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Trauma's Dialectic in Civil War Literature and Film

“WHAT WE HAVE LOST WILL NEVER BE RETURNED TO US. The land will not heal. . . . My heart will not heal.”¹ The portrayal of trauma’s human wounds drenches particular works of Civil War literature and film, in which traumatic acts taking place upon Nature’s land reverberate to the core of human nature, causing characters both close to and distant from such events to display the behavioral dialect of trauma. What happens on the physical battle grounds translates into “happenings” within the inner landscapes of people; so too, from the stances of different eras, the screenwriter/filmmaker, the short story writer, the poet, and the novelist use an arsenal of stylistic forms as vehicles that attempt to articulate the Civil War experience, reflecting the various traumatic and posttraumatic stress reactions of soldiers and their loved ones. Anthony Minghella’s film *Cold Mountain*, a postmodern work based on the book by Charles Frazier, unfolds the state of the southerners’ Civil War perspective by piecing together moments of flashback through “reel” image—gesture and action—and dialogue. Here, film is memory, the past told through the point of view and voiceover of the character of Ada; however, the camera lens bears witness itself when Ada cannot, and it itself depicts traumatic events Ada never experiences: Inman’s journey through battle. Minghella also unfolds traumatic reaction in real time: Sarah’s encounter with the Union soldiers. Ambrose Bierce’s mid-to-late 1880s *Civil War Stories* unveils a visceral, detailed, hopelessly virulent, heightened sensory and death-bound reality exposed within the artificial structure of a short story’s craft. Bierce utilizes both physical and emotional constriction and the intrusive occurrence of vivid sensations and images in “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”; facing death by hanging, Peyton Farquhar lacks his own vocalized verbal narrative, yet Bierce provides the unspoken in prose. Closer to the war itself,

Herman Melville's *Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866) handles trauma through the self-distanced "framed" aspects or episodes of post-event memory. Melville focuses on the shock and grief of the observer in a poem such as "Ball's Bluff" or trauma's incomprehensibility in "The Apparition." During wartime, Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* (1863) depicts trauma's realism within a battle between physical and emotional distresses, as well as fantasy-like "sketches," recorded in the midst of life circumstances. Alcott utilizes the witness bearer's dissociation through the portrayal of protagonist Tribulation Periwinkle. Like the soldier missing a leg or the wife whose husband has been killed, it is the cut-off pieces and the non-linear fragments of these works—rather than the "wholes" of the polished crafts—that replicate the reality of traumatic Civil War experience.

Through the utilization of varying perspectives (Ada's, Inman's) and flashbacks, as well as encompassing fog and haze, Minghella introduces the visual experience of trauma as one that induces mental distress, confusion, disorientation, and dissociation. Initially the film references a time when there is no trauma. Close to the start of *Cold Mountain*, just past the film's initial scene of war's horror and grief, protagonist Ada focuses on the "pre-image" of life in the South, characterized as innocent, peaceful, happy, orderly, love-filled—an idealized time before the war. With her voiceover, which refers to and accompanies a visual flashback three years earlier in July 1864, the South awaiting attack by the North, the film shows the budding union between Ada and Inman, lovers at first sight. *Cold Mountain's* aura of order and stability, however, quickly leaves when Inman enlists as a soldier. Then, once again, the scene becomes one saturated by the bloody trauma of war's battle. The attack at Petersburg is portrayed through the lens of traumatic vision: the slow motion, silent approach of the massive number of shadows, and then two flags—Union troops—followed by a rush of bodies and cacophonous yells of attack, then the visual confusion of disorienting smoke and haze; a survivor, Inman cannot quite make out what is in front of him. According to Judith Herman, psychiatrist and author of *Trauma and Recovery*, "[during trauma,] time sense may be altered, often with a sense of slow motion, and the experience may lose its quality of ordinary reality."² (As an aside, in "One of the Missing," Ambrose Bierce tackles the idea of mind-filled confusion and the warping of time within prose by switching tenses, from past to present, then back again, at the end of the story, confusing reality, and ending without any sense of re-integration.) As if to grasp on to an anchor, Inman somehow manages to hold on to a small picture of Ada, some letters and a book; as he emerges from the Earth's blown up soil, the atmosphere's thick reddish smoke, and piles of dirtied, dead bodies, Inman surveys the wasteland as he salvages love upon this freshly-lain burial ground. The film's soundtrack enhances the moment he picks up the picture of Ada: a woman's wistful voice, accompanied by a violin, sings mournfully, "I've gone to find my true

love. . .”³ The only other sound is Inman’s breath, in gasps; here, the film mimics the idea of “tunnel sound,” a heightened sensory focus experienced during trauma. At one point, the scene cuts to—for Inman—an indistinguishable man standing up from the wreckage, and unfolds in real time as Inman realizes it is the innocent, young Oakley. At an earlier point, the film handed off the point of view to Oakley, as the action moved in an “unreal” slowness within a disorienting fog that blew to the right until his eyes and mind distinguished a horse running to the left (the film here perhaps aesthetically reflected the opposing battle forces). Oakley, dirt-covered, his mouth agape with shock, passively watched the horse leave. Likewise, when the union troops overrun the crater-like land, it seems Inman cannot freely move, as he, in slow motion “runs” toward Oakley to get to him out of harm’s way. Herman’s research on trauma reflects upon this sense of inertia: “one of the many casualties of [war’s] devastation [is] the illusion of manly honor and glory in battle. Under conditions of unremitting exposure to the horrors of . . . warfare, men [begin] to break down in shocking numbers . . . subjected to the constant threat of annihilation . . . they froze and could not move.”⁴ Inman cannot get to Oakley quickly enough and further trauma unfolds before him: he hears the piercing cry as he sees the Union forces stab Oakley, like a sacrificial animal, in the gut, his body falling into the bloody mud.

Within the gore of realism, the film, using Inman’s perspective, juxtaposes a very romantic picture: all the while in trauma, Inman holds onto Ada’s picture, book, and letters, and he dissociates from the present; as if a protective mechanism, his mind flashes back to a time with Ada and her father at a church in the town of Cold Mountain. Ada’s father, a priest, preaches of the peacefulness of nature and his desire for its perpetuity. Inman replies, “That’s what people say we’re fighting for, to keep it that way.”⁵ He adds, “I imagine God is weary of being called down on both sides of an argument.”⁶ In the midst of crisis, Inman reflects upon what calms him: the past—love, and the spirituality of nature, both earthly and human, unharmed, untouched, not yet violated or torn apart by the trauma of war. In contrast, later in the film, Inman expresses a common reaction displayed by trauma survivors: shame, and a perception of innate badness. He says to Ada, “see my insides . . . I think I’m ruined. If I had goodness I lost it. How could I be right to you after what I done? What I seen?”⁷ However, Ada does not understand this perspective; she does not view Inman in this manner. She encourages their union. Yet the trauma of war has not left her unaffected either. She states, “war’s made some things pointless. It’s hard to imagine a wedding.”⁸ Within this post-trauma realm, they exchange the vow, “I marry you”⁹ three times and consummate their marriage. For Inman and Ada, out of trauma comes reconnection. And, after Inman’s death, there is a rebirth: a daughter who carries on his name—literally, “Inman.”

Minghella uses a seeming respite for Inman in the film to portray the traumatic effects of war on someone not directly involved in battle: Sarah, a widow with a sick infant. Sarah embodies guardedness, distrust, terror, grief, a basic need for medical attention, and an innate desperate longing for safe human connection. As Herman reiterates, “traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning.”¹⁰ Sarah epitomizes innocence touched by traumatic experience. When Inman offers her his gun as a gesture that he means no harm she responds by saying fearfully, forcefully, “I don’t want it. I had my way they’d take metal altogether outta this world. Every blade, every gun.”¹¹ She later invites Inman inside: “Do you think you could lie here next to me, not naked or further.”¹² In bed with Inman, Sarah platonically touches his hand and holds it, holding on to all she has lost. She then lets go of her held-in emotions and cries, her face expressing a mixture of grief and relief. Here, she uses Inman as a way to momentarily attempt to fill a hole in her heart, which, in reality, can never be filled. Sarah’s actions show how “traumatic events . . . shatter the sense of connection between individual and community, creating a crisis of faith.”¹³ With Inman, she tries to recapture a connection cut off by war—the death of her husband—by physically holding Inman’s hand. She displays an intense need for faith in his word that he will not hurt her. Concurrently, with enduring vigilance, Sarah displays what Herman refers to as an “ordinary human response to danger” when the Union soldiers arrive at her home:

The ordinary human response to danger is a complex, integrated system of reactions encompassing both body and mind. Threat initially arouses the sympathetic nervous system, causing the person in danger to feel an adrenal rush and go into a state of alert. Threat also concentrates a person’s attention on the immediate situation. In addition, threat may alter ordinary perceptions: people in danger are often able to disregard hunger, fatigue, or pain. Finally, threat evokes intense feelings of fear and anger. These changes in arousal, attention, perception, and emotion are normal adaptive reactions. They mobilize the threatened person for strenuous action, either in battle or in flight.¹⁴

Minghella takes Sarah through the structural stages of Herman’s trauma theory. Sarah begins in a state of high alert. She tries to self-soothe through her companionship with Inman’s body. The film cuts suddenly to show her in an extremely frenzied state: she awakes Inman in a terrified manner, informing him in headline-like phrases that the Union soldiers have come and he must leave. While

Inman escapes and hides, Sarah is confronted by the soldiers who ask her for food: “I got nothing,”⁵⁵ she says with hysteria. The three soldiers tie her to a post and use her baby as torturous collateral. Weeping and physically helpless, Sarah begs: “Please, I’m beggin’ you, have mercy! I got a hog behind the house, please, please sir—take me inside, I’ll do anything you want. You take the hog I’m as good as dead.”⁵⁶ Here, Sarah tries to bargain with her captors, thinking of nothing but saving her life and her baby’s. Dragged back into the house by two soldiers (one remains to watch over the baby), Sarah is mentally present as one soldier starts to rip off her clothes and pushes her down, acts that suggest what will follow: rape. Minghella does not show the traumatic visuals of rape but rather implies it; the film uses the anticipation of the trauma and leaves it—the camera lens dissociates from this reality as perhaps Sarah does—focusing outside the house, on the baby, who remains on the dirty ground outside, lying on his back, painfully crying. Here, the baby becomes a representation of Sarah, expressing the wordless wails of life-or-death-at-stake trauma, and the victim’s physically helpless state in the hands of harm. The sound of a hog screaming accompanies this moment, reflecting violation to a being’s core. The film uses these aural and visual fragments or scene cuts in a way that is symptomatic of the victim’s response to a traumatic act: “The psychological distress symptoms of traumatized people simultaneously call attention to the existence of the unspeakable [act] and deflect from it.”⁵⁷ The film uses sounds dissociated from Sarah’s voice, and a physical environment outside the inside location of Sarah’s trauma. In effect, the editing of scenes creates meaning out of visual and aural relationships, showing Sarah’s traumatic response: she leaves her inner self; as she is violated, her mind goes outside of her body, to be with her screaming baby, there a seemingly lesser of two horrific states. With the help of Inman, Sarah manages to escape total destruction by the hands of the soldiers. Inman tells the remaining Union soldier who stands over the baby to take off his clothes and run. He has no intention of killing him. Sarah, on the other hand, without a second thought, with blood on her shoulder and rage in her face, the traumatic hysteria of rape pulsing through her body and soul, without an utterance from her lips, aims a shotgun at the soldier and shoots. Here, Sarah switches from the role of victim to perpetrator—she holds the phallic symbol strongly, resolutely, and uses it to fatally penetrate the soldier with one resounding bullet.

Ambrose Bierce characterizes the war-traumatized in terms of physical and emotional constriction and dissociation in his short story “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” Focusing the prose initially on the set-up of Peyton Farquhar’s hanging, Bierce portrays Peyton’s dissociation from the trauma of his pending death by extensively prolonging, textually, the eternal sense of the prolonged final moment through the narration of fantasy; Bierce expands time and communicates

the vivid sensations and images of Peyton's inner, unspoken experience as he "falls" through the noose and into the water below the bridge:

... he was awakened—ages later, it seemed to him—by the pain of a sharp pressure upon his throat, followed by a sense of suffocation. Keen, poignant agonies seemed to shoot from his neck downward through every fibre of his body and limbs. These pains appeared to flash along well-defined lines of ramification and to beat with an inconceivably rapid periodicity. They seemed like streams of pulsating fire heating him to an intolerable temperature. As to his head, he was conscious of nothing but a feeling of fullness—of congestion. These sensations were unaccompanied by thought. The intellectual part of his nature was already effaced; he had power only to feel, and feeling was torment.¹⁸

Here, Peyton feels physical constriction, articulated through the "sense of suffocation"; the feeling of "congestion" is overwhelming, "a feeling of fullness." At the same time, his mind becomes constricted: in a powerless situation, Peyton has a perceptual change, an altered state of consciousness in which he protects himself from the unbearable emotional pain of a physical hanging by escaping in his mind. For Peyton, feeling is separated from the intellect. A heightened sense of feeling is "torment," is trauma. His mind constricts to allow in only the fantasy of escape rather than surrender; he disconnects from reality, or at least tremendously distorts it, swimming within his adrenaline-fueled attempts to regain control within a scenario in which he is rendered powerless, in which his life (and death) is actually in the hands of others. Although it is a fantasy, it is not permeated by pleasures but by resonances of the trauma, in a manner created by Peyton so that his mind is able to handle the experience in a controlled, linear fashion. Still, disorientation plagues Peyton at various points:

... suddenly he felt himself whirled round and round—
spinning like a top.

The water, the banks, the forests, the now distant bridge, fort and men—all were commingled and blurred. Objects were represented by their colors only; circular horizontal streaks of color—that was all he saw. He had been caught in a vortex. . . .¹⁹

Here, the physical and emotional experience merge. Confusion is the centrifugal force in Peyton's mind. While the narrowed "vortex" feeling is true at this moment, at other moments a heightened sense of sharp sight accompanies him, reflecting the aspect of Herman's theory of the dialectic of trauma—the two contradictory and "oscillating"²⁰ responses of intrusion and constriction:

He felt the ripples upon his face and heard their separate sounds as they struck. He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf—saw the very insects upon them: the locusts, the brilliant-bodied flies, the gray spiders stretching their webs from twig to twig. He noted the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass.²¹

In this instance, the minute details of Peyton's vision seem impossible to grasp in the midst of the frenzy of escape; however, he does, and, utilizing this aspect of detailing, Bierce depicts the "encoded . . . vivid sensations and images"²² of traumatic experience, which Herman compares to a "deathprint."²³ The progression of this short story also parallels Wolfgang Schivelbusch's theory "On Being Defeated," his introduction to *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*, in war: a progression from a dreamland or state of unreality to an awakening, accompanied by a shift from a tone of liberation and salvation to revenge and then to unconditional surrender²⁴—what Bierce's story lacks is Schivelbusch's theory's final stage: renewal. Peyton progresses through his fantasy of escaping death, from his drop to the waters below and his realization (once in the water) that he is still alive, to his successful darting of bullets from the Union soldiers, to his reunion with his home and his wife (the ultimate fantasy), and then to final surrender—death, but then no further: "He springs forward with extended arms. As he is about to clasp [his wife] he feels a stunning blow upon the back of the neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon—then all is darkness and silence!"²⁵ Bierce highlights the response of shock to trauma before the story ends; it is not the "shot" of a cannon but the "shock" of one that both creates and ends this mind-blowing experience. This third, and longest, section of this story ends with one sentence that switches in perspective, from fantasy back to hard reality: "Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge."²⁶ Peyton's body never left the scene—but within the experience of trauma his mind did. Despite the coping techniques he used to "escape," Peyton could not stop the terrifying experience as it unfolded to its (and Peyton's) doomed end.

Bierce uses a child in "Chickamauga" to illuminate the victim's inability to

control war's traumatic event. In this story, the child symbolizes the smallness of the human being who faces the sublime enormity of consuming trauma. In this way, Bierce communicates the experiencer's sense of incomprehensibility toward such an occurrence. At first, the child perceives the dangerous and wounded soldiers innocently as "the painted clown whom he had seen last summer in the circus . . . he laughed as he watched them. But on and ever on they crept, these maimed and bleeding men, as heedless as he of the dramatic contrast between his laughter and their own ghastly gravity."²⁷ A rabbit frightens the boy more than the harmful men, showing his child-like senses, his lack of ability to understand the adult, grave reality before him. His imagination works to make manageable meaning out of crisis elements that he cannot comprehend. But then the child encounters combat realism head-on: "The man . . . flung the small boy fiercely to the ground as an unbroken colt might have done, then turned upon him a face that lacked a lower jaw—from the upper teeth to the throat was a great red gap fringed with hanging shreds of flesh and splinters of bone."²⁸ Here, the child is brought face to face with the grotesque aspects of trauma and becomes "terrified at last."²⁹ Now, imagination and confusion are replaced by terror. Bierce creates a tone of upheaval by using words that articulate the child's emotional experience rather than the "happening" experience of the situation; he describes the disorientation of the child whose confusion, personified within his own physical situational stance, reverses as his being "pivots" to stand within recognition:

Shifting his position, his eyes fell upon some outbuildings which had an oddly familiar appearance, as if he had dreamed of them. He stood considering them with wonder, when suddenly the entire plantation . . . seemed to turn as if on a pivot. His little world swung half around; the points of the compass were reversed. He recognized the blazing building as his own home!³⁰

Here, language reflects the shift of visual and visceral experience, of the "dreamlike" to the horrors of waking reality, of a world turned upside down. Seeing firsthand his mother, dead, in severely disturbing detail, the child articulates the unspeakable terrible truth through the language of traumatic expression:

The child moved his little hands, making wild, uncertain gestures. He uttered a series of inarticulate and indescribable cries—something between the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkey—a startling, soulless, unholy sound, the language of a devil. The

child was a deaf mute. Then he stood motionless, with quivering lips, looking down upon the wreck.³¹

While some argue that Bierce literally means here that the child was a deaf mute, his description rather mirrors that of the traumatized who is shocked and wordless by the unfathomable, uncontrollable nature of the experience he is forced to bear. Bierce uses the child's progressive reactions to display the human processing of severe trauma, the inability to take in or manage, integrate, make sense of, and otherwise come to terms with the images and facts that lay before him. He presents the inarticulate nature of expression, of what it feels like to live through the unthinkable circumstances of one's world suddenly destroyed.

Like Bierce, Herman Melville's poem "The Apparition," in his collection *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, touches upon incomprehensibility but also incorporates the reverberating emotional effects of this sense through issues of distrust, grief, and rage. A poem about the "convulsions"³² of traumatic experience, Melville depicts the speaker's shell-shocked mental state within the third stanza:

So, then, Solidity's a crust—
The core of fire below;
All may go well for many a year,
But who can think without a fear
Of horrors that happen so?³³

The personification of Solidity portrays it as if atop a hell, an inferno—"the core of fire below"³⁴—that resides like a volcano, its top ready to blow. Solidity's constancy cannot be trusted. The speaker states that "all may go well for many a year"³⁵ yet he has a reflexive fear of upheaval, that Solidity, like a foundational rug, will be pulled out from under by ". . . horrors that happen so?"³⁶ In this way, the poem refers to the survivor's sense of his post-traumatic world lacking the perpetuity of stability, solidity. Preceding this, Melville describes the mental processing of trauma through narrative: "But, ere the eye could take it in, / Or mind could comprehension win, / It sunk!—and at our feet."³⁷ In these lines, Melville explains that the event occurred so quickly that the mind could not hold on, take in, or comprehend it. Yet as a poet, Melville uses his craft to hold on using printed words, which may not describe the minute details of experience, but which confirm that such experience did in fact happen, and which attempt to make meaning out of the unutterable. While spoken words are lost after they pass beyond the lips, written words on a page remain through Time's passages.

In this way, Melville attempts to bear witness to the trauma, and in "Ball's Bluff," he depicts the grief of a private observer who looks at a public scene of entrapment

through a window. The observer, physically removed from the actual event, understands that the soldiers he sees have no realization of what is to come: “Life throbbed so strong, / How should they dream that Death in a rosy clime / Would come to thin their shining throng?”³⁸ Here, Life is described as that which “throbbed so strong,” emphasizing Life through a stark contrast with the Death that the observer foreshadows; while he knows what traumatic end is to come, the soldiers do not. The witness here, in a sense, vicariously, and perhaps even voyeuristically, experiences the unfolding of the event, watching the blind innocents turn to the damaged experienced via the traumatic reality of injury and death, the full extent of which seems never to have before crossed the soldiers’ minds until they live through the happening. The poet, the witness bearer, sees the entirety of the scene as it plays out, while those enmeshed within it do not, thus giving the observer an omnipotent point of view. Schivelbusch argues that observers display a type of “defeat empathy,”³⁹ which he characterizes as “disinterested”⁴⁰. With Melville, however, it is rather an interested yet distanced stance from which the affected poet and simultaneously the speaker—perhaps one in the same—articulate empathy from behind the frame of a window. He views the atrocity from the safety of a looking glass. In this way, the poet / observer—“. . . at my window, leaving bed, / By night I mused, of easeful sleep bereft, / On those brave boys (Ah War! thy theft)”⁴¹—can prevent, or at least cushion his own succumbing to the damaging effects war’s reality brings, though he himself still experiences the trauma victim’s characteristic shock and grief at the site.

Melville’s poems describe the intrusive, intense emotions of traumatic reactions. In “The Frenzy and the Wake,” a commentary on Sherman’s advance through the Carolinas, betrayal, despair, and hate prevail:

We were sore deceived—an awful host!
They move like a roaring wind.
Have we gamed and lost? but even despair
Shall never our hate rescind.⁴²

In this instance, the narrator ends the poem by stating that hatred for the enemy outlasts the lost battle. Herman discusses a combat veteran’s “helpless, desperate rage”⁴³ and the pervasive sense of doubt regarding others as well as themselves,⁴⁴ which is reflected here. Part one of the poem “Apathy and Enthusiasm,” resounds aspects of doubt, gloom, doom, anguish, terror, and loss. In this sense, Melville integrates emotional experience with “happening” experience, using the descriptive characteristics of Nature as a vehicle to bind the two:

O the clammy cold November,
 And the winter white and dead,
 And the terror dumb with stupor,
 And the sky a sheet of lead;
 And events that came resounding
 With the cry that *All was lost*,
 Like the thunder-cracks of massy ice
 In intensity of frost—
 Bursting one upon another
 Through the horror of the calm.
 The paralysis of arm
 In the anguish of the heart;
 and the hollowness and dearth.⁴⁵

In this unbroken set of lines, Melville uses environment to create a tone of blanketing death (“winter white and dead”) and to create a deadening mood of inertia—“and the sky a sheet of lead.” The poem copes with the idea of complete loss and the rippling aftershocks of horror, emotional and physical paralysis, anguish, and emptiness. Schivelbusch reinforces that “at the heart of both defeat and war lies the threat of extinction, a threat that resonates long past the cessation of hostilities.”⁴⁶ In “Apathy and Enthusiasm,” part one focuses on what is lacking: “hollowness and dearth.”⁴⁷ This section ends with “doubt on every side”⁴⁸ and the “finality of doom.”⁴⁹ This initial piece of the poem does not particularly outline apathy, as stated in the title, but rather expresses a kind of overwhelming depression, as reflected in the lengthiness—evoking heaviness—of the stanza, which in itself seems a kind of emptying out; this part does not discuss a lack of interest but rather a dying of sorts, a losing of outer and inner life, a crushing sense of grief, to the point of doom, caused by forces that cannot be controlled or that have already imparted their irreparable, ravaging effects. Part two of the poem describes how “the winter died despairing”⁵⁰ and “the tomb of Faith was rent,”⁵¹ juxtaposing death and mourning with the personification of an uplifting Faith, and continues to move beyond the past with a rebirth through the “rising of the People”⁵² and the “springing of the grass,”⁵³ binding together both humans and nature. However, the poem does not remain there but rather returns to the past and the theme of loss and continued depletion: “But the elders with foreboding / Mourning the days forever o’er, / And recalled the forest proverb, / The Iroquois’ old saw: *Grief to every graybeard / When young Indians lead the war.*”⁵⁴ Here, the poem reflects upon the idea that the trauma never leaves the war veteran; rather, the veteran continues to hold on to the past, to embody the “foreboding” negativity of the future, just as the “leadened” sky described in part one of the poem served as a stagnant omen

of the grief- and death-filled war that will remain. On the other hand, Melville describes how a prisoner of war has nothing to hold on to. For example, in "In The Prison Pen" the POW is "listless,"³⁵ with "vacant hands,"³⁶ with a numbed sense of dissociation—"He tries to think—to recollect, / But the blur is on his brain"³⁷—and a fatalistic depression: ". . . dropping in his place, he swoons, / Walled in by throngs that press, / Till forth from the throngs they bear him dead— / Dead in his meagerness."³⁸ In these last lines of the poem, Melville uses the heavily peopled environment to mirror the mental state of the prisoner: literally, he is "walled in" by masses, yet in a figurative read, his mind has become walled in, closed to life; "meagerness" implies a void, the low or depressed energy within his state of being, the absence of aliveness within his spirit, a sense of inner defeat, as if his soul is waving the white flag in surrender. This fills him, binds him. The POW lacks the empowerment or physical—and now mental—ability to change his situation. He thus "allows" the overwhelming circumstances to crush himself, like walls tumbling down upon his body, pinning his intellectual and emotive mind to the floor like a corpse buried under mounds of earth.

Louisa May Alcott also battles between physical and emotional distresses, and, in tandem, reality and fantasy-like segments in her *Hospital Sketches*. The protagonist, Tribulation Periwinkle, records her two-week experience leaving home for her stint as a hospital nurse at Hurly-Burly house, where she is confronted by war's trauma, literally passively, as a caretaker of the wounded who bring their outside trauma to her inside the hospital. Alcott uses the persona of Tribulation (meaning a distress or suffering, or a trying time) Periwinkle (a word meaning either a beautiful girl or a prostitute) and insists that such a person is not fantasy: ". . . such a being as Nurse Periwinkle does exist . . . she really did go to Washington, and . . . these Sketches are not romance."³⁹ However, the name itself is fantasy-like, rendering it in contradiction with the story's claimed realness or truth. As Herman notes, "people who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy."⁴⁰ Herman's statement refers not only to Trib, a nurse "on the sidelines" of the war, but later, to the behavior she observes among the wounded. In her postscript, Alcott claims that truth is captured by her sketches: ". . . I have heard from several of my comrades at the Hospital; and their approval assures me that I have not let sympathy and fancy run away with me, as that lively team is apt to do when harnessed to a pen."⁴¹ At the same time, Alcott, or rather Tribulation Periwinkle, contradicts herself by adding, "As no two persons see the same thing with the same eyes, my view of hospital life must be taken through my glass, and held for what it is worth."⁴² While her statement is self-deprecating, it does not enhance its truth worth; the

“worth” of her lens, her views recorded in sketch form, is rendered subjective and can be concluded by skeptics as a less truthful telling of experience.

Within her contradictions, Alcott covers the holes—or rather patches them over, threads together—of her sketches. In her initial disclaimer, Alcott carefully words “such a being as” to leave room for fantasy, yet she infuses Trib’s speech with that of reality, the verbiage of an actual soldier: “I’ve enlisted!”⁶³ she says, and refers to her meals as “rations.” Trib creates a protective fantasy around her experience by portraying herself as a soldier, idealizing the role. Alcott titles chapter two “A Forward Movement,”⁶⁴ as if Trib is part of an army, yet this section is devoted to Trib’s diary account of her trip to Washington, not to a battle. Alcott portrays Trib as both a woman of inner strength and as a ditsy girl all at once: “It was dark when we arrived; and, but for the presence of another friendly gentleman, I should have yielded myself a helpless prey to the first overpowering hackman, who insisted that I wanted to go just where I didn’t.”⁶⁵ Trib needs a protector, yet she has chosen to go to Washington to be the protectress, Nurse Periwinkle. Alcott and her character Trib sway back and forth between the real and the unreal. As Trib passes by the Capitol, a real place, she first removes it from reality by comparing it “so like the pictures that hang opposite the staring Father of his Country, in boarding-houses and hotels,”⁶⁶ and then takes another step away from reality by likening the site to a fairytale, “recall[ing] the time when I was sure that Cinderella went to housekeeping in just such a place, after she had married the inflammable Prince; though, even at that early period, I had my doubts as to the wisdom of a match whose foundation was of glass.”⁶⁷ Trib (or Alcott, tongue-in-cheek) may be commenting here on the lack of perpetuity she sees within her government, or more so the state of her Union, but ultimately it seems she is only able to move through reality by holding on to fantasy. Within fantasy, Alcott’s use of incomplete sentences in the diary section of her “sketches” crafts a human being’s “realness,” uncrafted or unpolished, unrevised thoughts; however, told in the past tense, the text more so reflects the fragmentary nature characteristic of traumatic memory recalled post-event.

Although Alcott’s label of “sketches” implies an incomplete craft, she supplies Nurse Trib with a complete and intact, structured daily work schedule. Trib describes her timetable of treating the wounded, each step followed in a particular order: cleaning, feeding, amputating, and then writing letters to the soldiers’ loved ones. This tug and pull between fragmentation and order highlights the intrusion of trauma and the attempt to re-establish a sense of safety or normalcy, perhaps not only for the soldiers but for Trib as well, who after all did refer to herself in terms of a soldier before arrival at the hospital. Fragmentation and order mixes just as reality and fantasy do. Trib describes the fantasy of a soldier as consisting of delusions:

... his mind had suffered more than his body; some string of that delicate machine was overstrained and for days he had been reliving, in imagination, the scenes he could not forget, til his distress broke out in incoherent ravings, pitiful to hear. As I sat by him endeavoring to soothe his poor distracted brain by the constant touch of wet hands over his hot forehead, he lay cheering his comrades on, hurrying them back, then counting them as they fell around him, often clutching my arm, to drag me from the vicinity of a bursting shell, or covering up his head to screen himself from a shower of shot. . . .⁶⁸

Here, long after the danger has past, the trauma intrudes upon the soldier's mind and he re-lives it; fantasy is shown to be that of realism: the flashback of a soldier, post-event, part of the dialect of trauma. Trib tries to comfort the soldier physically with the touch of her hands, as if to ease the intrusion of trauma upon his mind. In fact, the soldier is living in the reality of trauma and does not see Trib as a nurse but as one of his soldier comrades, whom he must save. In his article "Soldiers, Psychiatrists, and Combat Trauma," John E. Talbot states that "the writings of those who have 'seen the elephant'—the Civil War soldiers' fanciful term for experiencing combat—portray reenactment as outside time"⁶⁹; soldiers experience "fragmentation, helplessness, guilt, and vulnerability that persist with vivid realism. . . ."⁷⁰ At the same time, Alcott displaces the trauma of amputation with a soldier's humor, or, rather, Trib's sketching of it as such, through the voice of the amputee:

"I've been in six scrimmages, and never got a scratch till this last one; but it's done the business pretty thoroughly for me, I should say. Lord! what a scramble there'll be for arms and legs, when we old boys come out of our graves, on the Judgment Day: wonder if we shall get our own again? If we do, my leg will have to tramp from Fredericksburg, my arm from here, I suppose, and meet my body, wherever it may be."⁷¹

Here, the post-war body itself is fragmented. Alcott brings Trib through excerpt-like encounters with the wounded where she briefly sees the real effects of war upon the men. She lists or sketches each soldier's state through his own words, one after another, the dialogue reflecting at times heightened emotions and delirium, at times deflection, and overall, elements of post-trauma behavior. At the same time, Alcott uses Trib's relationship with another wounded soldier to depict reality in an unreal way; Trib characterizes John in a romanticized way, with a framed and

polished attractiveness: “no pictures of a dying statesman or warrior was ever fuller of real dignity than [John]. A most attractive face he had, framed in brown hair and beard, comely figured. . . .”⁷² The language used here—“real,” “framed,” and “comely”—all create an idealized, fantasy-driven reality. Herman encompasses Trib’s experience when she states that “witnesses as well as victims are subjects to the dialectic of trauma”⁷³:

It is difficult for an observer to remain clearheaded and calm, to see more than a few fragments of a picture at one time, to retain all the pieces and to fit them together. It is even more difficult to find a language that conveys fully and persuasively what one has seen. Those who attempt to describe the atrocities that they have witnessed also risk their own credibility.⁷⁴

Ultimately, trauma’s reality befalls Trib herself when John dies and she becomes debilitatingly ill. While she has caught a physical illness, her mental capacities are rendered sickened as well, weakened by feverish confusion, showing how the observer is not immune to that which plagues the wounded for whom she cares. Trib is eventually overcome by her exhaustive role as caretaker and witness bearer—her relationship to the trauma is rendered physically and mentally traumatizing—and she leaves her job at the hospital to return home. Alcott’s “sketches” in effect are the fragments of trauma, pieced together in a way that can only outline traumatic experience textually, “whose fullest flow can never wash away the red stain of the land.”⁷⁵

Minghella, Bierce, Melville, and Alcott all labor to express the dialect of Civil War trauma by portraying characters and their circumstances in film, short story, poem, and “sketch” forms, respectively. Within their own frames of reference, these writers attempt to capture reality through a craft and to record it; through their own means, they try to tell the whole truth of experience, but telling the whole truth becomes impossible, as traumatic truth is an ungraspable sublime truth in its all-encompassing, horrifying sense. To this end, these writers become witnesses themselves who try to testify to a “happening” and emotional realism that is almost intangible, pendular between the limited human capacity to articulate and comprehend or integrate the traumas of war, and the wholeness and structure demanded by the forms of literature (and the tangibility of the words that fill them). This results in published flashes or pieces or aspects rather than fully complete tellings. In his article “Blot out the Name of Amalek: Memory and Forgetting in the Fragments Controversy,” Michael Bernard-Donals states

that “what the witness sees isn’t available to memory because seeing precedes the witness’s ability to know what she sees”⁶:

Testimony is to witness what history is to trauma: the only available trace of something unavailable even to the one who was there. To put this another way, we consider history as that which can be remembered—preserved in memory and written as narrative—but the event that serves as the object of history is always lost to history. . . . [O]nce an experience occurs, it is forever lost, and it is at the point of “losing what we have to say” that we speak. It is at this point that the event is unwritten, erased, and that writing begins. For we don’t remember trauma so much as we forget it; we “take leave of it” . . . though it leaves an indelible mark on everything we say. . . .⁷

In speaking through their crafts, Minghella, Bierce, Melville, and Alcott do leave an indelible mark on everything they say, but they capture only handfuls of the reality of Civil War trauma. As they straddle romanticism and realism, fragmentary episodes of the human desire to grapple with the incomprehensible, to survive the uncontrollable, to create meaning out of the unfathomable chaos, all work to communicate the actual experience of trauma. In fact, what is beyond comprehension, control, or meaning, and the unfathomable chaos, *is* the realism or truth of trauma. It is only through closely examining these various parts of trauma’s wounds—the emotional and the happening reality, the unspeakable events, the contradictions and missing segments—that one can work to put the pieces together in order to become whole again.

Notes

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39. Schivelbusch, 3.
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43. Ibid., 137.
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46. Schivelbusch, 5.
47. Melville, 13.
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50. Ibid., 24.
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52. Ibid., 28.
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