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La guerra e le armi
nella letteratura in inglese
del Novecento

a cura di Lucia Folena

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WHOSE WAR?
THE INFLUENCE
OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *MRS DALLOWAY*
ON SOME POSTCOLONIAL WRITERS

Carmen Concilio

One historical moment when war was dramatically represented in literature is Modernism and one among the many modernist masterpieces about war is undoubtedly *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) by Virginia Woolf¹. The aim of this essay is to show how influential that novel and its author have been on postcolonial writers, precisely in the way in which they approach the subject of war.

To begin with, *Mrs Dalloway* seems to be a source of inspiration for J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990)². The South African writer and Nobel Prize winner seems to pick up on some major elements of Woolf's novel. First of all, he chooses a woman protagonist in her old age, Elizabeth Curren, and he sets her loose in the streets of Cape Town. She crosses and maps the city for the reader, as Clarissa did with Central London.

Second, the old woman's painful and problematic relationship with her daughter, and their incommunicability and physical distance seem to echo *Mrs Dalloway's* pages, where Clarissa and her daughter Elizabeth are set apart by different interests and people.

Third, a war, which mainly kills young men, is central to both novels, although in South Africa it is a racialized kind of civil war, while the First World War in Woolf's novel is a global devastation, that involves Europe and its civilization at large.

Finally, Coetzee's novel not only echoes *Mrs Dalloway* in its thematic choices, but also in its structure. In Virginia Woolf's novel the plot involves two main characters: namely Clarissa Dalloway and

¹ V. WOOLF, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1992.

² This assumption is the object of a wider, comparative study, still in progress, I dedicate to J.M. Coetzee and V. Woolf.

J.M. COETZEE, *Age of Iron*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1990.

Septimus Warren Smith. They respectively represent sanity and insanity, even though the borderline between the two categories is really thin³. They also represent the upper classes and the middle classes, the female and the male spheres and the questioning of preconceived role models. J.M. Coetzee's novel also involves a man and a woman of quite different social classes, the professor of classics Elizabeth Curren and the vagrant Mr Vercueil; both of them are damaged and disabled from the very beginning.

Sign of the affinity between the two texts, however, can be found in certain lexical symptoms. When remembering that moment of bliss, the kiss received from Sally Seton in their youth, Clarissa ponders:

she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it – a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which, as they walked (up and down, up and down), she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling! (p. 38-39).

This moment of recollected memory, concerning the psyche as well as the body, the mind as well as sensations, is placed between the past and the present. The past of a lost youth:

She and Sally fell a little behind. Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips (p. 38).

And the present of Clarissa turning 51 and experiencing a sort of malady:

Would he say that, or would she see him thinking when he came back, that she had grown older? It was true. Since her illness she had turned almost white (p. 39).

³ “By implicitly stating her intention to show that the definitions of sanity and insanity in the postwar years had been skewed and that their definition (“study”) need be informed and altered, Woolf was postulating a relation between sanity and insanity that might only be appreciated by recognizing that the experience of survivors of the war (whether combatants or non combatants) could lead them to despair (what Kierkegaard called ‘the sickness unto death’) and, possibly, suicide.” K.K. LEVENBACK, *Virginia Woolf and the Great War*, New York, Syracuse UP, 1999, p. 46.

Surprisingly, J.M. Coetzee deploys almost the same lexical items in his novel, although applied to a completely different context, that is, the relationship between the old and dying mother to her exiled daughter, who lives in the States:

So day by day I render myself into words and pack the words into the page like sweets: like sweets, like sweets for my daughter, for her birthday, for the day of her birth. Words out of my body, drops of myself, for her to unpack in her own time, to take in, to suck, to absorb. As they say on the bottle: old-fashioned drops, drops fashioned by the old, fashioned and packed with love, the love we have no alternative but to feel toward those to whom we give ourselves to devour or discard (p. 8).

While Woolf uses terms such as “a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it,” “wrapped up” just to “uncover,” Coetzee uses terms such as “pack” the words, “for her to unpack,” “to take in”. The images suggested by the two quotations are quite similar. In both cases the subject matter is a gift from a woman to another woman. The first is a gift, impalpable, though almost material, and eternal as a jewel. The second is a gift of words, a gift of time, against the course and the flow of time.

Furthermore, to “pack the words into the pages like sweets” resounds like a Woolfian predilection for such a simile, as in the portrait of the nurses chatting among themselves: “rolling words like sweets on their tongues” (p. 310, *emphasis mine*)⁴.

Virginia Woolf, too, might already have been influenced by several British writers, both her contemporaries and predecessors. Among the various tributes that might be detected and mentioned, I would like to hint at the possibility that Woolf paid homage to Shakespeare, not so much because of her explicit and repeated quotations from *Cymbeline*, rather, because of her construction of a perfectly balanced tragic-comedy on the one hand, and of a well-defined double plot on the other hand. If Shakespeare used to blend different genres, as was typical in Elizabethan drama, particularly mixing comedy and tragedy, rather than simply shifting from comedy to tragedy, Woolf, too, in *Mrs Dalloway* managed to end her novel with a perfect balance between comedy (a happy party) and tragedy (a suicide).

⁴ V. WOOLF, *Between the Acts* (1941), Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 2012.

Shakespeare was a master – among other things – in creating multiple, parallel and coexisting plots or patterns, as in tragedy, *King Lear*, and in comedy, *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*. Woolf, in *Mrs Dalloway* builds up a double structure, where two stories run parallel for a while, then meet and cross over at certain moments. However, if the meeting, or “merging,” of Clarissa and Septimus happens roughly after ten pages for the reader, Mrs Curren bumps into Vercoe in the very first page of the novel, and the novel reveals itself to be a tragedy. Thus, Coetzee seems to borrow this double, intertwined structure from Wolf and Shakespeare at one and the same time.

The expression “War was over” is repeated three times on page four, in *Mrs Dalloway*, while the word “death” makes its entrance on page nine. Tragedy is thus called for, though it soon alternates with comedy, as the preparation of a party is announced. Coetzee’s novel mentions “death” on the second page; the mood of Mrs Curren’s monologue is a long goodbye and tragedy remains consistently the main feature of the narrative.

In both novels tragedy is declined through two main themes: illness and war. On her errand to buy flowers for her party, Clarissa is described as

A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her [...] a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness (p. 4).

Post-war London is powerfully described by Mrs Dalloway through its almost empty shop windows, where sparse jewellery was on display “to tempt Americans,” the only new affluent consumers who might afford buying them, while “one must economise” (p. 5). That is what Mrs Dalloway thinks of the British, probably, and of her own domestic economy: “she spent little” (p. 5). Similarly, Bond Street appears with its sober shops: “one roll of tweed in the shop where her father had bought his suits for fifty years; a few pearls; salmon on an iceblock [...] a glove shop where, before the War, you could buy almost perfect gloves” (p. 11). The indication of “one” and “a few” items in the shop windows and the recurrent hint at what one could buy before the war in comparison to the present perfectly show the post-war economic depression.

More tragically, however, “the War was over, except for some one like Mrs Foxcroft [...] eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed [...]; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed” (p. 5). Thus post-war depression and mourning for the dead is the background to Mrs Dalloway’s flânerie through the streets of central London.

Similarly, in Coetzee’s novel Mrs Curren presents herself as an old and severely ill woman, affected by terminal breast cancer, as seen through the eyes of the homeless man who occupies her garden:

inspecting the winter stockings, the blue coat, the skirt with whose hang there has always been something wrong, the grey hair cut by a strip of scalp, old woman’s scalp, pink, babyish (p. 4).

In spite of the fact that Mrs Curren is older than Mrs Dalloway, that her health is undermined more severely, it is interesting how the two women measure their aging through the eyes of men.

However, if it is undeniable that “the distance between civilian and combatant experience is explored in *Mrs Dalloway* where in postwar London the reality of a politician’s wife, Clarissa Dalloway [...] is juxtaposed with that of a combat veteran, Septimus Warren Smith,”⁵ in Coetzee’s novel the combatant is Mr Thabane. He is a black activist and agitator, who, by inciting the young black boys to (armed) action, sends them to meet their death.

It is significant that when Thabane (black activism) is present, Vercueil (coloured idleness) is absent. Moreover, Vercueil almost pushes Mrs Curren towards Thabane and the township of Guguletu, for he has to push her car to make it start in the middle of a rainy night. Consequently, Mrs Curren is plunged into the middle of a war of which she knows nothing:

Shooting in Guguletu: whatever Florence knows about it, whatever you know ten thousand miles away, I do not know. In the news that reaches me there is no mention of trouble, of shooting. The land that is presented to me is a land of smiling neighbours (p. 49).

⁵ LEVENBACK, p. 47.

Militancy costs the black boys their death, and they are just past their childhood. Thus, Mrs Curren is confronted with death at the front, something Clarissa Dalloway is spared:

The inside of the hall was a mess of rubble and charred beams. Against the far wall, shielded from the worst of the rain, were five bodies neatly laid out. The body in the middle was that of Florence's Bheki (p. 94).

Here the mother, Florence, is not disconnected from the scene of her son's death in the trenches or, better, the ditches, as Mrs Flanders is, in *Jacob's Room* (1922), for instance, or as are the two mothers in *Mrs Dalloway* (pp. 4-5). For the black community is subjected to apartheid's persecutions and therefore it is compelled to witness, and live through death, day after day. This happens in the 1980s, during the years of the Emergency. Mrs Curren acknowledges this as "this... this war" (p. 95), fought with bullets "made in South Africa. SABS Approved" (p. 95), says Mr Thabane. It is not enough for Mrs Curren to leave the scene, she cannot avoid being haunted by those deaths.

The suicide(s) she often plans, imagines, and almost enacts, asking for the complicity of Mr Vercueil, as well as the growing shame she feels towards her country can only direct her to seek freedom in thoughts of death or even in death itself.

When Mrs Dalloway knows of Septimus through a narrative about his suicide, right at her party, she immediately retreats to her upper room. In Woolf's previous novel, Jacob absents himself from his own room, towards the end of the narrative. Similarly, Mrs Dalloway absents herself from her party, from the room of her party, to the point that Peter Walsh and Sally wonder where she might be:

What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party? A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party – the Bradshaws talked of death. He had killed himself – but how? Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. But why had he done it? And the Bradshaws talked of it at her party! (pp. 201-202).

Immediately after receiving the bad news, Mrs Dalloway goes to the window, she parts the curtains and looks out:

Oh but how surprising! – in the room opposite the old lady stared straight at her! She was going to bed. And the sky. [...] It will be a solemn sky, she had thought, it will be a dusky sky, turning away its cheek in beauty. But there it was – ashen pale, raced over quickly by tapering vast clouds. She was going to bed, in the room opposite. It was fascinating to watch her, moving about, that old lady, crossing the room, coming to the window. Could she see her? It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to bed alone. She pulled the blind now. The clock began striking. [...] There! The old lady had put out her light! [...] She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself (p. 204).

That old woman who had put out her light, literally her life, after some failed attempts at imagining her own suicide, might be recognised in Mrs Curren in the very last scene of Coetzee's novel:

I slept and woke up cold: my belly, my heart, my very bones cold. The door to the balcony was open, the curtains were waving in the wind. Vercueil stood on the balcony staring out over a sea of rustling leaves. I touched his arm, his high, peaked shoulders, the bony ridge of his spine. Through chattering teeth I spoke: 'What are you looking at?' He did not answer. I stood closer. A sea of shadows beneath us, and the screen leaves shifting, rustling, like scales over the darkness. 'Is it time?' I said. I got back into bed, into the tunnel between the cold sheets. The curtains parted; he came in beside me. For the first time I smelled nothing. He took me in his arms held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had (p. 180 *emphasis mine*).

Once again, lexically, Coetzee echoes Woolf. While Mrs Curren narrates the impossible: her own death, her own dying, her own suicidal death, Mrs Dalloway imagines Septimus's suicide as an embrace by and in death:

Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre, which, mystically,

evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death (p. 202 *emphasis mine*).

If “Woolf transformed the physical distance during the war into a physical proximity during the day in the postwar London”⁶, Coetzee chooses the absolute physical proximity between Mrs Curren and the Other. First the death of the absolute Others, the blacks, second, the absolute Other, the dizzy, alcoholic Mr Vercueil. She even sleeps next to him in a public park, on a bed of cardboard boxes, when her house is destroyed by a police raid. A homeless and a vagrant, disabled by her illness, Mrs Curren ends up resembling Vercueil, whom she had previously called “good for nothing,” a “scavenger,” but also “an angel”: an absolute outsider, considered as a waste by society, a failure, exactly like Septimus, and to a lesser extent, like Peter Walsh. They all fail in the eyes of society, particularly the middle and upper classes, thus representing a completely different models of different behavioural models. They are not only anti-heroes, they also represent a different model of masculinity: a highly transgressive way of enacting and performing virility in the twentieth century.

Similarities between Woolf’s and Coetzee’s texts are not limited to the ones discussed here; Woolf sets a narrative model that postcolonial writers have not so much de-constructed, but paid homage to.

Another example of how Septimus remains alive in the mind of readers, is in the portrait Michael Ondaatje provides of Kip in his novel, in *The English Patient* (1994), a novel with multiple, parallel plots, too. It does not matter that the two men are different, a white English-born veteran of the First World War is on the surface not at all comparable to a Sikh soldier of the Commonwealth Armies in the Second World War, I am strongly convinced that the latter could not have existed without the former.

As epitome of the veteran who has lost himself in the trenches and has come back home diminished, de-humanized, mad, or, in medical terms, affected by a Post Traumatic Disorder Syndrome (PTDS), due to shell-shock and to the witnessing of his best friend’s slaughter, Septimus Warren Smith is the symbol of war martyrdom in Modernist literature.

⁶ LEVENBACK, p. 47.

When we first meet Septimus, he is in the street and hears the “pistol shot” (p. 14) produced by the backfiring of a car; he “heard him” (p. 15): he anthropomorphises that noise, which sounds like the explosion from a weapon.

Immediately after, we read: “The sun became extraordinarily hot because the motor car had stopped outside Mulberry’s shop window” (p. 16). This sentence, with its blurred and confused syntax, does express a very odd causality, certainly not a logical one. This sentence is symptomatic of the way in which Septimus’s mind works: through exaggerations, wrong cause/effect relations, but, above all, through the immediate association between the noise of an explosion/a shot and tremendous heat. However, the sun is objectively hot, because it’s a nice morning in June, and “old ladies on the tops of omnibuses spread their black parasols” (p. 16). Septimus remains almost paralysed there where he stands, and feels that everything “threatened to burst into flames” (p. 16): “I will kill myself” (p. 17), he even says.

The second time we meet Septimus, he is sitting on a bench in Regent’s Park beside his wife, Lucrezia, and he is watching a plane writing letters of smoke in the sky. While most of the people read the smooth and fluffy word “toffee” up in the sky, Septimus hears the explosive sounds “K...R”, more similar to the onomatopoeic noise of a weapon exploding: “into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke” (p. 24).

Septimus is both a hero of war, a decorated veteran, and a failed man: “it was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now” (p. 25). Yet Septimus saw the unspeakable. Mrs Curren says that “to speak of this [War] you would need the tongue of a god” (p. 91). Maybe, one would need the eyes of a God, too, for Septimus sees only “[...] his hand; there the dead. White things were assembling behind the railings opposite. But he dared not look. Evans was behind the railings!” (p. 27).

Dismembered limbs and bodies, a hand, white flesh to be slaughtered, that is what Septimus sees in his hallucinations: Evans, his friend, the one who blew up in pieces before his eyes. It is his friendship with Evans that builds up a prototypical partnership, a comradeship that only war brings by:

That dead man Evans, whom she had only seen once for a moment in the shop. He had seemed a nice quiet man; a great friend of Septimus's, and he had been killed in the War (p. 72).

Septimus, too, "had been dead" (p. 75), and yet, now, is alive. He is a survivor, with the syndrome of a guilty survivor. Septimus deliriously sees Evans in Peter Walsh ("no mud was on him; no wounds; he was not changed" p. 76), as a typical English gentleman, who is approaching in his grey suit. It is worth noticing that both Septimus and Peter Walsh cry copiously in the novel, once again, washing away the stereotypical ideal of virility with their tears.

Septimus's friendship with Evans is described in very unusual terms, again, by shifting to animal metaphors, maybe Woolf contributes to dismantle Victorian ideals of heroism. In a similar way, Mrs Curren wants to dismantle the ideal of the iron soldier, or freedom fighter. By enrolling in the Army, Septimus gained and lost his virility in the same moment:

Septimus was one of the first to volunteer. He went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole [...] There in the trenches the change which Mr Brewer desired when he advised football was produced instantly; he developed manliness; he was promoted; he drew the attention, in deed the affection of his officer, Evans by name. It was a case of two dogs playing on a hearth-rug; one worrying a paper screw, snarling, snapping, giving a pinch, now and then, at the old dog's ear; the other lying somnolent, blinking at the fire, raising a paw, turning and growling good-temperedly. They had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other. But when Evans (Rezia, who had only seen him once, called him 'a quiet man', a sturdy red-haired man, undemonstrative in the company of women), when Evans was killed, just before the armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably (p. 95). [...] He had not cared when Evans was killed; that was worst (p. 99).

In *The English Patient*⁷, Kip materializes himself in Villa San Girolamo as if coming out of the pages of Kipling's *Kim* ("it seemed

⁷ M. ONDAATJE, *The English Patient* (1992), New York, Vintage, 1993.

to her a reversal of *Kim*. The young student was now Indian, the wise old teacher was English” p. 111). And yet, he seems to be born out of the pages of Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*. What would it be like to translate Septimus into a young black man? What if that young black man, like Peter Walsh, came from India?⁸

After all, between World War I and the publication of *Mrs Dalloway*, and the Second World War in the fiction of Michael Ondaatje, India had been slowly progressing towards independence. Lahore, Kip’s city of origin, had to be yielded to Pakistan as part of Eastern Punjab, and became the theatre of Partition and its aftermath of violence.

Kip is a soldier, a sapper, wearing a uniform, belonging to the Eighth Army and to a group of seventeen men, made up of seventeen men, who “had landed in Sicily and fought their way up” (p. 77), marching northwards, liberating Italy not so much from the enemy, but from the enemy’s deathly traps, the left-overs, defusing bombs and mines: almost the job of pacifists.

Kip, like Septimus, has lost a dear friend in a blast explosion, after which he desperately looks out for sanity:

If he could walk the seven yards across the Englishman’s room and touch her he would be sane. [...] He had found the location of the death and what was left there and they had buried his second-in-command, Hardy. And afterwards he kept thinking of the girl that afternoon (p. 113).

Touching Hana means touching “something human” for one who is used to touch metal machines of death. In the past he had not so much touched, but brushed against angelic statues and sculptures, caressing them for the same reason, to feel human. Kip’s sensitivity to art is one of his eccentric features, the other being his care for his long hair and his various rituals to arrange and rearrange it:

Before light failed he stripped the tent of all military objects, all bomb disposal equipment, stripped all insignia off his uniform. Before lying

⁸ These reflections have been inspired by a dialogue with the translator of the new Italian edition of *Mrs Dalloway* (Einaudi, 2011), Anna Nadotti, in the occasion of the book launch in Torino, at Libreria Borgo Po and at University (Department of Modern Languages and Literature) which allowed me to re-read the novel and discuss it with new eyes.

down he undid the turban and combed his hair out and then tied it up into a topknot and lay back” (p. 287).

This insistence on his hair is not a way to feminize the Orient according to the usual orientalist stereotypes, as has been claimed by some critics⁹. It is once again an attempt at providing a different view on masculinity and virility, according to the modernist lessons. Septimus, Vercueil and Kip, at the end of the three novels here considered are called upon to enact an agency.

Furthermore, there is another loss in his life that drives Kip closer to Septimus. His friendship and devotion to Lord Suffolk suggestively echo pages from *Mrs Dalloway*:

He had loved Lord Suffolk and his strange bits of information. But his absence here [...] He had suddenly a map of responsibility, something, he realized, that Lord Suffolk carried within his character at all times. It was this awareness that later created the need in him to block so much out when he was working on a bomb. [...] When the reality of the death of Lord Suffolk came to him, he concluded the work he was assigned to and reenlisted into the anonymous machine of the army (p. 195 *emphasis mine*).
Although he is a man from Asia who has in these last years of war assumed English fathers, following their codes like a dutiful son (p. 217).

Kip’s instinctive reaction to the death of his mentor, lord Suffolk, was enrolling once again in the army in a sort of suicidal vein. This act reminds us of Septimus who “was one of the first to volunteer [...] he drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, named Evans” (p. 95 *emphasis mine*). Kip, too, “had been befriended, and he would never forget it” (p. 187).

His friendship with Lord Suffolk, across races and hierarchies, consisted mainly in his being visible to him and his wife, and even looking human to them, not “a member of another race, a part of the invisible world” (p. 196):

⁹ G. LOWRY, *Between The English Patients: “Race” and the Cultural Politics of Adapting CanLit* in “Essays on Canadian Writing”, No. 76, (Spring 2002), 216-246, p. 226.

Lord Suffolk and Mrs Morden had offered to take him to an English play. He had selected *Peter Pan*, and they, wordless, acquiesced and went with him to a screaming child-full show (p. 197).

Intimacy between Septimus and Evans was like that of two playful dogs, here intimacy between this perfect English gentleman and a Sikh young soldier resolves into watching a show meant for children. Their relationship is often described as that between father and son, teacher and pupil, mentor and talented youth: “Drawn by desire of Lord Suffolk, by his student Lieutenant Kirpal Singh” (p. 198). Thus he signs a drawing of a new explosive device for military use.

Yet, their job brought them back to their adulthood and responsibilities, and Suffolk – “the best of the English” (p. 185) – died, during the German bombings of London, because of a delayed-action bomb, whose second gain and fuze the sapper had not managed to defuse:

He worked flat-out, crazily, after Suffolk’s death. Bombs were altering fast, with new techniques and devices. He was barracked in Regent’s Park with Lieutenant Blackler and three other specialists, working on solutions, blueprinting each new bomb as it came in (p. 199).

The adverb “crazily” and the location at “Regent’s Park” bring us back to Septimus, to his hallucinations, to his visions of his dear friend Evans. Now the visions are of Lord Suffolk. While defusing bombs in Italy, Hardy till his death is Kip’s best companion: “Only Hardy, he realized, keeps me human now” (p. 216). Hardy functions as a substitute of Lord Suffolk, or a substitute of a “British father figure”.

Kip’s memories of Lord Suffolk construct images that remind us of Septimus:

He spends hours with the Englishman, who reminds him of a fir tree he saw in England, its one sick branch, too weighted down with age, held up by a crutch made out of another tree. It stood in Lord Suffolk’s garden on the edge of the cliff, overlooking the Bristol Channel like a sentinel (p. 219).

Like a crippled war veteran, the tree on crutches echoes Septimus’s visions of menacing trees, from whose branches Evans comes out:

“The trees waved, brandished. [...] Evans answered from behind the tree” (p. 76).

War as madness and maddening is present also in Ondaatje’s novel, when Caravaggio warns Hana: “You’re surrounded by madmen,” and she answers: “Yes, I think we are all mad” (p. 267). Ondaatje admits in an interview: “I think everyone thinks they’re healing everybody else, in some way, but they are all wounded”¹⁰.

Hana, too, experiences a sort of suicidal drive on a special occasion, when Kip asks her to grasp two wires he was going to defuse: she says “I thought I was going to die. I wanted to die. And I thought if I was going to die I would die with you. [...] I didn’t feel scared” (p. 103). And, adds the sapper: “She had tried to damage her life so casually” (p. 113). Similarly to Septimus, both Hana and the sapper live a fatal life as survivors of death and war.

All the characters in the novel appear as damaged by War. The so-called English patient has his body burnt up and blackened and has a hearing aid system that plugs him to reality. Hana has lost all her beloved ones and is often crying: “Her inwardness was a sadness of nature” (p. 272). Caravaggio, her former acquaintance back in Canada, has been tortured and had his thumbs cut off because he was a spy and a thief during the War. Kip has lost his best comrades, Suffolk, Hardy and a few others. He too lives with head phones constantly on, which plug him constantly to radio stations and music. They all seem to suffer, although of different degrees, from possibly indelible or long term PTSD, like Septimus. For the sapper, who is permanently suspicious of any object placed casually in a room: “Years after the war [...] putting a pen on a table would position it with the thicker end facing four o’clock” (p. 275). As for Septimus, causality, chance and loss become confused and tricky to Kip’s mind, too. Kip repeats recurrently “I have lost someone like a father as well [...] his comrades blown up, and he risking himself daily in this war” (p. 272).

Septimus’s loss of “his official”, Evans, and Kip’s loss of “someone like a father”, Lord Suffolk, are inscribed in their guilty survival and in their subsequent delusion:

¹⁰ E. WACHTEL, *An Interview with Michael Ondaatje* in “Essays on Canadian Writing”, No. 53, (Summer 1994), 250-261, p. 253.

the omnipresence of death in war, according to Freud, makes it possible for participants to become “heroes who cannot believe in their own death” (“War and Death,” 132), which might have been the case with Leonard’s brothers, who were blown up by a shell as they attempted to rescue their officer¹¹.

This is exactly the core of both Septimus’s and Kip’s experience: the failure to rescue their superiors and friends, makes them fantasizing about their own impossibility to die.

Finally, like Septimus, who mistakes the approaching Peter Walsh for Evans, Kip, too, in a fit of madness and rage wants to kill the English Patient, to kill the emblem of Englishness itself¹², accusing the British and the Americans of dragging Indian soldiers into their war, a foreign war: “Indian soldiers wasted their lives as heroes so they could be *pukkah*. You had wars like cricket. How did you fool us into this?” (p. 283).

When the war is declared over, for Kip there is no reason to rejoice. The yellow and brown races of the world have been wiped out with just one bomb, in the name of civilization:

One bomb. Then another. Hiroshima. Nagasaki.

He swerves the rifle towards the alcove. [...] Caravaggio enters the room and reaches for him, and Kip wheels the butt of the rifle into his ribs. [...] Now his face is a knife. The weeping from shock and horror contained, seeing everything, all those around him, in a different light. [...]

American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman. You had King Leopold of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry Truman of the U.S.A. You all learnt it from the English (p. 286).

¹¹ Quoted in LEVENBACK, p. 51.

¹² “Ondaatje’s intertextual comparison of Kip and the ‘Englishman’ to David and Goliath suggests a relationship between an emergent postcolonial subject and the Embodiment of a burnt-out imperial discourse in all its complexity.” J.U. JACOBS, *Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient and postcolonial impatience in Journal of Literary Studies*, (1997), Vol.13, N.1-2, 92-112, p. 107.

Like Septimus, Kip too cries, he wants to kill a man, feels betrayed by war. And, he feels betrayed by the English he had so admired, like Peter Walsh admired England for its “civilization” (p. 78). Kip’s final vision is a hallucination of a blast producing heat and fire, where bodies are melted away: “he sees fire, people leaping into rivers into reservoirs to avoid flame or heat that within seconds burns everything” (p. 286). This final deflagration and apocalypse is anticipated by his insistent images of fire¹³. Similarly, Septimus’s presence is always accompanied by images of fire and flames, and Mrs Dalloway herself, when thinking of Septimus’s suicide, feels her own body as if on fire.

In the end, Kip walks out of the room, steps out of Italy, out of his uniform, of his boots and his tools, out and away from a war which was not his own, nor his people’s. He thus re-affirms his affiliation to Asia, turning his back on England¹⁴.

In conclusion, through the connections which have been here traced, it seems that Virginia Woolf’s *War* re-surfaces, or fights back, in the two postcolonial texts, *Age of Iron* and *The English Patient*, which are among the masterpieces of twentieth Century World Literature.

¹³ S. SCOBIE, *The Reading Lesson: Michael Ondaatje and the Patients of Desire* in “Essays on Canadian Writing”, No. 53, (Summer 1994), 92-106, p. 94.

¹⁴ “It is only at the end of the war that Kip makes a firm choice about his affiliation.” G. Roberts, “*Sins of Omission*”: *The English Patient*, *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*, and *the Critics* in “Essays on Canadian Writing”, No. 76, (Spring 2002), 195-215, p. 201.