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*Brno studies in English*. 2020, vol. 46, iss. 1, pp. 91-108

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2020-1-4>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/142602>

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# VIMY, GALLIPOLI, TRAUMA, AND THE POETICS OF GRIEF: RE-READING THE MYTHS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN JANE URQUHART'S *THE STONE CARVERS* AND BRENDA WALKER'S *THE WING OF NIGHT*

*Brno Studies in English*

Volume 46, No. 1, 2020

ISSN 0524-6881 | e-ISSN 1805-0867

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## Abstract

The article is a comparative analysis of *The Stone Carvers* (2001) by Canadian author Jane Urquhart and *The Wing of Night* (2005) by Australian writer Brenda Walker, which explore the First World War and its aftermath. My purpose is to demonstrate how the two novels engage with the foundational myths of Vimy and Gallipoli by representing the two battles from unusual perspectives. Instead of celebrating the violent crisis seen as the birthplace of their respective nations, Urquhart and Walker foreground violence as the foundation of the nation-state. Using trauma theories, I explore Urquhart's and Walker's representation of war injuries, as well as the traumatic impact of national ideologies on personal and collective identities. While both texts offer an insightful re-reading of the myths of the Great War, Urquhart creates a vision of harmony resulting from the tragedy of the past, whereas Walker's gesture of revision is more radical, as she insists on the impossibility of post-war reconstruction.

## Key words

*First World War; Vimy; Gallipoli; nation building; trauma; grief*

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## 1. Introduction: Vimy, Gallipoli and nation-building

The purpose of this article is an analysis of two twenty-first century novels: *The Stone Carvers* (2001) by Canadian author Jane Urquhart and *The Wing of Night* (2005) by Australian writer Brenda Walker, which focus on the First World War and its aftermath<sup>1</sup>. Depicting individuals and communities in mourning, both Urquhart and Walker depart from a militarily oriented point of view to explore the sequels of war – the difficulties of the veterans' reintegration and the devastation of the home front. They also engage with foundational myths of Vimy and Gallipoli, which function in national metanarratives as violent crises, the birthplaces of the Canadian and Australian nation, respectively<sup>2</sup>. I intend to show how the two novels under consideration, published almost a century after the conflict, re-inscribe and/or contest the Canadian and Australian myths of the Great War,

offering alternative frameworks to apprehend the tragedy of the past. Though most intimate experiences, in the last two decades trauma and grief have become privileged means of understanding groups recovering from violent events, for they create “a sense of political community of a complex order,” illuminating fundamental issues such as dependency and responsibility (Butler 2004: 22).

In Canadian and Australian cultural memory the First World War is remembered as a nation-building event. In 1914, Canadian and Australian propaganda stressed unity in times of threat to the Empire, and represented the war as a sacred crusade, a civic duty, and a ritual of manhood. War stirred imperialist and nationalist sentiments; the imperial enthusiasm was “premised upon the notion of demonstrating national qualities, gaining respect, and thus rising in status within the Empire” (Keshen 2003: 4). 600,000 Canadians and 400,000 Australians volunteered for the front; approximately 60,000 Canadians and 60,000 Australians gave their lives. The romanticized myths of the Canadian Corps and the Anzacs was to a large degree shaped by the official eye-witnesses: William Maxwell Aitken, later Lord Beaverbrook, and Charles Bean. Aitken made great efforts to launch an image of the Canadian Corps as “shock troops that were thrown into the bloodiest campaigns to deliver victory” (Cook 2003: 46). He depicted the Canadian soldiers as a Northern race of innocent, yet intelligent young men, raised in harmony with nature, healthy, strong, and responsible (Cook 2006: 10–40; Keshen 2003: 4)<sup>3</sup>. In the same vein, Bean presented Australian men as invincible heroes. Their national character, shaped in the difficult bush conditions, was based on physical strength, courage, loyalty and anti-authoritarianism, features that were earlier attributed to the Australian digger or bushman (Seal 2004: 3; Keshen 2003: 8; Reynaud 2014: 300). While both narratives emphasized primarily male values, such as courage and physical prowess, the Canadian myth gained more religious connotations; the innocence and purity of Canadian soldiers, imagined as Christ-like figures, soon became an important element of the Canadian memory of the Great War (Vance 1997: 71–72).

The battles that acquired legendary status, “producing the emotional / sentimental foundations of nationhood” (Keshen 2003: 20), were the first landing of the Anzacs (the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 and the battle of Vimy Ridge which raged from 9 to 12 April 1917 and during which the four Canadian divisions fought together for the first time. The fact that Gallipoli was a serious military defeat, with 7,600 casualties among the Anzac troops, was overshadowed by a narrative of glory and heroism. Besides New Zealanders, British and French soldiers also took part in the campaign, yet in the Australian national imagination Gallipoli was represented as an entirely Australian adventure. After Gallipoli, Australians began to use the term “Anzac” only in reference to Australian troops (Keshen 2003: 8; Rhoden 2015: 32). The legend of the brave Australian soldiers on the cliffs of Gallipoli soon metamorphosed into a narrative of Australianness. The Canadian victory at Vimy Ridge, an impregnable, highly fortified German position, which the allied forces had tried to capture, in vain, for months, failed to produce a breakthrough. The casualties were high – 3,500 Canadians died in action, yet the battle was transformed in the Canadian national imagination into the mythical place where Canada came

of age (Berton 2001: 178). In the post-war national rhetoric the battle of Vimy Ridge provided an ideal of national unity (Vance 1997: 260–261). The detachment of Vimy and Gallipoli “from [their] ethical, political, and historical contexts” served to reify the two events as acts of founding violence in the national narratives (Zacharias 2012: 122).

While since the 1970s the Canadian myth of the Great War has been gradually deconstructed, multicultural Canada seeing itself above all as a peace-keeping nation, “the cultural force of Vimy-as-origin continues to be wielded in an effort to garner support for, and silence dissent over, the military’s present engagements,” such as Canada’s intervention in Afghanistan (Zacharias 2012: 128; also see Coates 2018: 132–137). By contrast, although the Australian legend has been radically challenged in the same period, reverence for the Anzacs has not decreased at the centenary of the First World War (Reynaud 2014: 301). The recognition of the sacrifices endured by the nation during the 1914–1918 conflict “serves only to increase the notional heroism of the mythical and now pitiable Anzac, and so strengthens the power of World War I as a foundational event for the nation” (Rhoden 2015: 39). Definitions of Australian national identity are still rooted in military history and “an entire culture of military commemoration” (Bongiorno 2014: 41) that distorts the imperial contexts of the First World War (Lake et al. 2010: iv). The modern version of the Anzac legend has been redefined “as one of unity, Australianness and inclusivity,” reflecting what Australians desire to believe about the 1914–1918 conflict a hundred years later (Reynaud 2014: 30)<sup>4</sup>.

## **2. Re-reading the Canadian myth of the Great War: *The Stone Carvers* by Jane Urquhart**

*The Stone Carvers* by Jane Urquhart is a story of trauma, grief, and reconstruction, which traces the tragic sequels of the First World War for twenty years after the cessation of hostilities. Urquhart depicts the conflict and its aftermath from the perspective of Klara Becker, who lives in Shoneval, a small village in Ontario; her brother Tilman, who ran away from home as a child; her fiancé Eamon O’Sullivan, who dies on the Western front; and Giorgio Vigamonti, with whom she becomes romantically involved twenty years after O’Sullivan’s death. The Canadian author aptly juxtaposes the war survivors’ personal stories with the official narrative of commemoration by making them participate in the construction of the Canadian Vimy Memorial in France. Designed by the brilliant Canadian architect Walter Seymour Allward, this impressive monument was erected near the Ypres salient in the French Pas-de-Calais. The walls of the monuments are carved with the names of 11,285 Canadian soldiers whose bodies were never found. An example of the post-war “cult of mourning” (Winter 2006: 26), the monument was unveiled in 1936 and later became a pilgrimage destination for the war veterans and bereaved families (Vance 1997: 67–69; Evans 2007: 124–127). According to Robert Zacharias, “The enormity of Allward’s monument, so disproportionate to the military significance of the battle it commemorates, indicates both the mythological importance the battle held for the war generation and the

government's determination that it would retain its mythic power for generations to come" (2012: 123). Urquhart's resort to ekphrasis, the description of a work of art, reinforces the metanarrative of Vimy as originary catastrophe, yet the Canadian writer also uses several strategies that decentre the Vimy myth. She demonstrates "the arbitrary nature of historical points of entry by locating the narrative of Vimy within other historical moments" (Fahey 2014: 420), such as the story of King Ludvig II of Bavaria, who was obsessed with castle building, or of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century settlement village in Ontario. As a result, Vimy becomes just one among several foundational stories in the novel.

The non-British background of the protagonists of *The Stone Carvers* is particularly significant, for it allows Urquhart to explore the disparate motivations that push them to enlist, which clash with the metanarrative of Canadians eager to sacrifice their lives in defence of the Mother Country. Urquhart's characters do not share these imperial loyalties. Eamon O'Sullivan, an Irish Canadian, departs for Europe believing that he will realise his boyhood dream of flying an aeroplane. His father, who was forced to leave his beloved Ireland to avoid the privations of the post-famine period, curses him; he does not want his son to fight for the hateful Englishmen (Urquhart 2001: 138). As for Tilman, a German Canadian, and Giorgio, whose ancestors immigrated from Italy, they join the army because of the growing unemployment. Like Eamon, they naively believe that the war will be a romantic adventure. Urquhart also exposes the lack of national consensus by highlighting the pacifist attitudes of the German-Canadian community of Shoneval, whose reluctance to enlist is due to familial traumas rather than their pro-German sympathies. Their ancestors left Europe to be free from the armed conflicts that devastated their native Alsace and Bavaria. Their refusal to fight is also firmly grounded in the first commandment: "Thou shalt not kill" (Urquhart 2001: 137). Most villagers use their agricultural occupation to claim exemption from the army. Such attitudes were viewed with suspicion in the war years (Shaw 2008: 8-9). However, when he learns about this act of dissent after the war, Klara's brother does not condemn the villagers and is convinced that they made the right choice.

The glorious narrative of Vimy Ridge is questioned in *The Stone Carvers* from the perspective of Tilman, who was a runner at Vimy, responsible for carrying messages between the trenches and the tunnels under the ridge. Because of his experience as a tramp in Canada in the pre-war years, his habituation to discomfort and danger, Tilman adapts very quickly to life on the front lines. He volunteers for risky missions, indifferent to the sight of mutilated and dying men. Nevertheless, with time, he feels deeply unsettled by the meaninglessness of death and the unhappiness of other soldiers, whom he is unable to help. He also finds unbearable the claustrophobia of the tunnels, to which the Canadians are confined before the barrage. He remembers 9 April 1917 as "pure bedlam": "Afterwards hardly anyone who had participated and survived could remember anything about it, except chaos" (Urquhart 2001: 230). Tilman is wounded and loses one leg in a grenade explosion. So many of his comrades are killed or injured, and so confused is he after the battle, that he can hardly understand it was a victory. The only memory that he has retained is that of a young boy, whose

body was shattered by shrapnel when the barrage began, and who died with a frozen question on his lips. For Tilman, this is an *image of ultimate horror*, which, as Robert J. Lifton explains, involves “the dead or dying in a way that evokes the survivor’s strongest identification and feelings of pity and self-condemnation” (Lifton 1996: 142). This haunting memory encapsulates in Urquhart’s novel the meaningless death of thousands of innocent Canadians on the Western front. In the post-war years the grandness of the Vimy narrative fills Tilman with wonder and bitterness.

Paradoxically, however, for Tilman, it is the aftermath of war that is more difficult than the war itself. When thousands of disabled veterans return from the front, the government, “in a state of mild panic” (Urquhart 2001: 231), decides to employ them in a factory producing wooden legs. The war amputees are also housed in dormitories at the factory site, a place of “both stasis and transition” (Urquhart 2001: 234). The returning soldiers are perceived as liminal men, suspended between two “disjunctive social worlds,” that of war and that of peace (Leed 1979: 194). As those who have experienced and inflicted unimaginable violence, back home they are believed to be dangerous barbarians, potential revolutionaries affected by Bolshevik propaganda (Leed 1979: 18–19; 196; Rutherford 2004: 244–245). Moreover, according to Jessica Meyer, in the post-war years, the war-maimed were often associated with passivity and immaturity, and, as a result, felt “alienated from both their mature masculine identities and the society they had sacrificed their lives to defend” (2011: 4). Rejected by their families and unable to go back to their previous employment, Urquhart’s handicapped men, often deeply traumatized, spend three years in an atmosphere reminiscent of the trenches. However, when the demand for artificial legs declines, the factory is closed down: “Satisfied that they had done all that they could to rehabilitate Tilman and his colleagues, the same government that had called these young men so earnestly to arms now cast them unceremoniously out into the streets” (Urquhart 2001: 235). Tilman, like many others, becomes a beggar and a tramp.

The distinction Judith Butler draws in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* between the concepts of precariousness and precarity illuminates the condition of the disabled veterans in Urquhart’s novel. All lives are precarious, i.e. vulnerable and dependent on others – they can be obliterated at any moment by disease, accident, or an act of will. By contrast, “Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (Butler 2010: 25). Urquhart stresses the precarity of the veterans’ lives by associating them with other figures of drifters living on the social margins. When Tilman ran away from home as a child, he encountered other homeless characters on the road, unable, like him, to accept a normative way of life, victims of familial tragedies or industrial capitalism. Urquhart insists that veterans now belong to this group, expanding the image of wound from physical injury to mental, emotional, and social fractures. Like Tilman, the other veterans in the novel are “wounded out of life altogether, forced to live in a world apart” (Urquhart 2001: 323). It is also important to emphasize that Tilman is wary of any form of community, which results from the abuse he suffered in his childhood, when his

mother, desperate to make him stay, chained him to a post like a dog. In *The Stone Carvers*, various institutions which regulate social existence, such as the family, the factory, the army, the nation-state, are therefore a source of trauma, conflated with a betrayal of trust, which “takes place when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors: when the community of which we considered ourselves members turns against us or when our family is no longer a source of refuge but a site of danger” (Edkins 2003: 4). Instead of gratitude and recognition for their sacrifice in the war, the veterans are exposed to maximized precariousness. Urquhart’s emphasis on the nation-state as “a contradictory institution: a promise of safety, security and meaning along with a reality of abuse, control and coercion” (Edkins 2003: 6) serves to further question the homogeneous myth of a harmonious Canada united in/by conflict. That the Canadian government spends exorbitant sums of money on the construction of the Vimy Memorial, having abandoned the returned soldiers to homelessness, hunger, and disease, provokes the veterans’ justified anger. While the dead combatants are immortalized as beautiful, forever young heroes, there is no space for the psychologically and physically maimed bodies in the national rhetoric of commemoration.

Nevertheless, Urquhart portrays her mutilated protagonist as an “active sufferer” (Bourke 1999: 39) rather than a passive victim. Together with Klara, Tilman travels back to France, thus helping her and himself to reshape their lives. His homoerotic relationship with the French owner of a restaurant in Arras, Monsieur Recouvrir, plays an important role in the process of recovery. Although they can hardly communicate because of the language gap, the two men are united by their common experience of cataclysm and the corporeal dimension of loss. The body of Monsieur Recouvrir is a “map of scars” (Urquhart 2001: 328) after the injuries he sustained at Verdun; it regularly pushes pieces of shrapnel through the surface of the skin. Elaine Scarry argues that war establishes an intricate interaction of body and state – the soldier consents to open his own body to wounds and injuries, thus “unmaking” himself for the sake of a higher purpose. As a result, his body loses its materiality and is metamorphosed into abstract numbers, on the victors’ or losers’ side (Scarry 1985: 112–122). By highlighting the suffering bodies of the Canadian and French veterans, Urquhart restores a corporeal memory of Vimy and Verdun. Like the sites of Canadian and French national traumas, where fragments of bone and metal can be found even today, this embodied memory works as a powerful reminder of the violent past (Grace 2014: 115).

Urquhart also depicts the devastating effect of the First World War by exploring Klara’s grief. During the 1914-1918 conflict Canadian women were to give their unconditional support to the war, by encouraging their husbands, fathers, and sons to enlist. They were expected to accept their losses with peaceful resignation (Evans 2007: 79–85; Rutherford 2004: 199–215). *The Stone Carvers* questions this cliché of consenting femininity – Klara cannot forgive Eamon for having chosen the war instead of her. Having learned about her sweetheart’s death, the female protagonist experiences an agony of grief. Yet she must hide her torment from others, as her relationship with Eamon was not formalized and she



has no right to public display of emotions. The pain of loss fills her life for many years after the war:

In her twenties it had been a fierce, unspoken sorrow, this past, catching her off guard during the day, causing her to dig her nails into the flesh of her palms, or taking her quite unexpectedly back to scenes so tender she could be locked in them for long periods of time, could find herself standing quite still, completely absent from the task that had been occupying her hands. This frightened and appalled her – so much so that she began to train herself in the art of stoic apartness, a separation from her former self. She had been a good pupil in this endeavour and began finally to behave normally as a spinster, keeping the past at a distance, on the other side of the fence, of her skin. (Urquhart 2001: 31)

For Klara, the fact that Eamon's body was never found complicates the process of mourning. As Luc Capdevila and Danièle Voldman (2006: xii-xiii; 114) suggest, mass death by violence in the trenches of the First World War transformed the traditional Western funeral rituals. Because of the lack of a body to mourn, it was more difficult for the bereaved to peacefully commemorate the loss of their loved ones. In *The Stone Carvers*, the fact that Eamon has disintegrated into nothingness haunts Klara decades after the war: "Sometimes she dreamt of [his] remnants, dreamt herself wandering some distant battlefield, having collected his bones, which she carried in her arms like a bundle of kindling. But in the dream she was always searching because although she carried the miraculous package close to her heart, there was always a rib or a thigh bone she couldn't find" (Urquhart 2001: 168). Unable to accept the death of her lover, the female protagonist shows the symptoms of melancholia<sup>5</sup>. She loses her religious faith and the desire to carve in wood, and becomes profoundly depressed. Although other men approach her, Eamon "had taken all her desire with him" (Urquhart 2001: 344). The inhabitants of Shoneval perceive her as a pragmatic spinster, devoted to her work on the farm. They do not realize that she suffers from a pervading feeling of alienation, as if she did not belong to the community in which she lives, as if she were absent from her own existence.

It is only by travelling to Vimy with Tilman twenty years after the war that Klara manages to complete the process of mourning. When, disguised as a man, she is employed by the architect, Walter Allward, as a stone carver, the creative act helps her accept her loss. In secret, the female protagonist decides to carve Eamon's face on one of the statues of the Vimy Memorial. By carving and later touching Eamon's face and name, she performs what Jay Winter (1996: 113–115), referring to the mourners of the First World War, views as an important ritual of separation from the dead. Moreover, in France, Klara falls in love with Giorgio, her brother's Italian-Canadian friend, with whom she ultimately returns to Canada to begin a new life. With Giorgio, Tilman and his French lover, Monsieur Recouvrier, the female protagonist creates a *community of grief* (Horne 2015a: 599), which allows her, perhaps not to entirely forget the dead, yet to disengage from the trauma of the past.

In the parts of the novel set in France, Urquhart illustrates how after the First World War the Vimy battlefield itself is transformed into a “a ‘metonymy of sacrifice’ and nation” (Scates and Wheatley 2015: 551–552). The landscape around Vimy Ridge is slowly cleared of bones, the dead soldiers’ clothes and other belongings. Tilman and Giorgio, who witnessed the carnage of the war, find these efforts to erase the violent traces of the past particularly disturbing. The perfect purity of the limestone selected by the architect for the Vimy memorial contrasts vividly with the veterans’ bloody memories. Allward’s is one of the memorial projects that “belie the brutality of war, contributing to what [Annette] Becker calls the ‘sterilisation (*aseptisation*) of violence and death’” (Scates and Wheatley 2015: 541; italics in the original). His vision of the memorial is filled with monumental, allegorical figures, which should have a universal dimension for every person in mourning. However, when he learns Klara’s story, he sees in the face of the statue the innocence of the generation whose world has been ruined by war (Urquhart 2001: 340). He therefore allows the female protagonist to carve in stone the face of her dead lover. As a result, Allward’s official story of commemoration is not privileged in Urquhart’s novel – the official narrative and the personal stories of war witnesses complement one another.

Although in *The Stone Carvers* Urquhart questions in several ways the Canadian myth of the Great War, she also insists on recovery and consolation. By including in the grandiose narrative of Vimy the story of a woman (Klara), a disabled, homosexual veteran (Tilman), and Canadians of non-British ancestry (Eamon, the Beckers, Giorgio), Urquhart seems to return “to the mythological birthplace of Canada to insert difference [...] into the very heart of the national narrative” (Zacharias 2012: 128). Yet the role of the memorial in the novel highlights the double pull of remembrance and forgetting. After their work in Vimy is finished, the protagonists of *The Stone Carvers* return to Canada: Klara marries Giorgio, whereas Tilman begins a new life with Monsieur Recouvrir. In accordance with the official war narrative, Urquhart shows that “the experience of loss can become a catalyst for intimacy and the building of community” (Gordon 2014: 92). *The Stone Carvers* thus becomes what Dominick LaCapra refers to as a “harmonizing narrative” (2001: 13), providing the reader with a spiritual uplift.

### 3. Re-reading the Australian myth of the Great War: *The Wing of Night* by Brenda Walker

Composed of abrupt fragments, situated between February 1915 and October 1922, Brenda Walker’s *The Wing of Night* focuses on two men and two women during and after the war: Elizabeth and Louis Zettler, wealthy station-owners in the Australian south-west; Bonnie Fairclough, a destitute young widow whose husband committed suicide after mistreating her for a year; and her sweetheart Joe Tuller, whose middle-class parents died when he was a child, abandoning him to a life of poverty. The novel, written in an impressively economical yet profoundly affecting style, can be classified as *post-traumatic writing* (LaCapra 2001: 179), an attempt to convey, in a unique, elliptical form, the problematic aspect

of surviving war trauma (see Caruth 1995a: 9). Walker finds in *The Wing of Night* the means to represent the “infringement of a sense of coherent, progressive temporal order” (Stevenson 2013: 113) associated with both war and its trauma. The pairing of characters – Louis and Joe, Elizabeth and Bonnie – allows the author to explore the class differences between them, but also the unconventional relationships they form during the war. The fragmentary structure of the novel is disorienting to the reader, the more so that Walker refrains from using the place name “Gallipoli” “as if to avoid the frameworks of cultural memory that might open up the story to larger meanings” (Spittel 2014: 265). When Gallipoli is named at the end of the novel, it is only in reference to its haunting legacy of horror and butchery.

*The Wing of Night* provides brief, fragmentary insights into the Dardanelles campaign, which brings Louis and Joe together. Instead of national birth, the reader witnesses mass death and destruction. Walker illustrates the fantasies of a smooth campaign shared by the unprepared Anzacs, who were convinced that artillery from the battleships would smash the Turks “[b]efore anyone hauled himself out of a trench and started running” (Walker 2005: 27). The campaign is represented from the point of view of the Light Horse regiment commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Brazier, who is fully aware of the fact that he is sending his men to their deaths. Far from the legendary Anzacs, the soldiers waging the battles against the Turks are desperate, dirty men, tormented by the intense cold, as well as “Artillery so heavy you didn’t know whether you were shaking or just shaken by the force of it” (Walker 2005: 175). Both Louis and Joe are represented as vulnerable, subtle, considerate individuals, which questions the myth of the robust, chauvinistic, invincible bushmen (Coates unpublished 8). The Turks are not the dark beasts they expected, but frightened, pale boys, “distressed by the continuing waves of Anzacs they were obliged to mow down” (Coates unpublished 13). By means of evocative descriptions, Walker creates a barren peninsular landscape covered with body parts and bones, the earth being unable to bury all the dead. A particularly shocking scene is that of the explosion after the troops’ retreat, which “sent the bones of dead Light Horsemen spinning as high as the stars” (Walker 2005: 131). This disrespectful treatment of human remains and the disintegration of human bodies into nothingness suggest a reversion to barbarity, contrasted with the complex and tender funeral mores of the Egyptians, which the Australian characters witnessed in Cairo. The “fountain of bones” (Walker 2005: 132) closing the Dardanelles campaign inscribes Gallipoli within Holocaust imagery, and thus denies the sacredness of human life by highlighting the serialization and absolute devaluation of human death<sup>6</sup>. In this sense, the existence of the Australian soldiers in *The Wing of Night* is reduced to what Giorgio Agamben refers to as *bare life*, excluded from the polis and exposed to unlimited injury and death “in the most profane and banal ways” (1998: 114).

Furthermore, if Walker seems to apply the legendary trope of Anzac mateship, it is to stress the Australian men’s vulnerability rather than their heroism. At Anzac Cove Louis and Joe sleep together chest to back because of the cold. According to Joanna Bourke, such forms of male bonding “served to make war less unbearable, and more human” (1999: 137). While at home Zettler would have hardly noticed

Tully because of his social position, at the front they share a personal, physical intimacy, a closeness which also reveals their equality in the face of random, meaningless death. Significantly, the two protagonists' proximity erases the differences between them, transforming them into anonymous "day laborers of death" (Leed 1979: 206), an interchangeability later developed in the novel. Nevertheless, the trope of mateship is denied any profound meaning, as his friendship with Zettler is obliterated in Joe's memory. While Louis dies a quick, unnoticeable death, Joe emerges from the war a broken man, who avoids human contact and does not feel any special community with his former comrades-in-arms.

The scarce and seemingly disconnected descriptions of Gallipoli in Walker's novel can be related to Joe Tully's loss of memory. When a shell comes down on the side of his sniper hole, he is thrown into the air and suffers traumatic paralysis. Joe remembers only the hospital ship; his experience at Gallipoli remains enigmatic in the novel. Walker seems to suggest that, having killed a prisoner by mistake, the male protagonist becomes a sniper, living a solitary existence, avoiding other Australians. In the intriguing epilogue, the experience of massive killing is represented as Joe's spiritual death, an exit from the community of men. Walker thus powerfully illustrates Cathy Caruth's statement that "trauma is not only the repetition of the missed encounter with death but also the missed encounter with one's own survival. It is the incomprehensible act of surviving – of waking into life – that repeats and bears witness to what remains ungrasped within the encounter with death" (Caruth 2013: 6). Although he is later sent back to fight in Egypt and Syria, Joe never fully recovers. Flashbacks of the explosion haunt him and make him stagger at the least expected moment: "while his body moved about obeying orders some part of him was still falling" (Walker 2005: 165). He suffers from terrible nightmares, filled with blood and death, after which he feels "broken, again and again" (Walker 2005: 216). In fact, Joe "long[s] for a complete loss of memory" (Walker 2005: 167), as he sometimes recollects, with horror, what others have done, and is afraid that he might have committed similar acts of brutality. This is why the protagonist cannot look at his face in the mirror, and his name becomes that of a stranger to him. His reactions are symptomatic of the fracturing of the self, a mechanism that occurs in extreme trauma. As Robert Jay Lifton suggests, the soldier creates a second self, "doubling" to survive in dehumanizing circumstances (Caruth 1995b: 137)<sup>7</sup>. Walker's masterful representation of Joe's trauma and its tragic dénouement shows how the war continues in the bodies and minds of veterans long after the war. The lack of formal closure in the novel denies the possibility of emotional closure as well.

Furthermore, in *The Wing of Night* the war reinforces the divide between those in power and the dispossessed. Joe resents the government's offerings of barren land or meagre pensions to the war veterans and, as a result, his financial situation becomes even more precarious than before the conflict. The protagonist perceives the war as a betrayal by the elites: "He could have done without *their* war" (Walker 2005: 179; my emphasis). He is forced to become a vagrant, roaming the countryside, squatting in abandoned buildings, unable to reintegrate his former life. Mental trauma therefore fuses here with a form of social death. The war does not improve the situation of destitute men in the novel, their bodies now not only

marked with disease and cheap alcohol, but missing limbs and displaying horrible wounds and scars (Walker 2005: 85). This vision of a class-divided Australia is historically justified. In reality, “in contrast to the smooth rhetoric of unity in the modern post-memory of Anzac, the war was a deeply divisive event, provoking conflict within and between social classes” (Reynaud 2014: 290). The totalizing gesture of the meta-narrative aiming to produce a homogeneous national body is undermined when Walker focuses on the needy bodies of the excluded and marginalized, whose life, in contrast to the invincible Anzacs, is obscure and precarious. It is as if the production of the Anzac ideal (“authentic” Australian) required a radical separation from the physically and psychologically maimed veterans (life lacking political value) (see Agamben 1998: 132; 174). Yet Walker’s story of a traumatized ex-serviceman, who fights to survive on the social margins, refuses to “depoliticize” the memories of the veterans (Edkins 2003: 16).

In *The Wing of Night*, Walker also questions the cliché of the home front as a source of strength and unconditional encouragement for the fighting men (see Rhoden 2015: 160-180). Such an idealized approach to the feminized domestic sphere, in contrast to the brutal war zone imagined as inhabited solely by men, was characteristic of war propaganda in the British Empire during the 1914–1918 conflict (Grayzel 1999: 11). Instead of safety and stability, however, Walker highlights fear, hardship, and uncertainty in the female experience on the home front: “All over the south-west, the soldiers’ wives were learning to sleep alone. Sleeping themselves back into the nights before their weddings, or waking in hot sheets to the clicking of crickets. They were afraid of wandering swagmen, afraid of rape and robbery” (Walker 2005: 41). Various rootless characters take advantage of the absence of the local men to harass their families. Elizabeth is directly threatened by her hired man, Williams, who is easily angered and shows disrespect to her. For days later, she sleeps in her clothes and is relieved when she wakes up, unscathed, in the morning. After Williams leaves, she has to manage the farm on her own.

Rather than portraying serene women, protected from the horrors of war in an “untouched colonial paradise” (Rhoden 2015: 177), Walker depicts female protagonists who suffer from what Ann E. Kaplan (2005: 1) defines as family or quiet trauma. In the scholar’s view, trauma does not only affect the combatants in the war zone, but also their relatives on the domestic front. Wives, mothers and sisters in particular have to struggle with anxieties concerning the fate of their husbands, sons, and brothers. When confronted with the injury or death of their beloved ones, they experience somatic reactions and psychological disorders, such as hypervigilance, insomnia, nightmares and apathy. In *The Wing of Night*, Elizabeth’s longing for her beloved husband becomes increasingly acute, the drama of separation more poignant due to Walker’s flashbacks to scenes of marital happiness. The representation of Elizabeth’s somatic reaction to the news of Louis’s death in 1915 is particularly affecting:

When the news of his death came through, Elizabeth began to shake. Gripping each wrist in the other hand. Her face draining and then hotly colouring. [...] She could do nothing, and in very little time everything she

cared for would break apart. She felt herself closing off, shutting down into widowhood.

*My husband has gone.* It was like losing a sense. Your hearing. Like standing in the street with everything crackling and booming about you, and riding within your body in a heavy silence. (Walker 2005: 76)

Elizabeth survives due to her friendship with her neighbour Bonnie; the two women help each other with the farm work and share a sad tenderness, comforting each other in moments of despair. In contrast to the wealthy women who visit Elizabeth and are embarrassed by her lack of composure, Bonnie accepts “all the nonsense of grief” (Walker 2005: 77). Interestingly, this relationship between a wealthy station-owner and a working class woman is seen as a breach in the Australian class structure: “Men mixed freely in the bush, but well-off women were less likely to meet poorer women as equals” (Walker 2005: 63). Paradoxically, however, as noted by Donna Coates (unpublished 14–15), in *The Wing of Night* the relationship formed by Elizabeth and Bonnie is closest to the myth of Australian mateship. Significantly, women less privileged than Elizabeth are also victims of the war in the novel – they suffer the excruciating pain of separation and loss, but also abandonment and betrayal (Kaplan 2005: 19). Bonnie Fairclough waits for Joe to return, in vain, and finally marries Elizabeth’s father Ramsay; her eventual encounter with the returning soldier breaks her heart. Annie Crane, a cook, is reduced to poverty and hunger after her husband, forced to enlist by zealous white feather ladies, is killed in France. Walker thus creates an atmosphere of haunting absence, emptiness, and desolation, which contrasts with the stereotypical image of the supportive, uncomplicated home front<sup>8</sup>.

The affective power of *The Wing of Night* also lies in the fact that, unlike Urquhart, Walker denies any possibility of post-war reintegration and reconstruction. Three years after her husband Louis’s demise, Elizabeth gets romantically involved with Joe Tully. The lovers seem perfectly compatible; with Joe, Elizabeth stops thinking about her dead husband all the time. Yet their love affair is only an interlude of happiness in a sequence of tragic events. Although he feels safe by her side, the male protagonist still suffers from flashbacks and nightmares. When Elizabeth becomes pregnant and is about to give birth in a remote town, Joe is “flooded with black dread” (Walker 2005: 210), afraid that the universe of death that he carries within himself might contaminate her or their child. Inebriated, Joe is sent to prison. He commits suicide, having reconstructed, to his horror, his Gallipoli deeds, which, however, remain beyond the possibility of direct narrativization in Walker’s text. There is no escape for Joe and Elizabeth from the trauma of war – the female protagonist’s life is again shattered by loss.

Significantly, in a most disturbing way for the reader, Walker fuses her female protagonist’s grief for Joe with her grief for Louis. In fact, the two soldiers become one in the version of events Elizabeth intends to reveal to her new-born son in the future:

I’ll tell him that I first saw his father when the Light Horsemen were marching onto their troopship at Fremantle. There was a brass band, wasn’t



there, Bonnie? And a crowd packed shoulder to shoulder, singing “God Save the King”. The sun was shining on the leather and the brass and plumage in their hats. I’ll tell him about the way the horses were winched onto the deck. I’ll make it into a story about flying horses and tall Australian heroes. (Walker 2005: 257)

This erasure of identity is unsettling in the novel. On the one hand, it illustrates the spectre of death which extends beyond Gallipoli, killing Joe in peacetime; on the other, it points to an excess of suffering that the female protagonist is unable to assimilate. However, the secret of Joe’s death also shows how unimportant his life was in the Australian class structure. According to Butler, life should be grievable in the sense that when it is lost it becomes the object of mourning and grief: “Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear” (Butler 2010: 15). In *The Wing of Night*, as one of the dispossessed, early orphaned by his parents, struggling to survive on the fringes of society, Joe will be quickly forgotten, his life will not count as life, and his death, in contrast to the mythical Anzacs of Gallipoli, will remain unnoticed and ungrievable (Butler 2010: 15). In a most disquieting way, in the above citation Walker also illustrates the disturbing transformation of the war into a romanticized narrative, purified of pain and death. *The Wing of Night* thus shows how *trauma time* disrupts, momentarily, the *linear time* of the nation state, which immediately “reassert[s] its authority through heroic stories of continuity and origin and narratives of sacrifice” (Edkins 2014: 132). Yet, simultaneously, by highlighting the depths of intimate suffering, Walker signals distance from the official imaginary. In contrast to *The Stone Carvers*, *The Wing of Night* allows the readers to “gain empathic *access* to the devastating effects of war without entirely or necessarily proffering us consolatory reprieve” (Gana 2014: 78; italics in the original).

#### 4. Conclusions

Vimy in *The Stone Carvers* and Gallipoli in *The Wing of Night* are sites of national traumas and long-lasting tragedies. The two novels explore the corporeal effects of violence at the origin of the nation-state, examining at the same time how it “comes to constitute the spectre of force by which the state draws its remarkable authority” (Zacharias 2012: 119). Both *The Stone Carvers* and *The Wing of Night* highlight the vulnerability of Canadian/Australian soldiers, as well as the precarity of the veterans’ lives. Urquhart and Walker refuse to invest them with heroism and glory, exploring bare life – abandonment to injury and death, and, later, trauma and homelessness (see Agamben 1998: 90). They fail to comply with the reproduction of the glorious Canadian/Anzac subject, which would involve a reconciliation with the tragedy of the past. By resisting the official narrative of commemoration, Urquhart and Walker demonstrate that when it inscribes war violence “into a linear time of national heroism [...] the state conceals the trauma that it has, necessarily, produced” (Edkins 2003: xiv). Instead of celebrating the violent crisis seen as the birthplace of their respective nations, they commemorate

Canadian and Anzac men and women by exploring their physical and psychological injuries, as well as the courage necessary to survive the trauma of war.

Bringing the two (hi)stories into dialogue with each other reveals interesting “connections in dissimilarity” (Rothberg 2009: 18). While Urquhart’s novel “culminates in the reification of those myths about Canadian participation in the war that seek to celebrate the way the nation came together in grief” (Gordon 2014: 117), Walker’s gesture is much more radical as she creates an atmosphere of haunting absence, of inconsolable devastation, and never-ending grief<sup>9</sup>. The Holocaust imagery Walker uses to represent Gallipoli redefines the national site of glory as a site of trauma and mass death. While Urquhart’s characters manage to rebuild their lives, Walker’s male protagonist dies, haunted by the horrors of war, and her female protagonist remains inconsolable. More radically than Urquhart, Walker shatters the “licensed displacements of the realities of war,” inscribed within the legitimizing narrative of the Australian nation, which tends to derealize the actual goals of warfare and attempts to “confer meaning on the meaninglessness of war” (Gana 2014: 78).

Both Urquhart and Walker depart from the militarily-oriented focus of traditional war stories to focus on “the local and the particular – the individual, the couple and the small group” (Horne 2015b: 638). The heart-renting descriptions of Klara’s and Elizabeth’s grief challenge the cliché of the serene home front to situate women as victims of the war. At the same time, however, in the two novels under consideration, grief is not a private, depoliticized experience, but rather generates a refusal to accept the soothing story of glory and nation building. Both novels illustrate new, tentative forms of interdependency (between Elizabeth and Bonnie in *The Wing of Night*, Klara, Giorgio, Tilman and Monsieur Recouvrir in *The Stone Carvers*), which result from solidarity in sorrow and transform, however temporarily, the status quo. Urquhart and Walker thus rewrite the memory of the First World War, complementing the grandiose national metanarratives with intimate stories of trauma and loss.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> While Jane Urquhart is a celebrated Canadian writer, and *The Stone Carvers* was long-listed for the Booker prize and short-listed for Canada’s top literary prizes, Walker’s exceptional novel has not attracted much critical attention. Urquhart was influenced by her mother’s personal stories about the war’s aftermath and her collection of memorabilia connected with Vimy. She was also deeply affected by her visit to the Vimy Memorial (Urquhart 2012). *The Wing of Night* in turn was inspired by the stories of Walker’s grandfather and great-uncle. Coates (unpublished 16–17) discusses in detail the autobiographical aspects in Walker’s novel.
- <sup>2</sup> In his insightful “Some Great Crisis’: Vimy as Originary Violence,” Zacharias shows how a myth of empty origin, based on the erasure of colonial violence, developed in Canada after Confederation until Vimy provided the crisis necessary to transform it into a nation. Rhoden proposes a similar argumentation in her *The Purpose of Futility: Writing World War I, Australian Style* (2015: 34–36). The scholar suggests that, in contrast to Federation, Gallipoli became “the icon of the nation’s birth” because it “ensured that Australia was noticed on the world stage” (Rhoden 2015: 35).



- <sup>3</sup> Only 6.5% of Canadian volunteers were farmers or ranchers. The majority were manual labourers and office workers from big cities. Similarly, more Australian soldiers had an urban background rather than any real connection with the legendary outback (Keshen 2003: 6; 8).
- <sup>4</sup> According to Rhoden, “In today’s Australia, all acts of bravery tend to be measured against the Anzac standard, with the myth regularly invoked in everyday language, politics and the all-important field of sport” (2015: 29). For a study of the history and progression of the Anzac legend, see Reynaud 2014; Spittel 2014; Bongiorno 2014; Rhoden 2015: 23-44. For a study of the Canadian Great War myth, see Vance 1997. In an insightful recent article, Coates (2018) insists on the consistent use of Gallipoli as a signifier of Australianness today, while stressing synchronously Canadian resistance to unifying myths of nationhood.
- <sup>5</sup> I offer a detailed analysis of Klara’s melancholia in *Comparing Grief in French, British and Canadian Great War Fiction (1977–2014)* (137–146).
- <sup>6</sup> As noted by Sokółowska-Paryż (2015: 98–99), such an imaginary makes the First World War more understandable for generations shaped by memories of the Holocaust and other 20<sup>th</sup> century genocides. On the tensions between the universal and the particular in references to the Holocaust, as well as the Holocaust turn in postcolonial studies, see Rothberg 2009. My reading of the two novels has been very much inspired by Rothberg’s comparative thinking.
- <sup>7</sup> I share this point of view with Coates, who also analyzes at length the construction of Joe’s psychological disorder in Walker’s novel (unpublished 17–26).
- <sup>8</sup> Urquhart included a feminine perspective in an earlier war novel, *The Underpainter*, which won the Governor General’s Award for Fiction. Together with the success of Frances Itani’s novels, this is evidence of a Canadian interest in rewriting national history from a feminine point of view. By contrast, as Coates has noted, Walker “is one of the few [Australian] female fiction writers in nearly one-hundred years to undercut the heroic tradition and call attention to the ‘dark sides’ of war” (unpublished 3). Rhoden argues that the “comparative absence of women from Australian narratives reinforces the adventure-genre flavour of these stories” (2015: 173).
- <sup>9</sup> Urquhart shares with other Canadian writers (Timothy Findley, Jack Hodgins, Frances Itani, to name just a few) the desire to save from oblivion the memory of Canadian participation in the war. Commenting on *The Stone Carvers*, Gordon emphasizes “the cultural work of remembering that participation via the writing of historical fiction helps tell Canadians something about who they are and, thus, provides a welcome sense of stability in an uncertain world” (2014: 92). With few exceptions, Canadian Great War novels illuminate the horrors of war, yet also the potential for recovery and reconstruction (Gordon 2014: 93). Similarly, Rhoden stresses that Australian war novels usually highlight both affirmation and desolation. In mainstream literary works the tropes of action and heroism are privileged over passivity and victimization, while the war itself is represented as a constructive adventure (Rhoden 2015: 120–123). If Rhoden (2015: 48-66) rightly warns us against the easy devaluation of idealistic heroism, and stresses that Australian novels have been often underestimated because of their traditional style, Walker’s *The Wing of Night* is an outstanding novel in comparison with this cultural tradition.

## Acknowledgements

This research was supported by grant DEC–2013/11/B/HS2/02871 from the Polish National Science Centre (Narodowe Centrum Nauki).

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