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Imagining the Blitz and Its Aftermath: The Narrative Performance of Trauma in Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch*

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Abstract: Critics agree that Sarah Waters' fourth novel, *The Night Watch* (2006), marks a turn in her fiction, away from the farcical tone of her first three neo-Victorian novels and towards an ever-more serious concern with the changes in class structures and gender roles brought about by the fact of war. The novel tells the parallel stories of three women and one man living in various areas of London in the 1940s. Though they have different social status, ideology, and sexual orientation, they share similarly traumatic experiences as, together with war trauma, they harbour individual feelings of loss and/or shame related to their deviance from patriarchal norms. The article seeks to demonstrate that the palimpsestic and backward structure of the novel performs formally the 'belatedness of trauma' (Caruth 1995, pp. 4–5), in an attempt to respond aesthetically and ethically to the 'mnemonic void' (Freud [1014] 1950) or 'black hole' (Pitman and Orr 1990; Bloom 2010; Van der Kolk and McFarlane [1998] 2004) left both in the characters' traumatised psyches and in our cultural memory of the 1940s by the erased memories of the decade's non-normative or dissident others.

Keywords: Sarah Waters; *The Night Watch*; the Blitz; constellation; palimpsest; shame; secrecy; trauma; void



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1. Introduction: The Critical Reception of the Novel

Critics agree that Sarah Waters' fourth novel, *The Night Watch* (2006), marks a turn in her fiction away from the farcical tone of her first three 'lesbo Victorian romps' (Anonymous 2002, n.p.) and towards a less ludic and metafictional attitude to the representation of the past. While in the earlier novels the protagonists are lesbian women struggling for individuation against the repressive heteropatriarchal Victorian order, *The Night Watch* tells the parallel stories of various characters living in different areas of London in the 1940s. These characters have different social status, ideologies, and sexual orientations. However, they share similarly traumatic experiences derived not only from the war but also from their non-normativity and/or dissidence. Thus, together with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder provoked by the Blitz, they harbour individual feelings of loss and/or shame related to their gender, their sexual orientation and/or their political deviance from patriarchal norms. For all this, there are critics who approach *The Night Watch* as just another lesbian fiction by Sarah Waters. For example, Natasha Alden argues that *The Night Watch* is aimed at fostering the 'postmemorial identification between the affective community of lesbians now and at any point in history' (Alden 2014, p. 179). Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of loss (Butler 2003), Alden contends that the novel fictionalises 'the loss of loss itself' (p. 178), that is, the history of lesbians erased from the dominant historical discourse and, therefore, lost to the collective memory of the period. This consideration of the novel is apposite and suggestive, and there is no denying that, as Alden argues, *The Night Watch* is centrally concerned with responding to 'the intense need amongst lesbian authors and readers for representations of a lesbian past' (p. 179). However, it should not be forgotten that the characters forced to choose between secrecy and invisibility or social ostracism and imprisonment are not only lesbian women (Kay Langrish, Helen Giniver and Julia Cavendish) but also gay men (Duncan Pearce, his friend Alec and his

‘uncle’ Horace Mundy), and heterosexual men and women, such as the couple leading an adulterous affair (Vivian Pearce and Reggie Negri) and the young man imprisoned for conscientious objection (Robert Fraser). Alden’s exclusive concern with tracing the lost memory of lesbians in the 1940s thus unwittingly contributes to deepen the void left in the collective memory by the loss of the other forms of punishable deviance and dissidence represented in the novel.

Another example of approach to *The Night Watch* as a fiction exclusively concerned with the lost memory of lesbian history is that provided by Natalie Marena Nobitz in a book aimed at closing ‘a glaring gap in the canonised recollection of an allegedly homogeneous and normative war’ (Nobitz 2018, p. 13). Just as Alden finds a gap in the postmemory of lesbian history, so Nobitz argues that ‘there is a variety of writings of and about the Second World War remarkably unaccounted for’ (p. 15). She tries to cover this gap, in her case, in the history of World War II literature, by presenting a group of four ‘Homosexual Problem Novels’ (p. 63), written in different periods: ‘Walter Baxter’s *Look Down in Mercy* (1951), Mary Renault’s *The Charioteer* (1953), Sarah Waters’ *The Night Watch* (2006) and Adam Fitzroy’s *Make Do and Mend* (2012)’ (p. 13). Though significant in many respects, Nobitz’s reading of *The Night Watch* evinces a puzzling lack of attention to the adulterous heterosexual couple and the political dissidents in the novel. This omission is important as, by juxtaposing the life stories of a whole range of homosexual and heterosexual characters who do not behave according to the dominant social norms, Waters is pointing to the absolute normalcy of both. As the writer told Luce Armitt in interview, the key to the understanding of *The Night Watch* is that ‘everybody in the book was engaged in illicit or clandestine activities [. . .]. Actually, I don’t think of them as marginal people at all; I just think of them as *perfectly ordinary people* from the 1940s’ (Armitt 2007, p. 122; emphasis added).

In a later interview with Kaye Mitchell, Waters admitted that, although there is a wealth of metafictional allusions to lesbian historical figures and canonical lesbian texts in *The Night Watch*, it also shows a certain evolution from postmodernist playfulness to emotionality in the recreation of history:

Of course we can’t reconstruct the past or capture the past, we can only reinvent it, so I wanted the novel to be very self-consciously a piece of lesbian historical figures [. . .] full of little gestures to other canonical lesbian novels, for example. But increasingly as a novelist I’ve found myself becoming much more interested in character and motivation and emotional dynamics, which means that I’m less interested in *playing* with history than with creating a kind of *emotional experience* for my reader. (Mitchell 2013, p. 131; original emphasis)

These manifestations point to a significant evolution of Waters’ fictional writings from the playful recreation of the lost lesbian past in the three neo-Victorian novels to a more serious and emotionally charged concern in *The Night Watch*, not only for the condition of lesbians during and after the Second World War but also of other types of Londoners erased from the collective memory of British history due to their marginal position within 1940s British society and culture. As the analysis will attempt to demonstrate, these Londoners suffered not only the traumatic effects of war but also the individual traumas associated to their non-normative sexual orientation and, in the case of women and conscientious objectors, the more insidious type of trauma that Dominik LaCapra calls ‘transhistorical or structural trauma’ (LaCapra 2001, p. xii).

Waters’ move from playfulness to emotionality and her new interest in the representation of war chimes in with the general mood brought about by the emergence of trauma as a dominant cultural paradigm in the 1980s. As a good number of critics have pointed out (LaCapra 2001; Luckhurst 2008; Omega and Ganteau 2011), this paradigm shift responds to the confluence of such socio-cultural and historical factors as the effects of the two World Wars, the Spanish Civil War, the Vietnam War, the Korean War, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War and other armed conflicts, the Soviet Gulag, the clash of civilisations, the processes of decolonisation and globalisation, and the alienation of affects

caused by the new technologies, the consumer society, and the overexploitation of the earth by multinational corporations and global capitalism. In the twenty-first century, the invasions of Georgia (2008), the Crimean Peninsula (2014), and Ukraine (started on 24 February 2022) by the Russian Federation leave no doubt about the continuation of the atrocious struggle for global leadership initiated in the Modern era that culminated in the two World Wars and seemed to have ended with the Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991). These recent acts of warfare beg for a relational interpretation of the events of war described in *The Night Watch* in Walter Benjamin's sense of the term 'history' as a 'catastrophe in permanence' (Benjamin [1955] 2007). As is well known, Benjamin's shocked realisation that Enlightenment historians had been unable to predict the atrocities of Nazism, led him to abandon the sequential interpretation of historical events in cause-and-effect terms in favour of a relational interpretation, aimed at granting significance to past events from his own present perspective. He contended that our memory of the past is built on particular 'moments of danger' that flash up in the memory as images (Benjamin [1955] 2007, p. 255), and that only by casting a relational backward glance on them, can we transform these particular events into a historically significant single 'catastrophe'. As he argued in *Illuminations*:

A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time. (Benjamin [1955] 2007, p. 263)

Comparing the historian's backward glance to that of the angel in Paul Klee's painting 'Angelus Novus', Benjamin argued that it is the very act of looking back that allows the angel to see 'one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage' (Benjamin [1955] 2007, p. 257).

Benjamin's outlook on history can help us explain why, from the 1990s onwards, British writers of historical fiction, including Sarah Waters, started giving preferential attention to the representation of what Silvia Pellicer-Ortín has described as 'alternative versions of some of the darkest episodes of our recent history' (Pellicer-Ortín 2018, p. 1). Nobitz's inclusion of *The Night Watch* in a group of homosexual writers creating counter-canonical representations of the Second World War points to the importance of these literary representations in the unveiling of unknown aspects of the past. However, I would like to argue that *The Night Watch* also throws important light on our own present that can be perceived by the contemporary readers if, as with Klee's Angel, we cast a backward glance on the events narrated from our own perspective. To my knowledge, this is an aspect of the novel that has not yet been addressed by critics. For example, in a monograph entitled *How the Second World War is Depicted by British Novelists since 1990*, Eva M. Pérez Rodríguez situates Waters, together with Ian McEwan, William Boyd, Sebastian Faulks and Robert Harris, in a group of British novelists intent on rewriting what she describes as well-established 'myths' about the heroic behaviour of the British during 'the Blitz, the Battle of Britain or the retreat to Dunkirk,' from a 'less idealised, and therefore more truthful' perspective (Pérez Rodríguez 2012, Abstract). After agreeing with Lisa Allardice's view (Allardice 2006) that one of the strengths of the novel is the way in which Waters 'lightly pins her novels with period detail [...] while avoiding the clichés of so much historical fiction' (Pérez Rodríguez 2012, p. 25), Pérez Rodríguez asserts that 'Waters's most noteworthy achievement in *The Night Watch* is the backward plotting' (p. 21). This is a fair assertion. However, instead of elaborating on it, she equates this backward plotting with that of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* (1951), flatly concluding that Waters shares Greene's view that: 'A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead' (Pérez Rodríguez 2012, p. 21). This comment is comparable to Eithne Farry's assertion, in a review of the novel, that '[t]he backward narration was inspired by Pinter's *Betrayal*' (Farry 2011, n.p.); or, as David Leavitt argues, by 'Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*'

(Leavitt 2006, p. 22). Leavitt dislikes the backward chronology of the novel so much that he goes so far as to accuse Waters of arbitrariness in her choice of narrative form: “‘The Night Watch’ leaves us with the sense that both the reader’s experience and the characters’ lives have been manipulated to suit the author’s design’ (p. 22). However, neither the choice of beginning and end of *The Night Watch* is arbitrary, as Pérez Rodríguez asserts, nor can the backward plotting respond to the author’s manipulative design, since, as the Russian Formalists already made clear in the 1920s, there is no separability of form and content (Erlich [1955] 1980, p. 186). In fact, as I will attempt to demonstrate, these formal features form part of a complex narrative structure carefully devised to ‘present or perform (*poiesis*)—as opposed to represent (*mimesis*)’ (Ganteau and Onega 2014, p. 13; original emphasis)—both the belatedness of trauma (Caruth 1995, pp. 4–5), and the ‘mnemonic void’ (Freud [1014] 1950) or ‘black hole’ (Pitman and Orr 1990; Bloom 2010; Van der Kolk and McFarlane [1998] 2004) left both in the characters’ traumatised psyches and in our cultural memory of the 1940s by the erased memories of those individuals failing to meet the decade’s dominant standards.

2. The Narrative Performance of Trauma in *The Night Watch*

As is well known, in their pioneering study ‘On the Psychic Mechanisms of Hysterical Phenomena’ (1893), Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer defined trauma as a malfunctioning of the conscious memory triggered by the subject’s incapacity to react adequately to a shocking or painful event or situation. Regardless of the severity or type of trauma, what produces the characteristic state of affective numbing, fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain is the repression of affects (Freud and Breuer [1893] 2001, pp. 5–6). Without the protection of the ego’s shield, the mind is flooded with large amounts of stimuli that cannot be mastered and so they return, belatedly, to haunt the individual in the form of nightmares, flashbacks and other hallucinatory phenomena that bring him or her back, repeatedly and inevitably, to the moment of fright. At the core of the traumatic experience is, then, a ‘structural belatedness’ (Caruth 1995, pp. 4–5): the break in the mind’s experience of time during the phase of repetition compulsion provokes a ‘temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment’, and paradoxically forces him or her to undergo ‘a repeated suffering of the event’ (p. 10). Usually accompanied by total or partial amnesia, these intensely emotional or somatic intrusions are incomprehensible and impairing, often perceived by survivors of trauma as a mnemonic, temporal and cognitive void or black hole bringing along a ‘collapse of [...] understanding’ (p. 7). This fact led Freud and Breuer to devise the ‘talking cure’, a technique aimed at helping their patients to verbalise, recollect and arrange temporally the meaningless and disjointed ‘mnemonic residues’ of their traumatic experience (Freud and Breuer [1893] 2001, p. 8). More crucially, it led Pierre Janet ([1892] 1901) to distinguish between traumatic memory and narrative memory and to contend that the working through of trauma is achieved when the patient manages to integrate the fragmentary contents of their traumatic memories and situate them in the past of the individual’s life history where they belong. This need to narrativise shock situates the arts, and literature in particular, in a privileged position, as the process of giving expression to the traumatised subject’s repressed feelings and emotions requires the use of highly troped, figurative language. In contrast to history, whose aim is the gathering of archival records in order to establish what actually happened by rational means, the artistic representations of the past are aimed at provoking an affective or empathic response to imagined events that might have happened according to the laws of probability or verisimilitude, not truth. For this reason, literature has always had a privileged function in the exploration of human experiences involving the expression, repression and fruition of affects, from simple stories of love, jealousy, neglect or resilience, to the representation of the many forms of pain that lie at the heart of trauma.

The upsurge in the late twentieth century of a plethora of trauma narratives characterised by generic hybridity, dialogism, indirection, fragmentation, temporal dislocation and other characteristics of traumatic memory, shows that, confronted with the intrinsic

difficulty of giving voice to trauma, these narratives often 'build their impossibility into the textual fabric, performing the void instead of anatomising it' (Ganteau and Onega 2014, p. 10). What is meant by 'perform' here is akin to Michael G. Levine's definition of witnessing as 'an illocutionary speech act which must be performed each time, as though for the first time, on the contingency of an act that in each instance tests—and contests—the limits of narration' (Levine 2006, p. 4). This notion of narrative performance can be related to Andrew Gibson's definition of event as an intermittent and non-linear structure of 'historical striations' (Gibson 2007, p. 8). Unlike accidents or disasters, Gibson argues, the event is 'the chance occurrence of something that had no existence beforehand, could not be predicted or foreseen and had no prior name', but has, however, unpredictable and long-lasting consequences, as it is the occasion of the disruption and 'transformation of forms, the transformation of the world' (p. 3). According to Gibson, Modernist writers responded to the challenge of representing the events that define Modernity by discarding the representation of historical facts as arranged in a structure of progression, and by conceiving instead 'the possibility of pure, aleatory, originary historical beginnings, by interruptions of existing series and inaugurations of new ones' (p. 8). In consonance with this, writers such as Samuel Beckett or Marcel Proust created a new 'aesthetics of intermittency', characterised by a non-linear structure of 'historical striations' (p. 8), that evokes both Walter Benjamin's notion of history as a 'catastrophe in permanence' (Benjamin [1955] 2007) and Sarah Dillon's palimpsestuous or relational reading of the older and the new texts in a palimpsest (Dillon 2007). As shown in an earlier study (Onega and Ganteau 2014), this conception of event and history also informs many a contemporary trauma narrative.

Drawing on these ideas, the article seeks to demonstrate that the palimpsestic and backward structure of *The Night Watch* thematises and performs the trauma-related sense of belatedness and stagnation experienced by the dissident characters and that, by so doing, it provides an aesthetic and ethical response to the erased memories of the decade's marginalised others.

In a book fittingly entitled *The Second World War in Contemporary British Fiction: Secret Histories*, Victoria Stewart points to the emergence of a group of contemporary women writers with an ongoing interest in war representation, integrated by Liz Jensen, Maureen Duffy, Muriel Spark, Olivia Manning, Penelope Lively, and Sarah Waters. As she argues, the existence of this group 'shows the continuing need to come to terms with both the nature of women's participation in the war and the transformation this undoubtedly wrought' (Stewart 2011, p. 158). This characterisation of Waters' later works is complemented by Jessica Gildersleeve when she establishes a relationship of 'affinity' between Waters' neo-forties novels, *The Night Watch* and *The Little Stranger* (Waters 2009b), and 'a tradition of anxious women's writing [concerned with] female vulnerability, gender and social change' (Gildersleeve 2016, p. 82), represented by 1940s writers such as Rosamond Lehmann and Elizabeth Bowen. As she explains, the anxiety expressed by these writers reflects 'how the period was, for women, a rapid progression from wartime freedom to post-war repression' (p. 82). In Gildersleeve's own words:

The affinity between women's writing of the 1940s and Waters's neo-forties fiction is thus best described as a concern about the possibility of social regression, in which the marginalised groups are increasingly limited or questioned in a conservative political landscape. (p. 82)

Although the Blitz was a colossal collective traumatic experience both physically and psychologically, cultural historians agree that the war offered British women an extraordinary degree of freedom as they could leave their enforced domestic sphere and subordination and assume jobs and activities traditionally reserved to men. At the same time, as Victoria Stewart notes, in the war novels of Waters, Jensen and other contemporary women writers, we find 'a gender-related paradox of wartime' identified by Sonya O. Rose (2004) as the social demand, regarding 'the war effort,' that 'women should participate, yes, but not become transformed by that participation' (Stewart 2011, p. 158). In other words, women were expected to replace the absent men during the war, and to give up

their jobs and the newly acquired agency and freedom attached to them after the return to ‘normalcy’. As Waters makes clear in *The Paying Guests* (2014), this treatment of women after the Second World War repeats a pattern already established in the aftermath of the First (see [Onega 2021](#), pp. 4–5). This pattern of repetitions shows that, besides the historical trauma of war, women were victims of ‘transhistorical or structural trauma’ ([LaCapra 2001](#), p. xii), a type of trauma that, unlike historical trauma, cannot be related to concrete traumatising events (p. 81), but rather is the result of ‘the anxiety-producing condition of possibility related to the potential for historical traumatization’ (p. 82). This subtle kind of trauma is central for the understanding of the emotional paralysis and numbing affecting the female characters in the post-war section of *The Night Watch*, regardless of their sexual orientation and, as Claire O’Callaghan argues, of dissident male characters as well: ‘Waters elucidates *some* of the differing politics between straight women, gay men and lesbians within heteronormative society’ ([O’Callaghan 2017](#), p. 103; original emphasis).

The traumatising feelings of social regression and exclusion shared by the main characters in the aftermath of the war, together with the traumatic effects of the Blitz, point to a thematic complexity that, as already argued, begs for a similarly complex narrative structure. Formally, the double sense of social regression and psychic stagnation of the characters is performed by the discontinuous and backward chronology of the novel. Instead of a teleologically oriented, progressive narrative beginning in 1941 and ending in 1947, the narrative is divided into three sections, each covering a single year, arranged in reverse chronological order. Thus, the first section is situated in 1947, two years after the war (September 1939–September 1945); the second in 1944, at the height of the Blitz (September 1940–May 1941); and the third at its beginning, in 1941. As Waters explained in the interview with Armitt, she decided to design the novel as ‘a real ensemble piece’ with ‘a cast of characters’ ([Armitt 2007](#), p. 118) living in different areas of London during and after the war, and alternated the narration of their parallel lives by arranging them in one-day vignettes covering from morning to evening. That is, she employed space montage, a common Modernist technique, already used by Virginia Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway* ([Onega 2017](#), p. 56), to give the impression that the various characters’ actions and thoughts were taking place simultaneously in various parts of London. This narrative structure forced Waters to narrate *The Night Watch* ‘in the third person, which [she] had never done before’ ([Armitt 2007](#), p. 118). She created an external narrator with access to the minds of the characters, but focalised from the characters’ perspectives. Thus, the narration, in free indirect style, alternates the report of present-day events and dialogues with the report, highlighted in italics, of the characters’ thoughts moving from the present to the past and the future through free associations of ideas. That is, Waters had recourse to time montage, another Modernist technique, employed to give the impression of temporal elasticity (see [Onega 2017](#), pp. 155–56), thus counteracting the sense of stagnation produced by space montage in the report of events and dialogues. This combination of time and space montage within the regressive and fragmented narrative structure of the novel works simultaneously to enhance the psychic paralysis and numbing of the characters and to create a hopeful ‘queer’ temporality as an alternative to the prescriptive linearity and progressiveness of heteronormative life and history. As Maite Escudero-Alías puts it in an illuminating essay on the burden of shame in *The Night Watch*:

Often used in trauma fiction as a way of placing the reader in a timeless, chaotic pattern of existence, this reverse chronology also enacts here an ethical form of telling which is relevant to queer and minority culture [in that it constitutes] an attempt to ‘produce alternative temporalities,’ to use Judith Halberstam’s words, that ‘allow their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction and death’. ([Escudero-Alías 2014](#), p. 223)

In agreement with this, in the first section of the novel, the characters are struggling to overcome their post-war traumas as survivors of the Blitz and attempting to readjust to

the new socio-cultural, economic and political conditions while simultaneously striving to hide some aspects of their lives at odds with the heteronormative pattern of birth, marriage, reproduction and death. These forbidden and punishable aspects of their lives take the form of unmentionable secrets only barely perceptible to readers through cryptic remarks or unexplained associations of ideas in the italicised paragraphs, whose true significance does not become apparent until the end of the novel.

The Night Watch begins with the presentation of Kay Langrish, an upper-middle class butch lesbian, as a paradigmatic example of the social stagnation and psychic paralysis affecting lesbians after the war. However, her ailing condition is immediately made extensive to Londoners in general. In 1947, Kay is leading a solitary and aimless life verging on major depressive disorder after having lost both her job as an ambulance driver and her beloved partner Helen Giniver, who left her for her own former partner, Julia Standing. Kay discovered their affair the night the apartment she shared with Helen was destroyed in an air raid. Since then, she lives in a hired garret room in a derelict house owned by Mr Leonard, the night watch of the title. She passes her uneventful, drab days watching films twice over and belligerently walking the streets with the cropped hair and male outfit she used to wear during the war. The first thing she does every morning is to open the garret window, just as Mrs Dalloway (Woolf 1925) used to open the French window at Bourton. But while Clarissa remembered this daily routine as an experience of exhilaration and happiness that triggered fond memories of her youth, Kay simply watches Mr Leonard's patients coming for faith healing:

Punctually, they came—so punctually, she really could tell the time by them: The woman with the crooked back, on Mondays at ten; the wounded soldier, on Thursday at eleven. On Tuesdays at one an elderly man came, with a fey-looking boy to help him. [...] After them came a woman with her son, a little lame boy in spectacles; after that, an elderly Indian lady with rheumatics. (Waters [2006] 2009a, p. 3)

While the parade of patients Kay observes every morning leaves no doubt about the ailing condition of Londoners in 1947, her reflection that they come 'so punctually [that] she really could tell the time by them' points to Kay herself as stuck in the presentness of trauma time. Although some of them remain unknown, the elderly man and the fey-looking boy are 'uncle' Horace Mundy and Duncan Pierce, an intergenerational gay couple that had met while Duncan was interned at Wormwood Scrubs on charges of conscientious objection and collaboration in the suicide of his friend Alec (pp. 433–34), as Mr Mundy was his warden. This fact strengthens the intertextual connection between *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Night Watch* as Duncan's traumatic guilt and shame echo those of Septimus Warren Smith, the World War I veteran suffering from shell shock who, confronted with the incomprehension of society, the army and the medics, eventually committed suicide. More generally, this story line also echoes Great War novels such as Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), or contemporary novels such as Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy* (1991, 1993, 1995), exploring the effects of the First World War on identity, masculinity, the negative attitude of the normative society towards conscientious objection and the difficulties of applying psychoanalytic therapy to shell-chocked combatants.

As with Kay, Mr Leonard's patients are survivors of the Blitz, but, unlike her, they share Mr Leonard's conviction that their physical wounds are the manifestation of the spiritual disorder brought about by the war and that they can heal themselves and the world through prayer and faith in the power of harmony (Waters [2006] 2009a, p. 12). Without the comfort provided by faith, with 'nothing to do and no one to visit, no one to see' (p. 6), Kay lives in the atemporal void of trauma in its acting out phase: 'Her day was a blank, like all her days' (p. 6). Her only way to gather a sense of the passing of time is to associate each day of the week with the regular visits of some patients (p. 3) and imagine stories about them. For example, she imagines that the little lame boy is afraid of her, that he takes her for 'a ghost or a lunatic [haunting] the attic floor' (p. 4). Needless to say, her thoughts have a strong intertextual charge as Kay is assuming that she projects the image

of an ‘apparitional lesbian’ (Castle 1993), or of ‘the madwoman in the attic’, the epitome of dissident women in patriarchy according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Gilbert and Gubar [1979] 1984). Kay is wealthy enough to own a house. However, she has enclosed herself in a derelict attic in the only standing building in a devastated area of London such as the bombed areas she used to patrol with her ambulance in search of survivors during the black outs. As several critics have pointed out (Alden 2014, p. 79; Clausen 2007, n.p.; Nobitz 2018, p. 221), the fact that Kay is an upper-middle-class masculine lesbian who worked as ambulance driver during the war, is intertextually indebted to Stephen Gordon, the controversial ‘sexual invert’ condemned to unhappiness and shame in Radcliffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (Hall [1928] 1935?). The precursor of this prototype was the eponymous protagonist of ‘Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself’, a short story written by Hall in July 1926, shortly before the writing of the novel, and published after it, in 1934. This short story narrates the agency and freedom brought to Miss Ogilvy, an upper-middle-class spinster in her mid-fifties, by the First World War, when she was allowed to found a militarised ambulance unit to rescue wounded soldiers from French fields of war. As Alden rightly notes, Kay is one of the many ‘Miss Olgivies’ that were free ‘to cut their hair, to dress mannishly and to take up active, traditionally male roles’ (Alden 2014, p. 190) during the war, but were asked to return home when the war ended. In Hall’s narrator’s own words:

Poor all the Miss Olgivies back from the war with their tunics, their trench-boots and their childish illusions! Wars come and wars go but the world does not change: it will always forget an indebtedness which it thinks it is expedient not to remember. (Hall [1934] 2019, p. 2)

As with Miss Ogilvy and Stephen Gordon, Kay suffers, then, from the gender-related, structural trauma of having lost her awfully hard but fulfilling job as ambulance driver and rescuer. This job, which she did every night during the Blitz with heroic disregard for her safety, had given Kay an unprecedented degree of autonomy and freedom that she refuses to give up after the war by continuing to wear trousers and cropped hair. However, together with the post-war nostalgia for agency and freedom felt perhaps more acutely by lesbians but shared by heterosexual women as well, Kay is prey to a deeper trauma caused by the loss of her beloved Helen. As Escudero-Alías notes, Kay’s psychic condition stems from the shame she feels as a masculine lesbian for her incapacity to fulfil the social requirements of heteropatriarchy (Escudero-Alías 2014, p. 224). As the narrator explains, one of the tragedies of her life was that she could not be like a man to Helen: ‘make her a wife, give her children ...’ (Waters [2006] 2009a, p. 326). The deeper source of Kay’s trauma is, then, the result of the social stigmatisation caused by the gender and sexual politics of British society in the 1940s that condemned lesbian women to exclusion and abjection.

In the short story, Hall finds a solution for Miss Ogilvy’s melancholia and dejection by having recourse to fantasy. Disrupting chronological order, she takes the protagonist to an Edenic Britain, where she can fulfil her cross-gender dream by becoming a Neolithic warrior and experiencing bliss with a woman. As Richard Dellamora explains, Ogilvy’s transformation into a prehistoric young warrior points to Hall’s endorsement of the Theosophical doctrine of reincarnation employed by Havelock Ellis and other early twentieth-century sexologists to explain ‘inversion’:

Theosophical mythology of reincarnation envisaged the self as a series of, in turn, increasingly masculine or feminine physical existences at different times and in different places. These changes were used to explain the phenomena of sexual inversion. (Dellamora 2011, p. 219)

The fact that Kay’s host is a follower of Mrs Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of the Christian Science Church (Waters [2006] 2009a, p. 10), strengthens Waters’ indebtedness to Radcliffe Hall, as Theosophy has many beliefs in common with this doctrine, including faith healing (see Barker 1940, n.p.). Mr Leonard offers Kay a way out of her traumatised state comparable to Miss Ogilvy’s transcendental leap, when he asks her to lift up her gaze from the dust and look beyond material things (Waters [2006] 2009a, p. 169).

His recommendation echoes William Blake's contention that we move out of the hell of materialism—what he described as 'Single vision and Newton's sleep' (Blake [1802] 1957, p. 808)—and assume the "Fourfold Vision" (p. 808) or enlarged consciousness of poets-as-prophets. However, Kay does not believe in transcendence, and she is far from thinking that her sexual orientation is a stage in a spiritual ladder of reincarnations towards original bisexual perfection. Thus, the 1947 section of the novel ends with Kay imagining Mr Leonard 'sending out his fierce benediction into the fragility of the night' (p. 171), while Kay is holding in her hand the gold ring unexpectedly given back to her (p. 80) by a young woman she had taken to hospital three years before after a botched abortion (p. 416). In the second section of the novel, we learn that this woman is Vivian Pierce, Duncan's sister, and that Kay had saved her not only from death but also from shame and imprisonment by writing in the report that she was married and had had a miscarriage. Kay soothed her panic by putting in her finger the gold ring she was wearing in the smallest finger of her left hand, symbolising her 'matrimonial' relationship with Helen. This ending suggests that Kay's alternative to Mr Leonard's faith in transcending reality to heal self and world lies in the capacity for empathic unsettlement and compassionate action recommended by LaCapra (2001, p. xi).

Regardless of their sexual orientation, the problems encountered by the female characters after the war are very similar. Helen also lost her job in 'a Damage Assistance Department in Marylebone Town Hall' (Waters [2006] 2009a, p. 15). However, her feminine looks, or as she put it, the fact that she looked '*marriageable*' (p. 146; original emphasis), together with the secrecy with which she led her lesbian relationship with Julia, ironically allowed her to run a flourishing match-making agency for heterosexual couples precisely with the assistance of Vivian Pierce. This coincidence, together with many similar ones throughout the novel, work thematically to enhance the role of chance knitting together the lives of the characters, and formally to blur the boundaries separating their parallel story lines. In 1947, Vivian and Helen have been working together for more than a year in apparent harmony and conviviality. However, they know very little of each other. Any attempts at intimacy on Helen's part are frustrated by what she describes as Viv's sudden drawing of a '*curtain* [whenever] she thought she had given away too much' (p. 19; original emphasis). Helen accepts Viv's refusal of intimacy and is in fact equally secretive. As the narrator explains, she also had a respect for curtains, 'having one or two things in her own life that she preferred to keep in darkness ...' (p. 19). As readers soon learn, Helen is obsessed with hiding not only her forbidden relationship with Julia but also the fact that she is suffering from evermore intense bursts of jealousy (p. 60), leading to self-harm and paranoia (pp. 146, 151–57), since Julia's growing success as a detective fiction writer often keeps her away from home with other women.

Indeed, secrecy seems to be a central feature of the main characters' relationships with co-workers, relatives and even lovers. During the war, Vivian, a working-class woman in her early twenties, enjoyed an unprecedented degree of freedom. Her job as a typist for the Ministry of Food allowed her to leave her constraining parental home and live in John Allen House, a residence for girls contributing to the war effort. This situation of independence led Viv to keep an illicit affair with Reggie Nigri, a mobilised car seller (p. 469) undergoing military training whom she had met on a train by sheer chance in 1942, when he was returning home with compassionate leave since his wife had just given birth to their second child (p. 471). When Vivian became pregnant since Reggie 'can't stand [...] raincoats' (p. 294), she decided to tell no one, except Betty Lawrence, a residence mate who guessed why she was throwing up (p. 293). Viv was panic-stricken by what had happened to another girl from the residence, called Felicity Withers, after becoming pregnant by a Free French airman:

She'd thrown herself down the stairs at John Allen House [...]. She'd been dismissed from the Ministry, sent home, back to her parents—a vicar and his wife—in Birmingham. (p. 294)

Paralysed by fear, Viv found herself in the office moving between the women ‘like some sort of phantom’, feeling separated from them and alone (p. 289). Advised by Betty, Viv tried various supposed methods to lose the baby. Only when she realised that they did not work, did she gather courage to ask Reggie for help, but by then her pregnancy was too advanced. Made by a dentist in awful sanitary conditions, the illicit abortion seriously endangered Viv’s life (pp. 386–408) and brought to the fore her lover’s callousness, unreliability and egotism (pp. 408, 411). In 1947, Viv is still struggling to overcome her feelings of dejection, guilt and shame in utter loneliness, forced to keep to herself not only her awful secret but also the equally shameful family secret that Duncan, her beloved teenage brother, had been in jail during the war for refusing to enrol in the army and for his involvement in the suicide of his friend Alec (pp. 433–34). As gay young men, Duncan and Alec had no chance of being declared conscientious objectors by a jury. As Tobias Kelly explains, to the British ‘the Second World War was “a just war,” a good and righteous battle against the forces of fascism’ (Kelly 2020, p. 321). Therefore, the arguments presented by conscientious objectors were ‘often valorized as a specifically individual and ethical response to war’, rather than as a question of justice (p. 328). This meant that, ‘in order to be treated as a subject with rights and entitlements, those who refused to fight had to behave like conscientious and loyal subjects of the empire’ (p. 329). Inevitably, their degree of loyalty was determined by wider cultural conventions about what a sincere and genuine conscience should look like (p. 327). Thus, ‘Quakers were seen as archetypal conscientious objectors’ (p. 328), since they were ready to collaborate in the war effort by carrying out humanitarian work, but ‘Jehovah’s Witnesses, who sought to cut themselves off from ungodly obligations, were routinely rejected by the tribunal’ (p. 327). The failure of the British government to apply criteria of justice to all petitioners evinces a structural discrimination between socially acceptable and dissident conscientious objectors, comparable to that suffered by women with respect to their working rights after the war.

As we have seen, in 1947, Duncan’s and Kay’s lives crisscross by sheer chance as he is the fey-looking boy she sees from her garret window every Tuesday morning taking an older lame man to the faith healing sessions. A sensitive closeted gay, Duncan is still paralysed by guilt and shame nearly three years after his release from Wormwood Scrubs: guilt for having been unable to prevent Alec’s suicide, and shame for his lack of courage to kill himself. As with Kay, he is also ashamed of his incapacity to meet the social expectations of manliness, in his case, enforced by his and Viv’s father, a staunch upholder of patriarchal norms and British Empire ideology. Also, as with Kay, Duncan responds to his double social stigmatisation as a convict and as a homosexual with feelings of self-hatred and worthlessness. After his release from prison, these feelings had led him to accept a drab job he hated in a candle factory at Shepherd’s Bush (Waters [2006] 2009a, p. 36), and also to live ‘like an old married couple’ (p. 32) with ‘uncle’ Horace Mundy, the crippled old man, who had been his former prison warden, even though he does not like having sex with him. His moving self-consoling thoughts while Mr Mundy is waiting for him in the Victorian bed justify Alden’s description of their relationship as ‘quasi paedophilic’ (Alden 2014, p. 186):

It wasn’t much. It was almost nothing. Duncan thought of other things. There was a picture, hanging over Mr Mundy’s bed: a scene of an angel, safely leading children over a narrow, precipitous bridge. He’d look at that until it was over. (Waters [2006] 2009a, p. 162)

In prison, Duncan shared cell with Robert Frazer, a handsome and self-assured conscientious objector in his mid-twenties (p. 41). As an upper-middle class heterosexual man, Frazer had no difficulty in finding fulfilling jobs after his release from prison. He worked for a year in a refugee charity (p. 88), and then started trying his hand at journalism for political magazines (p. 89). A casual encounter with Frazer in the candle factory—another example of chance governing the lives of the characters—seems to give Duncan the strength he needs to put an end to his self-punishing apathy and sense of worthlessness and move on from his position of social exclusion and abjection. But Frazer is little aware of the strong erotic bond he contributed to create with Duncan during their internment at Wormwood

Scrubs, and he baffles his expectations of friendship and support by failing to keep a second date with him two weeks later (p. 160). Duncan's realisation, after hours of waiting at Mr Mundy's house, that Frazer wasn't going to come (p. 160), is described by the narrator as a thoroughly traumatic experience that increases his low self-esteem: 'The disappointment was dreadful—but then, he was used to disappointment: the first sting of it faded, turned, instead into a settled blankness of heart' (p. 160). As he entered the kitchen, Duncan's blankness of heart turned into a vision of himself falling into a well, or in psychoanalytical terms (see above), into the 'black hole' of trauma: 'He had a horrible sense of himself falling, falling, as if down the narrow shaft of a well'. (Waters [2006] 2009a, p. 161). Still, although he had already put on his pyjamas and was resigned to accept Mr Mundy's invitation to enter the bedroom to say goodnight (p. 161), Duncan suddenly found the courage to put on a coat and go out, determined to find Frazer's home. His decision opens up the hopeful possibility that Duncan will manage to overcome his shame and guilt for failing to prevent his friend Alec's suicide or fulfil their suicide pact and move on to the healing phase of working through both of his individual trauma and of the structural trauma caused by his stigmatisation as a pacifist and as a gay man.

Significantly, the reason for Frazer's forgetting of his date with Duncan was the attraction he felt for his sister Vivian, which led him to insist on keeping her company at the time of the appointment, even though she did her best to stifle any attempts at intimacy with him (pp. 130–31). Frazer's attraction for Duncan's sister, an attractive girl without a known male partner, conforms to the behavioural pattern of every heterosexual man coming across her (including Reggie), who treats her as a beautiful object and potential sexual prey. Walking with Frazer along a sleazy area of London during their brief encounter in 1947, Viv reflects on the difference between walking alone or in the company of a man:

Yesterday she'd come this way on her own and a man had plucked at her arm and said in a phoney New York accent, 'Hey, Bombshell, how much for a grind?' He'd meant it as a sort of compliment too. But tonight men looked but called nothing, because they assumed she was Frazer's girl. It was half amusing, half annoying. (p. 132)

Viv's mixed feeling about the sexual attraction she produces in men, together with the fact that she continues dating Reggie after his dreadful behaviour during the abortion, point to her acceptance of the submissive role allotted to women in the heteronormative social order. In 1947, far from feeling the passion of old for Reggie, Viv is 'distracted', 'furious' and wanting to 'be on her own, away from him' (p. 77). However, she is unable to act accordingly. Still, as in the case of Duncan, Viv unexpectedly finds the energy to consider the possibility of leaving Reggie and starting a new life after a serendipitous encounter with Kay, when she gathers the courage to return the gold ring to her. As she reflects:

She felt capable of anything! [...] She could call him up and tell him—what? [...] The possibilities made her giddy. Maybe she'd never do any of these things. But oh, how marvellous it was, just to know that she could! (p. 140)

Frazer's frustration of Duncan's expectations of friendship and Reggie's unspeakable callousness with Viv constitute paradigmatic examples of the lovelessness and egotism of the heterosexual male characters. But their self-centredness does not exempt them from feeling shame and guilt for their unethical behaviour. Reggie was so afraid of losing his family and job and going to prison if the abortion was known, that he called the ambulance only when their host at the show flat said that it was a matter of life and death (p. 407); and although Viv was yearning for him to hold her hand and put her arm around her, he absconded as soon the ambulance arrived (p. 408). For all this, however, and ironically enough, when her rescuers spoke to each other and Viv realised in dismay that they were not men but short-haired women all her confidence in them and the sense of care and safety disappeared (p. 410).

For all of the privileges of his gender and class, Frazer was also ashamed by the lack of manliness attributed to conscientious objectors. During his imprisonment, he tried to cover

this shame with flippancy and nonchalance. However, after his release, when he learned the dreadful stories of the foreign refugees he encountered in his charity job, he realised that he had done nothing to alleviate their atrocious suffering. As he admitted to Duncan, he felt sick with himself for being alive (p. 90). Although he did not admit it, Frazer had given clear signs of cowardice during the black outs and bombings at Wormwood Scrubs, when he was so panic-stricken that he asked Duncan to let him get into his bed, without figuring out the disturbing erotic consequences of this intimacy for the gay teenager.

While Frazer had never been in real danger of losing his life, Helen's fear of the Blitz is a clear case of post-traumatic stress disorder. She had been rescued from the rubble of a collapsed building in 1941 and was so afraid of being buried alive again that she stayed in the flat instead of going to the underground shelters during the air raids. This is why the first time she gathered the courage to confess her love to Julia, she did so during a strictly forbidden walk in the pitch darkness of the black out, illuminated only by the glare of the bombs falling nearby. In another clear case of a serendipitous coincidence determining the lives of the characters, her betrayal of Kay saved Helen's life a second time as she was away with Julia the night the building and area where she lived with Kay were bombed. The second section of the novel ends with Kay, who nearly killed herself trying to enter the devastated zone in a maddened attempt to rescue her from the ruins of their building in flames, suddenly seeing Helen standing unharmed in the company of Julia (p. 454). The shocking contradictory revelations that, against all odds, Helen was alive and that she was with her former partner, constitutes the second shock that activates the acting out of her trauma of loss. In 1941, Kay had found Helen after an air raid, covered by plaster and buried to the waist by bricks and rubble (p. 294). She had kept her company for hours, trying to comfort her until the rescue team freed a mother and her son who were completely buried under the rubble (p. 502). As already suggested, Helen's paranoiac fear of being left by Julia repeats the traumatic fear of being abandoned by Kay. Julia, who is the daughter of an architect and likes helping him to assess the habitability of bombed houses, loves beautiful and elegant buildings such as St Paul's for everything they represent (p. 360). However, she is overwhelmed by the thought that rationality and beauty provide no real protection against human savagery. In a gesture that will be repeated by Frances Wray in *The Paying Guests* (Waters 2014, p. 131; see also Onega 2021, pp. 7–9), Julia tries to avoid 'the darkness' she feels after her loss of faith in humanity by concentrating on ordinary things (Waters [2006] 2009a, p. 360). Still, the character with the clearest symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder is Kay, who in 1947 continues acting out the unspeakable atrocities she witnessed during the Blitz as ambulance driver and rescuer in the form of chain-smoking, hallucinations, nightmares, bouts of violent shaking, and insomnia.

The fact that all of the main characters evince symptoms of war trauma helps them cover up their strongly repressed, individual and structural traumas of loss, shame and guilt caused by their deviance from patriarchal norms, thus providing a socially acceptable justification for their aloof, neurotic or paranoiac behaviour. As in the case of Kay, Helen and Julia, the relationships of Viv and Reggie, of Duncan and Frazer, of Duncan and Mr Mundy, and of Duncan and Alec seem to be ruled by a pattern of chance encounters and cross-purposes suggesting that love can never be returned by the loved object. According to Escudero-Alías, the recurrent nature of this impossibility points to it as a determining factor in the development of the queer characters' melancholia as a non-pathological, identity-affirming tool of survival (see Escudero-Alías 2014, pp. 232–33). This interpretation of queer melancholia is enhanced by the capacity for empathy and unrequited love of Kay and also of her ambulance mate, Iris Carmichael ('Mickey'), another male-looking but tender-hearted and empathetic lesbian. Mickey covered Kay when she falsified the report of Vivian's abortion and was always ready to accompany her in the hardest and more shattering rescues, including the picking of scattered body parts when it was not their turn, to protect a younger driver from the atrocious experience.

3. Conclusion: Towards a Relational Reading of *The Night Watch*

Given the backward structure of the narration and the gaps in the information stemming from the characters' reluctance or impossibility to talk about their traumatic memories, the readers cannot know the importance of Viv's chance encounter with Kay or of Duncan with Frazer in the 1947 section of the novel, just as we cannot know what had led Kay, Helen and Julia to their present situation of strain. This impossibility suggests that Waters' 'ensemble piece' is built on a network of fortuitous encounters, serendipitous coincidences and emotionally charged relationships ruled by secrecy and cross-purposes, experienced during and after the war by several queer—in the sense of excentric—Londoners with different socio-cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations and ideologies. The life-paths of these queer characters crisscross, separate and crisscross again, provoking a chain of material and emotional effects that enhance their increasing perception of the impossibility of progress or fulfilment, expressed, as we have seen, in self-deprecating feelings of shame, guilt, melancholia and even masochistic self-harm. Taking into consideration the intrinsic difficulty of working through psychic traumas by abreacting or verbalising them (Freud and Breuer [1893] 2001, pp. 5–6), it may be argued that the lack of information caused by the reverse chronological order and the gaps in the characters' traumatic pasts perform formally both the black holes in the protagonists' wounded psyches and the traumatic void left in the cultural memory of the 1940s by the erasure of queer history. The performance of this collective void by the regressive and fragmented narrative structure of the novel has an ethical charge as it forces readers to perceive it empathically and wish to fill it in by unearthing its remaining historical traces. As Escudero-Alías argues, the novel conveys the message that 'only by digging into the foundations of shameful and unbearable secrets can the reader unveil their cause and understand them' (2014, p. 234). This metaphoric description of the reader as archaeologist digging for hidden layers of meaning brings to mind Walter Benjamin's assertion, in 'Excavation and Memory', that:

He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the 'matter itself' is no more than the strata which yield their long-sought secrets only to the most meticulous investigation. (Benjamin 2005, p. 576)

Benjamin's comparison of secret memories to archaeological strata begging for repeated digging suggests that the past has a multi-layered depth and complexity comparable to that of a palimpsest. This complexity would be applicable to *The Night Watch* since, as we have seen, the parallel lives of the characters are constantly blurred by chance encounters and enmeshed with deeply buried secrets requiring further digging or, in Sarah Dillon's apposite terms, a 'palimpsestuous' (Dillon 2007, p. 4) or relational interpretation.

This palimpsestic nature of the novel is thematised through Duncan's fascination for old objects. During Fraser's visit to the candle factory, Mrs Alexander, the supervisor, introduced Duncan to him as 'a great collector of antiques' (Waters [2006] 2009a, p. 43). In fact, however, what Duncan collects are worthless bric-a-brac, like 'the stem and part of the bowl of an old clay pipe' (p. 93) that Duncan picked up from the mud outside the pub by the river where Frazer had taken him after their re-encounter. As Duncan confided to Frazer:

'There might have been a man here, three hundred years ago, smoking tobacco just like you [...]. 'I wonder what that man's name was. [...] I wonder where he lived and what he was like. He didn't know, did he, that his pipe would be found by people like us, in 1947?' (p. 93)

As this comment suggests, Duncan employs the worthless objects he collects to establish a material link with their earlier owners that can help him reconstruct their life stories and testify to their existence. His attempt at imaginative resuscitation of bygone Londoners has an authorial ring, echoing as it does Waters' fascination for the representation of a 'past [that] is absolutely teeming with untold gay stories, or stories that aren't popularly

known' (Armitt 2007, p. 121). As she told Armitt, Waters always sets her historical novels in 'real London locations as a way of anchoring London in some sort of present'. She likes 'walking around London and finding new bits to it' (p. 120). 'So, often, my characters will respond to London just like I do: they're very interested in where they are and who has been there before them and who is in the next street, or what's around the next corner'. (p. 220). What is more, Waters seems to think of London as a palimpsest when she admits that she particularly values 'the scale of London, the fact that it's full of stories [...] jostling up against one another, side by side' (p. 220); or also when she refers to:

The history of London—the depth of London's history—and the fact that it's still there on its streets. I find that very, very inspiring, the fact that you can walk down a London street and see bits of the 19th century, bits of the 18th century, bits of Medieval London, Roman London—if you want to. It's there and it's almost like it's peopled with ghosts—again, jostling up against each other or passing through each other. I find that very exciting. (Armitt 2007, pp. 119–20)

Set against Waters' description of London, *The Night Watch*, with its entangled overt and hidden layers of meaning, becomes a textual palimpsest standing in a micro/macro relationship to London, the archaeological palimpsest with its historical strata jostling up against each other or passing through each other.

Waters' equation of London to a palimpsest is thematised at the end of the novel when Kay finds Helen half buried in the rubble of a collapsed building after an air raid in 1941. While they waited for the rescue team to find a mother and son completely buried under the debris, Kay started wiping the dust from Helen's face very gently, with a wet handkerchief. When the dust fell away, Kay gazed at her 'in a sort of wonder; unable to believe that something so fresh and so unmarked could have emerged from so much chaos' (Waters [2006] 2009a, p. 503). Kay's astonished discovery of Helen's untainted beauty emerging, like Venus Anadyomene, from the chaotic sea of rubble, enhances the symbolism of rebirth provided by the rescue of a mother and son, found, after hours of demolition work, beneath a staircase almost perfectly unharmed: 'The boy came out first—head-first, as he must have come out of the womb' (p. 502). While readers know that the message of resilience and hope conveyed to Kay by this rescue will not be fulfilled, it also confirms the value Duncan attributes to the bric-a-brac he collects; that Waters encounters everywhere during her walks around London; and that the readers will surely perceive as a single historical catastrophe if, as Benjamin's angel, we look at the 'moments of danger' endured by the characters in the novel from a relational perspective.

As Dillon points out in *The Palimpsest*, Thomas de Quincey, in *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821), compared the process of resurfacing of the older, covered up text in a palimpsest to the near-death experience of a woman who had fallen into a pool of water as a child. The woman saw her whole life pass before her eyes 'in the twinkling of an eye', before being rescued, with the corresponding 'perversion of temporality and disturbance of chronology' (Dillon 2007, p. 27). According to this, the resurfacing of the older text in a palimpsest—or, in Duncan's and Waters' terms, the resuscitation of the ghosts of the past through their material traces—is an instantaneous occurrence that collapses linear chronology into a pregnant now. From this perspective, the regressive chronology of *The Night Watch* reveals its condition as a constellation in Walter Benjamin's sense of the term.

If, as with Benjamin's angel/historian, we cast a relational backward glance on the 'moments of danger' endured by the characters during the Second World War and its aftermath, we will perceive the successive generations of marginal characters caught in successive armed conflicts for global leadership from the 1940s until the ongoing invasion of Ukraine as a single catastrophe in permanence. The fact that Waters' construction of this fictional constellation is focused from the marginal perspective of non-normative or dissident characters has an added ethical value in that, besides providing an unprecedented outlook on contemporary history, it constitutes an act of restitution of their lost memories and, according to Alden, an act of postmemorial identification as well.

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