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Trauma, Gothic Apocalypse and Critical Mourning: The First World War and Its Aftermath in Chris Womersley's *Bereft*

Abstract

The article focuses on *Bereft* (2010), a novel by Australian writer Chris Womersley, which applies the framework of trauma to depict the (failed) reintegration of the returning soldiers after the First World War. Using Gothic and Apocalyptic tropes, Womersley addresses the question of the aftermath of violence in the lives of an Australian family and the Australian nation. By combining the insights of trauma and Gothic studies, the article demonstrates how *Bereft* undermines the meta-narrative of Australian participation in the First World War, questioning the myth of Anzac and national cohesion. It proposes to read the novel as an example of critical mourning, which, rather than cure from trauma, suggests a re-examination of the dramatic sequels of the imperial conflict. Rage seems to offer here an intriguing alternative to the forgetful practices of commemoration. By revising the militarized national mythology, *Bereft* redefines the First World War in terms of loss, trauma and desolation, and negotiates a place for broken bodies and minds in Australian cultural memory.

The defining moment in Australian cultural memory of the Great War is the landing of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (Anzac) forces at Gallipoli, Australia's first major armed confrontation during the conflict. Only fourteen years old, through stupendous feats of courage, on 25 April 1915, the Australian federation was transformed into a true nation. The romanticized legend of the Anzac, shaped by Australia's official eyewitness Charles Bean, highlighted the outstanding characteristics of Australian men, such as courage, loyalty, physical strength and anti-authoritarianism, features earlier attributed to the Australian digger/bushman (Seal; Keshen 8). The memory of the brave Australian soldiers on the cliffs of Gallipoli was soon fused with a narrative of Australianness, which neglected the fact that Gallipoli was a serious military defeat, "with Anzac, which was among the initial invading force of 50,000, suffering 7,600 casualties and then withdrawing after eight months" (Keshen 8). In the post-war years, the myth of the glorious

achievements of Anzac soldiers, seen as catalysts of a new nationalism, was celebrated by Australians. Although, besides New Zealanders, British and French soldiers also took part in the campaign, in the Australian national imagination Gallipoli was represented as an entirely Australian undertaking. After Gallipoli, in Australia the term “Anzac” began to be used only in reference to Australian troops (Keshen 8).

Synchronously, since the 1960s, the Australian legend has been challenged as over-simplified, based on several exclusions, in terms of ethnicity, race and gender, important factors in “a war that was fought for the freedom to keep Australia white, British and openly militaristic” (Reynaud 301). Nevertheless, in spite of the multi-layered critique of the Anzac myth,¹ at its centenary, the Great War remains the essential event that marks Australian independence from the British Empire (see Spittel 269; Reynaud 300). The modern version of the Anzac has been redefined “as one of unity, Australianness and inclusivity,” reflecting what Australians want to believe about the 1914–1918 conflict a hundred years later (Reynaud 301). The war awakened both Australian nationalism and imperialism, yet it is the former that occupies a central position in the narratives of commemoration. Colonial loyalties and the support given by Australians to the British Empire in what was an imperial, global war are thus eclipsed. The conflict’s tremendous costs for the dominion, with over 60,000 dead among the 400,000 volunteers, out of a population of five million, are still overshadowed by the official discourse of courage, freedom and nationhood (Keshen 8).

Since the 1960s, the Anzac legend has also become an important literary theme. In contrast to the canonical British representation of the Great War in terms of trauma, disenchantment, futility and ruin, Australian literature tends to depict the conflict “at one extreme, as a foundational event, and at the other, as a devastating national tragedy from which the country has yet to recover” (Rhoden 286). In mainstream literary works, the tropes of action and heroism are privileged over passivity and victimization, while the war itself is represented as a constructive adventure. The war might be horrible, but it is “a task to be done” by stoical, selfless and pragmatic Australian men (Rhoden 276–277). Clare Rhoden links this optimistic approach to the Australian national character and the bushman ethos of the pioneering past. Inscribed within the Australian tradition of insubordination (also in relation to the cliché of war’s futility and dehumanization), “Australian wartime confrontation with mortality in fact celebrates life, even contingent life, and living, as opposed to simply affirming the futility of war and mourning war’s victims” (Rhoden 277).

In this perspective, the remembrance of grief and war trauma itself becomes problematic. The reliance on the myth of Anzac as the idealized nation builders conceals the operations of biopower inherent in war,² which reduce the existence of soldiers to what Giorgio Agamben refers to as *bare life*, exposed to unlimited injury and death “in the most profane and banal ways” (114). The “licensed

displacements of the realities of war”, inscribed within the legitimizing narrative of the Australian nation, tend to de-realize the actual goals of warfare and attempt to “confer meaning on the meaninglessness of war” (Gana 78). Consequently, commemorating the dead killed in an imperial war, which is remembered as the birth of the modern nation-state, involves several forms of self-forgetfulness. As David Lloyd emphasizes, for the postcolonial subjects the function of the practices of commemoration is to “lose” their loss in order to become docile subjects of a “therapeutic modernity” (222). In this sense, mourning often involves reconciliation with the past “that is at odds with a postcolonial desire to reclaim or recover that which was lost/stolen” (Durrant 95). By contrast, Sam Durrant proposes a form of critical mourning, which, instead of soothing colonial/imperial trauma, exposes the collective wound, disrupting the identification of the subject with the state inherent in national mythology (Durrant 96; see also Lloyd 218). It is “a recalcitrant, anti-therapeutic form of mourning that, rather than accommodating the subject to postcolonial modernity” (Durrant 97), dismantles the amnesiac effects of the discourses of commemoration by synchronously revealing the violence that constitutes subjectivity (Durrant 93–94).³

Bereft, published by Chris Womersley in 2010, set between 1909 and 1919, focuses on the experience of Quinn Walker, a returning soldier from Flint, New South Wales, Australia. The novel is not a linear, coherent narrative, for it shares many of its ambivalences and uncertainties with the Gothic convention. The central protagonist has been profoundly marked by the war, but the defining experience of his life was the rape and murder of his beloved sister Sarah in 1909 by his uncle Robert. Wrongly accused of the atrocious acts, the sixteen-year-old had to run away from his native town and to conceal his identity. *Bereft* is therefore to a large degree a narrative of guilt, paranoia and persecution, Quinn being a man “perpetually on the verge of departure” (26). He volunteers for the front hoping for atonement, yet the Dardanelles and France prove devastating experiences which shatter his sense of self: “First exile, then war. Everything was in ruins” (243). The traumatic symptoms Quinn suffers from – flashbacks, nightmares, hallucinations – are therefore directly related to war, yet at the same time war trauma covers the initial trauma of family violence. Womersley thus powerfully illustrates Cathy Caruth’s statement that “trauma is not only the repetition of the missed encounter with death but also the missed encounter with one’s own survival. It is the incomprehensible act of surviving – of waking into life – that repeats and bears witness to what remains ungrasped within the encounter with death” (6). Quinn has acquired a profound wisdom about the limits of human endurance and does not care about life. What is important for him is a half-conscious desire for justice, which causes him to return to Flint after the war.

Bereft challenges the legendary view of Australian heroism and of unique bonds between the Anzac. As an outcast on the run, Quinn is particularly tempted by the war’s promise of glory and community. The potential transformation of the

“private ego into a national persona” proves, however, detrimental to his sense of self, and is experienced “like a death, abandonment, a severance from life” (Leed 205). The only brotherhood Quinn is admitted to is “a brotherhood of terror”: in *Bereft* the soldiers become accustomed to “the press of many bodies, to the whiff of other men and their whispering hearts of fear” (53). What connects them, however, rather than a sense of common achievement, is “ritualized humiliation and rites of powerlessness” (Bourke 128). Having returned home, the protagonist still hears the sounds of battles in the calm Australian countryside and wakes up weeping after the terrible war scenes that come back to him in his nightmares. The narrator emphasizes that language would fail to describe the horror of war, or “rather, that to describe it would require every word of the language, all of them at once, until they no longer made sense” (115). The available tropes of representation are dysfunctional in the context of war trauma: “the inextricable relationship between discourse and experience has been unsettled in such a way that, instead of experience, there follows a *collapse* of experience” (Gana 81). Moreover, Quinn’s memories from the war zone would be unacceptable to civilians, particularly the iconoclastic scene of a soldier sodomising a corpse (45). On the ship bringing him back to Australia, Quinn throws his medal into the ocean; he does not feel proud about his deeds and thus “displays an archetypical Australian disrespect for formal recognition” (Rhoden 285).⁴ The war fails therefore to create a community, as it isolates shattered individuals in the prison of their traumatic microcosms and the memories of horror that cannot be communicated to others.

Womersley thus engages with *critical mourning*, refusing to comply with the reproduction of the glorious Anzac subject in his novel. His descriptions of Australians returning from the front highlight maimed corporeality and the veterans’ liminality. Instead of vigorous heroes, the men disembarking at North Head, Sydney are represented as delicate and vulnerable, in terms reminiscent of Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est”: “The soldiers were a rabble, ill-shod and half-broken, tubercular, mutilated and blind. Many hobbled with crutches, on bandaged legs” (12). Quinn himself was gassed at the front and still suffers from terrible coughing fits, which leave him frightened and exhausted. Due to heavy bombardment, the protagonist was also exposed to partial loss of hearing; half of his face is scarred as a result of shrapnel wounds. In *Bereft*, war’s violence is therefore inscribed on the veterans’ bodies and minds. Moreover, they are liminal men, suspended between two “disjunctive social worlds,” that of war and that of peace (Leed 194). Having cohabited with vermin and beasts in the subterranean world of war, they are situated in-between the animal and the human world. As those who have experienced and inflicted unimaginable violence, back home they are perceived as dangerous barbarians (Leed 18–19; 196). Travelling through the Australian countryside, Quinn encounters other veterans, who, like him, are uncertain of their bearings. In this sense, homecoming proves more difficult than departure for the front; devastated by the terrible knowledge they acquired during

the war, several veterans in the novel succumb to the temptation of suicide. The totalizing gesture of the meta-narrative aiming to produce a homogeneous national body is undermined when Womersley focuses on the emotionally and physically maimed veterans, whose life, in contrast to the invincible Anzac, is tragic, obscure and precarious.

Interestingly, by resorting to Gothic hyperbole, Womersley depicts Quinn's liminal condition as extreme: he was reported missing in action, presumed dead in 1916, and, like a revenant, haunts his relatives; as a traumatized soldier, he is among the living dead; there is no social role he can return to except for that of the terrifying Flint Murderer. He is physically alive, but legally and socially dead, claiming "a self, a love, and a life of which he has been radically dispossessed" (Caruth 26), demanding a recompense for what has been denied to him. His condition is that of an outcast, ostracised by the community which treats him as a scapegoat, being unable to accept the violence within. In this sense, Quinn is a romantic figure, a victim of various institutions of power – the family, the police, the military (Botting 92), who elicits the reader's sympathy. Trauma in *Bereft* is not only connected with the protagonist's broken mind, but also with utter powerlessness, a betrayal of trust, which "takes place when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors: when the community of which we considered ourselves members turns against us or when our family is no longer a course of refuge but a site of danger" (Edkins 2003, 4). Significantly, both at the front and back home Quinn is exposed to the constant threat of death. Womersley's conflation of his protagonist's status as a dangerous banned man with that of an injured veteran, suspended in-between the world of humans and beasts, highlights that "his entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight" (Agamben 183). Yet it is this figure, hardly recognizable as human, scarred physically and mentally, "decivilized" by a war that was fought in defence of civilization, that is empowered in the novel to denounce injustice and claim retribution.

Womersley uses disturbing Gothic means to explore his protagonist's traumatic experience and the tension between civilization and barbarity. Quinn's mother displays an ambivalent reaction when she sees her son returning as if from the dead, for initially she fears that he has come back to take her life. Only later does she confess that she has always believed in his innocence. Quinn's relationship with the orphaned Sadie Fox, the object of his uncle Robert's sick desire, is also most disquieting. The adolescent girl, apparently involved in witchcraft, submits the young man to strange rituals, covering his body with mysterious cuts, including a cross on his chest that marks the bond between them. Their mutual feelings oscillate between the polar extremes of the Gothic sublime (see Botting 39): tenderness and distrust, "comfort and fear" (Womersley 137). When Quinn finally agrees to protect her, she replaces Sarah by his side, and he talks to this Gothic

doppelganger as if she were his sister. Sadie communicates with nature and the world of the spirits to learn others' secrets and predict the future; Quinn himself is called back to Flint by his deceased sister during a spiritualist séance. The Gothic monster *per se* in the novel is Robert Dalton, Quinn's uncle, now Flint's constable, a frightening figure of authority, who, pretending to protect the status quo, hides the most perverse desires under the mask of respectability. The Gothic logic of the hunted/hunter, victim/victimizer (Botting 165) is reversed when the protagonist finally kills his uncle, redeeming in this way his inability to protect his sister in the past, and thus liberating himself from its grip. Ironically, his own father still wants to kill him and his mother trusts Robert, her brother – a serial rapist and murderer – unconditionally. In a way typical of the Gothic (see Punter 198), the family is thus exposed as a fragile institution, incapable of recognizing the source of violence and of sheltering its children against the enemy at home.

I insist on these details for Womersley's resort to the supernatural in depicting the world emerging from the 1914–1918 conflict is consistent with the miracles and feasts of magic Quinn witnessed or heard about at the front. Myths, fantasies, rituals and omens were used by the soldiers to make sense of their experience during a war which, paradoxically, represented "a triumph of modern industrialism, materialism, and mechanism" (Fussell 115). This reliance on superstitions and supernatural beliefs was a "response to the total loss of individual control over the conditions of life and death" (Leed 128), a form of self-defence against the barbaric brutalities of war. Significantly, in *Bereft* such pre-modern frameworks are also functional after the conflict, which highlights the illusion of the discourses of progress and modernity, shattered in the realities of industrialized slaughter.

Womersley engages with the theme of premodern fears in his descriptions of the influenza pandemic, which echo the catastrophe of the front. Commonly known as the Spanish Flu, it killed 50 million people worldwide, including 13,000 in Australia, where it began to spread in June 1918. The warring nations were unprepared to confront the disease and to break the contagion, the more so that it was impossible to control human circulation at the end of the war (Rasmussen 337–355). Womersley recreates the atmosphere of fear caused by the Spanish Flu. His soldiers disembark wearing gauze masks, ghost-like figures, which provoke anxiety among the civilians. The state borders are closed, as the neighbouring state of South Australia has imposed a quarantine,⁵ which reinforces the carceral mood of the novel. A sense of emptiness, loss and grief suffuses the Australian countryside. Quinn's mother suffers and finally dies from the flu; the male protagonist is the only one who dares to approach her, while others, including her husband, communicate with her through an open window and leave food on the porch. The epidemic is associated with the Black Death of the Middle Ages: "They call it a flu, but it is surely something more serious than that. There is talk of other, worse things. Some say it is the plague. Here, in the twentieth century, can you imagine, Quinn?" (56). The plague contributes therefore to an impression of

“decivilisation” (Rasmussen 351), suggested by the reversal to barbaric brutality and the mass deaths in the war scenes of *Bereft*.

Ironically, the Armistice coincides with the peak of the flu, which creates a powerful sense of Apocalypse in the novel. Sailing back home, the veterans exchange rumours of the end of the world: the visions of Virgin Mary in Portugal; locusts ravaging Palestine crops; bizarre lights illuminating the waters of the world (144). For Quinn and Sadie, the First World War is a “moral catastrophe,” which, in a broad gesture, encompasses the modern technologies of slaughter, the influenza pandemic, the Bolshevik revolution, the collapse of traditional ethical codes, the destitution of the powerless *and* Sarah’s death (125). “It has already been a dark century. Who knows what is still to come?” (45), observes Quinn’s mother, foreshadowing other conflicts, other holocausts. The ur-scene of violence in the novel is, however, Sarah’s murder, which has “thrown the world off its course forever” (21). In this light, Quinn appears as the Old Testament Angel of Death (231) who brings punishment to the unworthy. Moreover, in a radical gesture, Womersley imagines a crusade “of all the children of the world left defenceless, abandoned by war or disease to fend for themselves [...] storming over the land with Sarah at their head, seeking retribution from those who had failed them” (136). This pre-modern image of the crusading army serves here to convey empathy for the helpless victims of basic social institutions, such as the family or the nation, both unable to protect their offspring. This is why not only Robert Dalton, but also Quinn’s mother has to die at the novel’s closure, cruelly punished for her blindness and lack of care. The triumph of the dispossessed in Womersley’s novel is a typically Gothic fantasy (see Ellis 4–43), yet this victory can be also read as a revenge of the physically, psychologically and socially abused soldiers on those who sent them to a deadly war. Rage appears in Womersley’s novel a more proper response to mass death than redundant mourning; by resisting the role of “good subjects” and seeking for revenge, Quinn and Sadie refuse to forget and thus “devalue” both the dead and the living left to confront the sequels of the catastrophe (see Lloyd 221).

Significantly, *Bereft* thus highlights how the public and the domestic, the world of war and the war of peace, are inextricably intertwined. The novel points to the powerlessness of language in reference to the traumatic experience of the soldiers at the front, but also the emotional loss experienced by the civilians. According to Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker (176), the nuances of suffering during and after the First World War remained unverbilized first of all because of the lack of an appropriate vocabulary. Hardly any semantic innovations were introduced in French, English or German to speak of the relatives of a deceased person, such as the mother, father, sister or brother of the dead, not to mention further removed relatives or friends. In *Bereft*, Quinn’s mother notices that there is no word to designate a parent who has lost a child, while the protagonist himself observes there is no word, either, to speak of the pain of a brother who has lost

his beloved sister (144). The grief of the bereft revolves outward towards a more general conclusion about the devastation of war.

What binds the home front and the war zone in the novel is unspeakable violence. Paradoxically, the most haunting 'war' scene for Quinn is not a memory of cruelty or gore but his encounter with the corpse of Sainte Solange that he discovered in the cellar of a French Catholic church. The memory of this young girl, dead for hundreds of years, whose cracked face retains a semblance of innocence, becomes for Quinn what Robert J. Lifton refers to as an *image of ultimate horror*, "one involving the dead or dying in a way that evokes the survivor's strongest identification and feelings of pity and self-condemnation." Such imagery often involves the most vulnerable individuals and thus functions as an epitome of all the situations in which he might have saved others (Lifton 142). It is no coincidence that Sarah merges with Sadie and Solange in Quinn's tormented mind. His failure to find atonement in the war proves that the pain of loss after the death of his sister cannot be healed; yet it gives him the power – in reality or fantasy – to protect Sadie from his uncle.

What is more, Gothic uncertainty experienced by Quinn in relation to the past, as well as the subjectivity of villains and victims in the novel, undermines the illusion of a stable identity in favour of disintegration. His lapses of memory, and the inability to know the truth about real motives and events, also render, on a metaphorical level, war's confusing aftermath in a country recovering from mass death and eager to forget the slaughter. Quinn's excessive role as the Flint Murderer in fact masks his exclusion from the symbolic order. The *ontic* trauma of war serves in the novel to reveal "the inevitable *ontological* trauma around which what we call social reality is constituted" (Edkins 2014, 132). Womersley uses Gothic aesthetic to question the fantasy of a secure subjectivity rooted in a stable social and linguistic order, a traumatic insight that shatters the continuity of both social and psychological narratives of origin. Ultimately, in *Bereft*, Sarah's murder, the war and the Spanish flu expose the pretence of security and wholeness within the family and the nation-state, by highlighting chaotic aftermath, and refusing closure – the illusion of completeness and meaning inherent in the Anzac myth.

The representation of the war in terms of abyss and ruin, an apocalyptic gap in time, characteristic of the British tradition of First World War writing (Hynes 455), radically questions the Australian discourse of national (re)birth. Womersley thus undermines the constructive narrative of nation-building centred around Gallipoli, which is ironically deprived of its glorious associations (211). In *Bereft*, Australia is not born at Gallipoli: it might be situated at the end of the world, but it possesses a sophisticated class structure and complex mechanisms of social control long before the conflict. For the protagonist of the novel, moreover, Gallipoli only belongs to a sequence of brutal events, initiated by family drama. By resisting the official narrative of commemoration, Womersley demonstrates that when it inscribes war violence "into a linear time of national heroism [...]"

the state conceals the trauma that it has, necessarily, produced” (Edkins 2003, xiv). *Bereft* highlights the vulnerability of Anzac, refusing to invest them with glory and heroism, exploring bare life – abandonment to injury, trauma and the power of death. Yet Womersley’s story of a traumatized ex-serviceman, erased from the sanitized official narrative, refuses to “depoliticize” the memories of the veterans (Edkins 2003, 16). It thus illustrates the responsibility of the nation-state for the violence it has produced, in shattering and then neglecting the lives of war survivors. The Great War brings only losses and no benefits to the Australian nation,⁶ which results in a poignant emotional barrenness and the collapse of community. The pre-modern anxieties of the novel’s protagonists shatter the image of a modern war and Australia’s entrance into postcolonial modernity, as an independent nation-state, due to its participation in the mechanized slaughter. Using the imagery of the Apocalypse, Womersley seems to suggest the impossibility of mourning mass death, for in the aftermath of war Australian landscape remains filled with haunting absence, while the attendant sorrow cannot be overcome. In an effort to mourn critically, Womersley thus suggests forms of remembrance that do not embrace a cathartic liberation from the trauma of violence. Rage and retribution highlight the bleeding wound of an unresolved national and familial past; the Gothic family drama renders metaphorically the devastation caused by the political crisis. Revising the militarized national mythology, *Bereft* thus redefines the First World War in terms of loss, trauma and desolation, negotiating a place for broken bodies and minds – a legacy of grief – in Australian cultural memory.

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Notes

- 1 Reynaud points out that the Anzac myth has become “the new secular state religion” (301) for Australians. According to Bongiorno, “while the cultural authority of Anzac has been achieved by developing its inclusiveness – it gestures powerfully towards both a multicultural and an Aboriginal Australia – the result has been a declining toleration in public culture of critique of Anzac. Anzac’s inclusiveness has been achieved at the price of a dangerous chauvinism that increasingly equates national history with military history, and national belonging with a willingness to accept the Anzac legend as Australian patriotism’s very essence” (81). This conflation of national memory with military history is viewed with suspicion today (Lake et al. iii). For a study

- of the history and progression of the Anzac legend, see Reynaud; Spittel; Bongiorno.
- 2 See Bourke; Leeds; Edkins 2003 for a biopolitical approach to the First World War in terms of management of bodies and mentalities.
 - 3 Lloyd situates his analysis in the context of the Irish Famine, while Durrant develops his critique of postcolonial mourning in reference to post-apartheid Africa. I attempt to read *Bereft* through the framework of critical mourning in the Australian context.
 - 4 The gesture is also reminiscent of the famous British Great War poet, Siegfried Sassoon's. See Rhoden's brief discussion of how *Bereft* re-inscribes traditional Australian literary tropes. I am not convinced by Rhoden's optimistic interpretation of the novel's ending. The Gothic fantasy might be as well interpreted as the central protagonists' death.
 - 5 The wearing of gauze masks was a measure widely applied in Australia, unlike other countries (Rasmussen 351). The quarantine is also a historical fact (Winter 49).
 - 6 Unless we count as a benefit Quinn's murder of his uncle in *Bereft*, which transposes the violence of war into the world of peace, the protagonist having acquired the capacity to kill in a good cause (see Rhoden 286).

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