beginning of the twentieth century. Before the outbreak of World War I, there was a pre-war tradition of homoerotic literature composed by a group of intellectuals who were active in London and Oxford mainly, and who called themselves Uranians because of their Platonic inspirations. The beginning of the Uranian movement is traditionally dated as 1 April 1888, when the poem “Hyacinthus” by Lord Henry Somerset appeared in the *Artist*. Uranian poets were quite active artistically, and from the late eighties they published pamphlets, poems, pictures, and photos about boy-love: William Johnson Cory, Symonds, Carpenter, Frederick Rolfe “Baron Corvo”, Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas, Aleister Crowley, Leonard Green, Montague Summers, Sholto Douglas, Beverley Nichols, Gerard Hamilton (Isherwood’s “Mr. Norris”) are a few of a well-known circle of late Victorian high-society. They had their own periodicals to publish their works, such as *The Artist* and *Journal of Home Culture and The Quorum: A Magazine of Friendship*. It is difficult to know how widely their works were read outside their clique, and how much the collective imagination drew on their imagery. It is commonly known that at least the succeeding homosexual literature shared the same cultural background, as we can see from Forster’s *Maurice*. Set in Cambridge, the plot of the novel is about the experience of reading the *Symposium* by two young male characters, and is therefore utterly

modulated around Platonic explanations of otherwise unacceptable behaviour. Although the novel was published posthumously in 1971, it was written in 1914, just at the beginning of the war, and known by Forster's friends, in particular Isherwood. The novel is perhaps the outcome of the last offshoots of what this Neo-Platonic wave of literary order had been at the end of the previous century and, later on, in early twentieth-century England, thanks to the "Cambridge Apostles". This was a group of intellectuals, including figures such as Keynes and Strachey, who regarded themselves as rebels devoted to Plato, as "part of a larger agenda that is, their ideological opposition to Victorianism".¹

¹ Julie Anne Taddeo, "Plato's Apostles: Edwardian Cambridge and the 'New Style of Love'", *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8.2 (October, 1997), 197.

Uranians, in their 'most innocent form', made theirs the concept of a pure form of friendship, "Greek love", grounding it on Plato's mythic conception of Eros as newly promulgated by Walter Pater: worship of young male beauty without sex. The challenge to dominant, disciplined late Victorian sexual morality went hand in hand with the acquisition of a language that made it possible to articulate love for another man. Greek myths – whose diffusion was largely due to the influence of Benjamin Jowett (1817-93), author of the first complete English translation of Plato's works – and the related imagery produced an almost 'technical', 'objective' way of making poetry, particularly 'homosexual' poetry, poetry that had to express forbidden feelings at war with Victorian society. The counter discourse of homosexual love took place by means of the infiltration of Plato's language into "the very vocabulary through which the emerging homosexual identity was defined".² In the utilitarian and bourgeois conception of sexuality – and somehow of literature too – that dominated Victorian public culture, the restoration of a more passionate, even uncontrollable, erotic drive needed a new language to overcome what were clear-cut distinctions in sexual behaviour – "conjugal, healthy, and reproductive or perverted, sordid, sinful, illegal, and degenerative":³ Aesthetic Platonism proposed an alternative to these schemas. And this revisionary attitude applied also to what Robert Graves called the "pseudo-homosexuals": advocates of sentimental friendship between older and younger boys acquainted with classical images.⁴

² Stefano Evangelista, "'Lovers and Philosophers at Once': Aesthetic Platonism in the Victorian 'Fin de Siècle'", *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 36.2 (2006), 234.

³ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁴ See Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2000).

⁵ Stefano Evangelista, "'Lovers and Philosophers at Once'", 244.

Although it is true, as Stefano Evangelista says, that this emergence of codified poetics and style is "a discourse for the emancipation of male homosexuality that gestures towards a wider ideal of sexual freedom",⁵ we should add that this freedom was more in concept than in actual textual form. In fact, from the point of view of form, most Uranian poetry is the result of the most 'conventional' outcomes of Victorian poetry. It is a poetry constructed of reassuring metres and figures of speech, images and imagery. Boy-love is dealt with by well-known literary traditions – mostly Greek, or Christian – and traditional forms – sonnets, pastoral elegies – and only at a later moment, as war approached, was the verse broken, and so too were its images. Uncountable references to characters of classical texts, mostly explicit, can be found in the homosexual poetry of the time, as well as other simple reassuring images such as boy-saints and acolytes depicted as golden-haired,

angelical youths,⁶ or scenes from pastoral romances, more often than not taken from works such as *The Faerie Queene* or Virgil's Second Eclogue, as Northrop Frye recognized in *Anatomy of Criticism*. Ganymede, for instance, is one of the favourite figures mentioned in these poems, as well as Adonis and Piers Gaveston (Edward II's *minion*): classical allusions "which would at once pacify any publisher or reader and impress a Uranian mind".⁷ From a formal point of view, and also when considering the themes of distress, love pain, and forbidden love, a typical almost flawless Uranian composition is a poem by John Gray, 'Cyril', from the 1884 collection *Cyril and Lionel*:

If my desire were thine, and wert thou near,
For mine thy hand, for mine thy smile, thy cheek,
My fancy at thy law, thy heart too weak
To bear the weight of love, too strong for fear
To strive to speak.
No need for me to call thee fair, sweet, dear,
Dear, sweet, and fair, to raise my voice and seek
A louder speech for love therein to wreak
The anguished love that for thy soul to hear
I need not speak.⁸

This poem evidently echoes Lord Alfred Douglas's line, "I am the love that dare not speak its name", in his poem "Two Loves", the Shame that was to become the epithet of homosexual love at the time. Yet another common image of Uranian poetry is the Christlike figure: the one who makes sacrifices for the love of humanity, the one who is crucified and tortured (the young Saint Sebastian is evidently another recurring character and symbol) because of his love. When not Greek gods and heroes, Christian ones would then be used: both Sassoon ("The Redeemer") and Owen in his letters would draw equations between their soldiers and Christ or Saint Sebastian, putting the body and the language describing sensual aspects at the forefront⁹. Likewise, World War I was the world's first major industrial warfare that ravaged the male body.¹⁰ The fundamental concept here was the catachresis of the idea of sacrifice, in certain cases even homoeroticized in images of Christlike-soldiers and crucified heroes.¹¹ Homoerotic connotations overlap and partly empty the original images of their more spiritual features, leaving room for vague sadistic homoeroticism and/or more classical metaphorization of sufferance and sacrifice. As is predictable, tragic tones had to take their part in Uranian poetry. Classically conceived, tragedy is used to give order to chaos: an ordered plot that leads to a deserved end. From this perspective, Uranians do use tragedy in their poetry. Perhaps that is why they fundamentally indulge more frequently in classical images rather than Christian ones: they need the tragedy before Christ's death, which they will use more extensively once war starts. Christianity was, we should not forget, a religion that had rejected them at

⁶ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2013), 299.

⁷ Timothy d'Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English 'Uranian' Poets from 1889 to 1930* (London: Routledge, 1970), 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁹ Santanu Das studied the importance of physical experience on the front focusing on the centrality of the sense of touch, also giving an account of the powerful language used by a few famous figures, among whom Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg, Vera Brittain and Mary Borden, and lesser-known participants in the war – unknown soldiers, nurses, privates. Das explains how writers struggle with finding the verbal equivalents of the sensual, showing us the textual mimesis of physical experience, as in the opening lines of *Dulce Et Decorum Est*; interestingly enough, one of the principal images he considers fundamental in the trench experience is mud and its indistinctiveness: "The experience of trench mud", he writes, "brought the soldiers to the precipice of non-meaning in a world that was already ceasing to make sense" (37). The mud itself would be a simile for the experience of being immersed in a confusing, borderless and totally embracing: "war literature reveals a mode of thinking about mud, a way of giving linguistic shape to formless matter" (40). *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2005).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 129.

the time. Only loved ones are compared to indulgent, lovable Christs; but it was Greek myths and imagery which were more celebrated and adopted by university educated, upper-class men in Victorian England, and also in the US and in continental Europe. Apollonian attitudes dominated this kind of Victorian poetry, before mess took possession of life – and creative power – as soon as war broke out, leaving room for Dionysus, the god of mess, and his new eruptive forms. Before that, Lord Alfred Douglas had written another poem, which in some of its parts was similar to hundreds of other elegies of dead boys that became stylish even twenty years before 1914:

Brave boy with the bright blue eyes,
Faithful and fair and strong!
Dead now – when the short day dies
Like a broken song,
And the night comes dark and long.

Friend and more than a friend,
Brother and comrade true,
We are come to the dim sad end
Of the way we knew:
I bleed in the dark for you.¹²

¹² D'Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest*, 52.

An interesting example is also Edward Alexander Crowley's, alias Aleister Crowley's, poem "Bathyllus", included in the collection *The Winged Beetle* of 1910. The passion that "crowns and controls" a "mystical love" is evidently a sort of oxymoronic syntax which well represents the ambivalent perception of forbidden love in Uranian poetry; ordered verses that are designed to protect and ignite passion at the same time, a paradoxical justification of purity against lust.

Let us drink, O my Lord, let us fill us
With purple Falernian wine!
Thy lips on the lips of Bathyllus
As we lock us and link and entwine,
Eyes ever burning like coals
For the passion that crowns and controls
The mystical love of our souls.¹³

¹³ Ibid., 99.

The outbreak of the Great War would wipe out some of the most ordered rhyme schemes and metric patterns (as the quintets above) even in those works which were not labelled 'impressionistic' or 'modernist', causing a first visible change in Uranian poetry itself. This partial abandonment of a regular classical form is evident in the following 1918 poem by Edwin Emmanuel Bradford, whose rollicking verse and a more aggressive headlining propagandistic style mark an evident change in form after the beginning of the war:

Eros is up and away, away!
Eros is up and away!
The son of Urania born of the sea,
The lover of lads and liberty.
Strong, self-controlled, erect and free,
He is marching along to-day!

He is calling aloud to the men, the men!
He is calling aloud to men –
‘Turn away from the wench, with her powder and paint,
And follow the Boy, who is fair and saint:
And the heart of the lover, long fevered and faint,
Beats bravely and boldly again.’¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid., 88.

Together with other warfare vocabulary and images added in a later phase (‘marching’, ‘strength’, ‘liberty’, ‘braveness’), death was used even before the War by Uranian poets as an excuse to write of the love for a boy, a fake *in memoriam*. Even before the closer acquaintances with dead bodies and young corpses, death was used in poetry as another excuse to set life in order, to allow forbidden love only when impossible, only when safe, from a distance. According to Fussell, “long before the war the Uranians were producing poems that were at first glance indistinguishable from poems of the Great War”.¹⁵ War poetry was love poetry, it has been said.¹⁶ The similitude between certain compositions produced by both combatants and non-combatants are sometimes striking, not as much in the form but for the imagery and vocabulary that were taken up by the generation who did not have to fight against Victorian hypocrisy but on a real battlefield, against historical betrayal. In both cases, the horror – for society or for oneself – began to be too strikingly unbearable, so that the only adoptable means of expressions were the good old reassuring ones, leaving Modernisms to the confident ones, the ones far from the battlefield although often in the embattled city. In fact, avant-gardes were just one of the possibilities to give new artistic shapes to the war experience fixing it to the collective memory: “Modernism, like other writings of the period, attempts to make the war ‘readable’ and to write it into history”.¹⁷

¹⁵ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 309.

¹⁶ Richard Fein, “Modern War Poetry”, *Southwest Review*, XLVII, no. 4 (Autumn 1962), 286. Cit. in Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 303.

¹⁷ Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Penrith: Manchester U. P., 1998), 13.

At the same time, as suggested by Sarah Cole, “a certain picture of modernism, which involves alienated, suffering males who both revile the past and demand that the world listen to their story of modernity, erupts out of the conflict between incompatible forms of male community”.¹⁸ It is widely recognized that the beginning of the century saw a manifest change in the experience and expression of masculinity, and war played a major role in this new attitude. Also involved in the process was a new kind of misogyny, which originated from a new unbalance in standard roles: as Sandra Gilbert points out, “many men involved in the First World War, including most combatants, resented what they perceived as women’s ability and desire to take advantage of their loss”.¹⁹ The entire conception of gender, together with that of historical order, had to be effected by the Great War,

¹⁸ Sarah Cole, “Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War”, *ELH*, 68.2 (Summer, 2001), 471.

¹⁹ Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar, *Sexchanges*, vol. 2 of *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale U. P., 1989).

as is manifest in “Apologia Pro Poemate Meo”. Wilfred Owen’s famous poem is a deliberate and straightforward analysis of the bonds of war, where he asserts the enormity of the intimacy formed by war in the male community, in contrast with conventionalized heterosexual norms:

I have made fellowships -
Untold of happy lovers in old song.
For love is not the binding of fair lips
With the soft silk of eyes that look and long.

The transition from romantic Uranian poetry and war poetry through the overlapping of the two is particularly striking here. Although still organic in structure, the poem sees a substitution of “the signs of war for conventional romantic imagery, as the domestic tradition of the marital bond is transformed into a virile performance of military duties”.²⁰ At the same time, the traditional shape of poetry – which was recognized as echoing Keats²¹ – imagines male intimacy not through war’s depersonalizing experiences but through a pre-war, pretraumatic harmony.

²⁰ Cole, “Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War”, 485.

²¹ Ibid., 486.

The Great War, or History of the Battlefield

Merry it was to laugh there -
Where death becomes absurd and life absurder.
For power was on us as we slashed bones bare
Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder.

A crucial problem for what was to become war literature was to find a language
²² Ibid., 473. “adequate to the unfamiliarity, ineffability, and horror of the war”.²² At the same time, the unintended challenge was to find a language for a new kind of intimacy among males, forged in war’s intimacy; and the result was, once again, that the imagery adopted was the one of Uranian poetry:

The inexpressibility of war friendship thus coincides in interesting ways with the kind of double-talk that so marked much homoerotic literature in Edwardian Britain. In both cases, the impossibility of speaking about male intimacy to women, who are treated with suspicion, and to the culture at large, which is punitive and repressive, requires the writer to create a new and cryptic language, often by invoking historical and literary traditions with the cultural authority of the Greeks and the Bible. During the war, the tradition of using elevated language to characterize possibility of connections between men became increasingly providing a shared vocabulary for widely divergent texts, precise nature of male love remained blurred. Yet there are important differences.... If decadent critics of the fin de siècle had invoked both classicism and the trope of purity beyond words in order to negotiate a space within a repressive culture, war writers experienced inexpressibility less as a strategy for self-protection than

as a failure in language.²³

²³ Ibid., 473-474.

Again, self-protection from chaos triggers the embracing of traditional elements that contrasted with more disquieting and louder forms of expression. Silence was a tactic: only when it was necessary to speak (and the most canonical war poetry did use poetry, was often driven to composing poetry, in order to heal and recover from shell shock and other traumas), the favourite images were the most comfortable ones.

It is no coincidence, then, that in some of the manifestations of war literature one could retrace the highly sophisticated pastoralism mentioned by Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory*:²⁴

²⁴ See "Arcadian Resources", in Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 251-292.

Recourse to the pastoral is an English mode of both fully 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 dugout, or a woolly vest.²⁵

²⁵ Ibid., 255.

Thus the pastoral idyll was another expression of that necessity to put a distance between life's horrors and one's imagination, to find tranquillity and stability, no matter how precarious and ambivalent these may appear: "If the opposite of war is peace, the opposite of experiencing moments of war is proposing moments of pastoral".²⁶

²⁶ Ibid., 251.

According to Fussell, therefore, different strategies were deployed to defend oneself against absurdity; even rumours – clear, well defined although ambiguous narratives fleeing from field to field and country to country – served as a form of self-assurance. "These rumors resemble much of the more formal literature of the war in that their purpose is to 'make sense' of events which otherwise would seem merely accidental or calamitous".²⁷

²⁷ Ibid., 131.

If we consider myth in a Girardian perspective, it represents an exoneration from epistemological and moral burdens: thus, if Uranian classical myths served as buffers against standard morality and social impediments, so it was for the war poets, who obviously had to add more layers and more disquieting images to represent the mess of the world they wanted to depict. Fussell contests Bernard Bergonzi's conviction that "[t]he dominant movement in the literature of the Great War was... from a myth-dominated to a demythologized world";²⁸ for Fussell, almost the opposite took place: "In one sense the movement was towards myth, towards a revival of the cultic, the mystical, the sacrificial, the prophetic, the sacramental, and the universally significant. In short, towards fiction".²⁹ The Nazis would know it only too well. World War I was born on myth and generated a new myth.³⁰ It would be the Second World War to finally demythologize society through silent shouts at a new maniacal order.

²⁸ *Hero's Twilight*, 198.

²⁹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 142.

³⁰ Ibid., xiv.

³¹ According to Samuel Hynes, the English avant-garde was dispersed because of the war: “the avant-garde was scattered and silenced” (Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1992), ebook version, chapter 3, section I.

³² For a wider perspective on recent Modernist Studies, see Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers, *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Cole, “Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War”, 492.

³⁵ At the same time, however, war was seen by someone as a purge, a healthy development for society: “a wartime renewal of feelings that had surrounded the Wilde cases in the Nineties – hatred and fear of sexual deviance, and a felt need to suppress the art and ideas about art that were associated with it. Henceforth the higher morality of war would be invoked as justification for the persecution of homosexuality and the censorship of art. And Wilde would reappear as a symbol of the Condition of England before the war, of the degeneracy and decadence that man like Gosse had also perceived” (Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1992). Also Michael C.C. Adams, in his *The Great Adventure: Male Desire and the Coming of World War I*, explores the beliefs and attitudes towards manhood, sex, power, maturity, boredom that defined war as a positive thing, a high expression of social behaviour.

But before the emergence of mid-century mythopoeic muteness, literary images made the expression of the horror easier. Modernism was the disruption of any formal certainty, a disruption that did not last long,³¹ and would reappear in literary history mostly in works written by the unaffected, those who were not directly involved in the battlefield, the ones that would represent a generic horror, an existential, profound, and apparently inexplicable one, often accompanied by unavoidable feelings of guilt. In fact, Modernism came as the breaking point, a momentary and only rarely regretted moment in art and literature during which apparent formal mess prevailed over the necessity of a more traditional textual order.³² History itself had somehow become disordered: Samuel Hynes talks about a disturbing, apocalyptic sense of an ending perceivable also in more or less ironic letters and writing by Henry James and Virginia Woolf:

Like James, they had believed, or had *wanted* to believe, that English society was fundamentally stable, and that it was evolving in a progressive direction. War could not occur to interrupt that process, because war was uncivilized. And now suddenly war had come, and had brought that dream of order to an end. It came not simply as an interruption of peace, but as a contradiction of the values that they had thought made Europe one civilization.³³

Joseph Conrad began impressionizing this new human experience, this new feeling of being out of civilization, wrapping it into epistemological ambiguity. T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men*, and many other works from the first decades of the twentieth century are poems that depict (to use an incisive description by Cole) “experience as a series of utterly fragmented and dissociated shards, where the flotsam and jetsam of religion, history, popular language, and human garbage intermingle to create a consciousness that exists on the boundary between dreaming and waking, death and life”.³⁴ This hallucinatory state, also retraceable in later works such as the 1947 novel by Malcolm Lowry *Under the Volcano*, originated from the erasure of every form of stability, both during and after the experience of war. Kierkegaard thought that while man loses the tragic he acquires desperation: as Uranian poets still possessed the sense of tragedy, mess then could still be dominated. War poets, the combatant ones like Owen and Sassoon, still tried to make order out of mess. We will see how it would be a different story in Isherwood, as well as in postmodernist writers representing postmodern tragic events.

Paul Fussell gives us a crucial insight into how the Great War changed life existentially: Europe lost its innocence, the benevolent hope in truth and ‘normality’.³⁵ The Great War transformed heroes into soldiers, and fight into arbitrariness; death into something imponderable. “Never such innocence again”, Philippe Larkin said, not referring to the closer Second World War but to the First. According to Fussell, “Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so

melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends”.³⁶ So it is with death, because we can only talk about death when talking from life. In this respect, *A Single Man* is paradigmatic, as we will see shortly. Fussell explains that the Great war was even more ironic, as it reversed the Idea of Progress,³⁷ and because “its beginning was more innocent”:³⁸ World War II had a partial precedent in horror, while with the Great War, people experienced a real tabula rasa. And, as Fussell says, language was innocent as well:

Another index of the prevailing innocence is a curious prophylaxis of language. ... There was no *Waste Land*, with its rats’ alleys, dull canals, and dead men who have lost their bones: it would take four years of trench warfare to bring these to consciousness. There was no *Ulysses* no *Mauberry*, no *Cantos*, no Kafka, no Proust, no Waugh, no Auden, no Huxley, no Cummings, no *Women in Love* or *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. There was no “Valley of Ashes” in *The Great Gatsby*. One read Hardy and Kipling and Conrad and frequented worlds of traditional moral action delineated in traditional moral language.³⁹

³⁶ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 8.

³⁷ Ibid., 8.

³⁸ Ibid., 19-20.

³⁹ Ibid., 24.

This moral language is a reassuring language. Even when related to disaster and death, the images adopted remain familiar ones. The language of war was “that which generations of readers had been accustomed to associate with the quiet action of personal control and Christian self-abnegation (‘sacrifice’), as well as with more violent actions of aggression and defence”.⁴⁰ From the Uranians, time took literary stereotypes and classical imagery; and warfare itself, its insensate violence, as Burgess described it, became new imagery. Isherwood’s memoir itself, *Lions and Shadows: An Education in the Twenties* (1938), contains a large number of Great War clichés. Clichés, together with irony, put disorder into order, at least superficially, at least rhetorically. Another existential device was dichotomies, for example, which were emphasized by the war in clear-cut distinctions: we/they, normal/grotesque, visible/invisible:⁴¹ “One of the legacies of the war is just this habit of simple distinction, simplification, and opposition. If truth is the main casualty in war, ambiguity is another”.⁴² There is no mess in war from an epistemological point of view but only from an existential perspective. Simplification became a form of survival before silence had overcome also that most disruptive and comfortably heroic manifestation of mess in literature that was Modernism.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁴¹ Ibid., 84.

⁴² Ibid., 87. Jay Winter recognizes an “effort to burn away the wartime fog of confusion, misinformation, and stylized official language”, in his own *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Croydon: Cambridge U. P., 1995), 30; it is important not to forget the actual confusion that warfare implies, and the complementary dry and aseptic language that was adopted even in the most tragic communications.

⁴³ Ibid., 90.

“Simple antithesis everywhere. That is the atmosphere in which most poems of the Great War take place, and that is the reason for the failure of most of them as durable art”:⁴³ this simplification, this organization of feelings would find new interesting possibilities after World War II, when a new kind of order would become a literary possibility – a paradoxical, neurotic narrative representing the spasms of a mind and a body, not mythically, nor universally, but singularly, and fatalistically; a paradigmatic title, symptom of post-war resignation, and silent indulgence toward death: *A Single Man*.

A Single Man, or of Post-war Silent Death

At its outset, World War I could have seemed as if it were some kind of “great outdoor fun”.⁴⁴ No one could have imagined how history was to unfold. But World War II combatants were not to share the same enthusiasm. Everything had been seen before: boredom, for a short time, was the theme, “with a sigh, not a scream, its typical sound”.⁴⁵ Soldiers knew that war was not going to be good nor fun for them; and they now had a vast antiwar literature to prove them right.⁴⁶ Awareness dominated them. As Robert E. Sherwood said, “the general disillusionment preceded the firing of the first shot”.⁴⁷ This disillusionment will rule, in one way or another, the mess in literature from that moment on. Some writers and poets understood that war was so serious that it became ridiculous; but they also realized that it could never be romantic again.⁴⁸ Forster would write to Christopher Isherwood in July 1944 about the flying bombs: “I think they are going to be important psychologically.... They will bitch the Romance of the Air – war’s last beauty-parlor”.⁴⁹ But when the war was over, men of letters became silent too. Also death became silent, as “Second World War technology made it possible to be killed in virtual silence – at least so it appeared”.⁵⁰

A young officer described the British “phlegmatic understatement” as “the art of litotes”.⁵¹

One inference might be that the more verbally confident poetry of the Great War emerged from a proud verbal culture, where language was trusted to convey and retain profound, permanent meaning, while the later world from which these laconic notations arise is one so doubtful of language that the responsible feel that only the fewest words, debased as they have been by advertising, publicity, politics, and the rhetoric of nationalism, should be hazarded.⁵²

Unspeakability will become a motif of post-war narratives.⁵³ And especially so after World War II, after concentration camps, and the Bomb. The irrelevance of traditional elegy, accustomed words and unbroken concepts become evident. Louis Simpson notes why infantry soldiers only rarely render their actual experiences in language: “To a foot-soldier, war is almost entirely physical. That is why some men, when they think about war, fall silent. Language seems to falsify physical life to betray those who have experienced it absolutely – the dead”.⁵⁴ Here we arrive at *A Single Man*, and the standpoint of its time, 1964, far from the horrific experience of war, but not too much. Here war is death, and death war. We want to listen to George, the main character, because he will tell us about death: not something that we can avoid in 60s California, but something that we all shall live. A Single Man will die alone, not heroically but comfortably, as his life had been, at least superficially, surrounded by material commodities but in hypocrisy: a single man, every man, a single act, dying. Silently.

We have seen how the unspeakable had forged itself, most often, on ordered

⁴⁴ Paul Fussell, *Wartime, Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1990 [1989]), 129. Michael Adams, in his paradigmatic volume *The Great Adventure: Male Desire and the Coming of World War I*, explains that men define themselves protracting into adulthood their adolescent loves and desires, and in particular sports and mother, but also hunting, in the quite typical stereotype of eternal Peter Pans. Interestingly enough, although this trend may be considered a typical gender issue, it seems that his focus is not on homosexuality, or the suffragette movements, but rather on asexuality.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 132.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁷ *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History*. Cit. in Fussell, *Wartime*, 130.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 132.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 136.

⁵¹ Ibid., 135.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 185.

⁵⁴ *The Poetry of War, 1939-1945*, ed. Ian Hamilton (London: Alan Ross, 1965), 172.

forms and comfortable patterns and imagery. Paul Fussell claims that “the drift of modern history domesticates the fantastic and normalizes the unspeakable. And the catastrophe that begins it is the Great War”.⁵⁵ Around 1916 the idea that warfare and destruction had become the normal order of things was already a conviction held by many: the feeling of “endless war as an inevitable condition of modern life would seem to have become seriously available to the imagination”.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 81.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

In literature, reactions for domestication were, as we know, the most variable. Imagination was at the same time quieted and aroused: all possible disaster could have occurred, and literature had to find new ways to put things in order. Christopher Isherwood’s mother noted in her diary that many people expected and feared a different catastrophe;⁵⁷ *A Single Man* would give up any idea of universal catastrophe, in order to symptomize it in the last days of a single man, and in his death. The fiction offers a quick, hyperrefined account of the minimal effort that a suffering man has to make in order to put an end to his existence, silently and smoothly through his comfortable life in the America of the 60s, a post-war sublimated asphyxia in apparent freedom and consumerist commodities. A moment in which history had become apparently fluid and smooth as an LA motorway, a nicely-fitting image used by George, the protagonist of the novel, to depict his pride, hypocritical and partial as it was.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

George is a middle-aged British gay man who teaches English in a Southern California university in 1962. We see him from the beginning of the story unstable and at loss after the sudden death of his partner Jim. The one-day narrative – so dry and aseptic when compared to Joyce’s mythological *Ulysses* – moves around George’s encounters with various neighbours, friends, colleagues, and students, and culminates with his sudden natural and organic death. The ending is somehow specular to Mrs Dalloway’s, as if in the latter the character’s existence was somehow affirmed, while here it becomes mere flesh, to be disposed of as any other useless product after use. Yet George seems to absorb plastically some of the beauty of existence – in his frequent observations on the surrounding world in slow motion – epiphanically but unenthusiastically. It is this mixture of quietness and sadness towards the resignation to existence that seems to me to be one of the common solutions found in literature after the Second World War, a note also evident in Philip Larkin’s poetry, for example, or in some of Anthony Burgess’s novels. The balance is found in the prose style, in the almost neurotic ordering of thoughts and events, step by step, as death enters into the character’s veins and limbs.

The narrative sees a progression of ordered procedures, ordered recognition of George’s own existence, from recognizing himself in the mirror to driving automatically along the motorway to work, from dealing with students’ notes and deadlines to managing the relationship with his depressed best friend. All of these duties are marked by a rhythmic prose, a third-person narrative speaking in the present with occasional sour flashbacks, marking contemporarily George’s anonymity and his exemplarity – again, as numerous post-war narratives do. In the

anguish of his new polysemic 'single' life, George tries his best to fit in the conformist cage of his neighbourhood, his job, his apparent 'normality'. And when all is missing, as every bourgeoisie allows, "there *were* the Greeks", once again the only possible justification to his otherwise inexplicable pain.

The novel opens with its referential incipit to a new day of the world, with a sentence that starts describing a general truth but at the same time affirming the relevance of singularity: "Waking up begins with saying *am* and *non*".⁵⁸ The whole novel could be read as an attempt by the protagonist to make sense of the mess of his existence – of his grief in particular – trying literally to figure out the beauty and the reason behind sufferance, cutting images, and thoughts and memory, and fixing them in pigeonholes in his mind. Jonathan, the main character of *Everything is Illuminated*, the 2002 novel by Jonathan Safran Foer, will do something similar but more physical, accumulating all sorts of things in small plastic bags, meeting other characters doing the same with boxes, accumulating them in the ongoing process of creating a book.

Before that – and some decades before the new horror and caesura of time that was 9/11 – George finally wakes up, and not much later, as he looks at himself in the mirror, says: "What it sees there isn't so much a face as the expression of a predicament. Here's what it has done to itself, here's the mess it has somehow managed to get itself into, during its fifty-eight years".⁵⁹ The passage enacts a daily recomposition of the remains of the character's integrity, both as a distressed fictional person and, most importantly, as a narratological function, as the narrator's purpose seems to weave a plot only in order to let the character die, after having performed a few quite irrelevant actions and less irrelevant thoughts and suppositions. The fiction traces a slow but unstoppable movement towards the ending, which is as messily but mechanically planned as that of a real life: from the beginning to the end, and a few irrelevant events and less irrelevant pains in the middle.

The entire plot is an ordered movement towards recomposition, in order to represent the final decomposition – useless as all the other dead on earth. Dead bodies have become (or are again) only something to be disposed of, as all soldiers in both World Wars were. Methodically. It is no coincidence that the ex-British consul of *Under the Volcano* (another Geoffrey), a book published right after the end of the war in 1947, is thrown dead into a ravine as a mere piece of flesh. In *A Single Man* we can find a new way of representing war – not against countries, but against one's own body, time, life, as warfare has become the normal state of humanity, however Cold it may be.

Hence George tries to set his life in order around his already decomposing mind and body. He lives – alone – in a "tightly planned little house",⁶⁰ surrounded by the accumulated objects of a consumerist society:

Life destroying life before an audience of objects – pots and pans, knives and

⁵⁸ Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (London: Vintage, 2010), 1.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 2.

forks, cans and bottles – that have no part in the kingdom of evolution. Why? Why? Is it some cosmic enemy, some arch-tyrant who tries to blind us to his very existence by setting us against our natural allies, the fellow-victims of his tyranny?⁶¹

⁶¹ Ibid., 4-5.

It is more than clear that the vocabulary is not innocent: “kingdom of evolution”, “cosmic enemy”, “arch-tyrant”, “natural allies”, “fellow-victims”, “tyranny”: a mixture of warfare and biology, intermingle in meta-existential, paralysing reflections. While Peter Conrad believed that Isherwood, just like Virginia Woolf and Aldous Huxley, had little to say about the war,⁶² I argue that in a book that is not about war and that was published almost twenty years after the end of the war, the atmosphere of war still lingers, permeating language and modulating characters in order to depict a world in which the very essence of war and chaos is intertwined with personal horror. “George loves the freeways because he can still cope with them; because the fact that he can cope proves his claim to be a functioning member of society. He can still *get by*”. George also knows that he is letting himself decompose, first emotionally and then physiologically. But in a typical attempt at survival, beauty becomes the goal. Beauty and order. The novel portrays the rhythm of life and this life’s attempt to create order, or to reformulate order, the sense of an ending, which is made even more incisive in Tom Ford’s adaption of the book in 2009. Such aestheticism made death a crystallization of movement and chaos. At the end of the novel the impersonal ‘it’ that indicated George at the beginning of the book and that was soon changed into ‘he’ after he takes possession again of his daily routine is what remains: “the non-entity we called George”.⁶³ We are in front of a story that is a movement from organic shapelessness to human entity and back.

⁶² Peter Conrad, “Tones of Fear”, *New Statesman* (July 28, 1978). Cit. in Paul Fussell, *Wartime*, 133.

⁶³ Isherwood, *A Single Man*, 152.

There is no tragedy here: tragedy needs guilt and despair,⁶⁴ explained Paul Fussell. I would add order also. Hamlet needs to set time in order, to put things in their joints before accomplishing his tragedy. *A Single Man* is not tragic nor comic: it is disenchanted. It is a silent, slightly queered description of existential disorder. An interesting position in queer theories is Elizabeth Freeman’s approach, which is somewhat in opposition to main trends in the field. She questions the traditional attitude that sees queerness as a pure deconstructive attitude, offering new perspectives about the issue of time. “Queer temporalities” are those hidden and happily found in the interstices of national-political life.⁶⁵ An interesting examples is retraced since Robert Graves 1915 poem “It’s a Queer Time” (in fact, wartime seems to have seen the rise of nascently gay subcultures). She is apt to retrace a discontinuous history, alternative stories, dreams of an escape from history:⁶⁶ a focus on all forms of unconsciousness, reveries, haunting, afterlives subverting the canonical chronological time order. Focusing on art in particular, Freeman denounces avant-gardism in favour of a sort of ‘looking back,’ recognizing “a series of failed revolutions in the 1960s and 1970s”;⁶⁷ the 1970s appear as a

⁶⁴ Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 220-221.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke U. P., 2010.) x.

⁶⁶ Ibid., xi.

⁶⁷ Ibid., xiv.

“revolting” decade: “they glimmer forth as an embarrassment, as something that remains to be thought, as the text’s indigestible material, and/or as a point of departure for resistance but not for grand revolution”.⁶⁸ The tendency explained by Freeman is also perceivable in the works we have dealt with in this study:

This stubborn lingering of pastness (whether it appears as anachronistic style, as the reappearance of bygone events in the symptom, or as arrested development) is a hallmark of queer affect: a ‘revolution’ in the old sense of the word, as a turning back.... Artists for whom the birth of the modern homosexual identity-form was constraining rather than liberating: shame, passivity, melancholy, and recoil, to name a few, were ways of refusing the progressive logic by which becoming ever more visible was correlated with achieving ever more freedom. Late-nineteenth-century perverts, melancholically attached to obsolete erotic objects or fetishes they ought to have outgrown, or repeating unproductive bodily behaviors over and over, also used pastness to resist the commodity-time of speedy manufacture and planned obsolescence.⁶⁹

Obsolescence favoured as a reassuring time, constraint perceived as a liberating space: the oxymora of queerness, perhaps, of the privilege of living life and art from its interstices.

Yet, Second World War literature marks the beginning of a laconic refusal to reach out for any myth.⁷⁰ Losing all traditional significance, all creative possibilities to represent queerness – at least before what we could still call postmodernism – and resignation, myth has become useless. What matters is the daily scanning of time and duties, intermingled with existential considerations.

Momentary Conclusion, or of Post 9/11 Literature

It will take a final horror – even more disarming and chaotic – to create a new aesthetics, drawing on more ‘classic’ postmodern forms but perhaps even more lulling us into a chaotic order that tries to make sense of coincidences and illogical explanations. Anglo-American fiction is even more significant at this time to depict the change. One magnificent example of such fiction is Jonathan Safran Foer’s experimental novel *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), in which the precariousness of both WWII and the post-9/11 world is spasmodically controlled by the characters’ ambiguous ‘rigid’ search through history and formal coherence, and in overlapping narratives and simultaneous, conflicting times and space that intertwine lives in a mess of form and content. Here, chaotic objects lead to a journey that leads to a collection – of other objects, other knowledge, and, most of all, other memories, often related to cultural and/or historical issues (war, immigration, and genocide). The technique of the list dominates the narrative, in its paradoxical attempt at organizing things, memories, and histories while transforming them into an imponderable mess. Here, single men represent other men through different

generations, intermingling themselves throughout history, confusing truth, both personally and historically. Perhaps the novel depicts a final attempt at maintaining the relevance of individual existences, single lives lost again in more than ever inexplicable and troublesome horror, where no clear-cut dichotomy makes sense, as not even the enemy is clearly identifiable.

Before World War I, social and individual disorders were easily depictable and identifiable through well-known, reassuring images and forms, but later collective trauma and feelings of guilt are probably at the base of the creation of the whole concept of post-war world literature. A Single Man cannot be preserved, but still the life is worth being told, against the masses, against the anonymity of the unknown soldier, of the victims of World War I and II, of the Bomb. Yet, now existential mess is manifestly controlled through an exasperation of spasmodic calm in the narrative, entering neurotic minds that can at least die smoothly, as is expected in the comfort of the '60s. 9/11, the new world (dis)order and endogenous suspect, will affect post-postmodern literary forms. But this is the same old (hi)story.