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by

Michael Anthony Flynn

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**Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Contemporary Colombian Fiction**

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# **Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Contemporary Colombian Fiction**

by

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**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

To my parents, Thomas and Ruth Flynn

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# Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Contemporary Colombia Fiction

by

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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This is a study of three contemporary Colombian novels using combat trauma theory as an interpretive model. Following the method of psychological literary criticism that psychiatrist Jonathan Shay used in his books *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1994) and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (2002) to analyze the characters Achilles and Odysseus, I propose to analyze characters in Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios* 'Our Lady of the Assassins' (1994), Darío Jaramillo Agudelo's *Cartas cruzadas* 'Crossed Letters' (1995), and Juan Gabriel Vásquez *El ruido de las cosas al caer* 'The Sound of Things Falling' (2011) to extend Shay's theories of combat trauma to a broad cultural context.

While Colombia has not been engaged in a conventional, state-to-state war, it has been at a constant level of large-scale internal violence for over fifty years, perpetrated by a complex mix of paramilitaries, guerillas, narcotraffickers, and state-sponsored organizations: Colombia has consistently ranked among the top countries in the world for rates of homicide and displaced peoples. Shay's model allows me to argue this kind of radically epistemologically and phenomenologically destabilizing

environment in which non-combatants as well as combatants live under the constant threat of violence as producing severe psychological trauma.

These texts have an additional cultural-psychological function. Shay identifies as an effective coping strategy the victims' act of integrating the traumatic memory into a coherent narrative, in order to both regain authority over their consciousness and to give social testimony to the injustice of the traumatic event. I will show how the characters in the texts I analyze make themselves psychologically whole in direct relation to the success with which they can narrate the story of their own trauma: those who fail do so in large part because the discourses available to them are inadequate to articulate the profundity of the trauma; those who succeed do so because they have found a form and structure that allows them to construct a coherent narrative of Self that incorporates the traumatic memory of the nation's failure.



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## FOREWORD: How I Came to the Project

My interest in trauma literature was piqued when I came across two books on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) written by Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist who worked at the Boston Veterans Affairs clinic treating Vietnam veterans in the eighties and early nineties. The books are *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1994) and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (2002). The idea for the first book came to him while discussing Homer's *Iliad* with his daughter, who happened to be reading it in a Harvard classics course at the same time Shay was treating some of his most troubled cases. Seeing a pedagogical potential in the striking similarities of the veterans' accounts of their war trauma with Homer's account of Achilles' trauma, Shay followed up and published an article entitled "Learning about Combat Stress from Homer's *Iliad*" in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* (1991). Shay's daughter gave it to her professor, Gregory Nagy, who, on reading it, presented himself at Shay's apartment and urged him to write a book: Nagy claimed that "this has never been said before" by any critic of Homer's epics – in centuries of scholarship, no one had read the *Iliad* from the psychological perspective of the combat soldier (Nagy, qtd. by Shay in Shattuck 6).

Like Sigmund Freud a century before him, Shay found that representations of trauma and symptoms of PTSD in imaginative literature augmented the testimonials of his contemporary patients when it came to expressing and explaining the phenomenon. Freud turned to classics of Western literature throughout his writings both to help him explain his theories as well as to demonstrate their universality. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), for instance, he uses Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, texts with which his nineteenth-century European readership would all likely have been familiar, as metaphors to help him articulate his psychoanalytic theories of repressions and drives (Leitch 562-565), ideas with which his public was largely unfamiliar. He claims as well that the legends' "universal power to move" modern as well as ancient audiences can be explained because the plays represent repressed childhood desires that are common to all humanity (563) — the plays' lasting appeal is offered as validation of his theories. Literature was also a useful vehicle for Freud because its poetic language offers an unequalled rendering of human suffering and psychology in a familiar framework of cultural forms.

The subsequent adoption of Freud's theories by literary theorists might be thought of as reversing the method – using psychoanalysis to interpret literary texts as opposed to using literary texts to elucidate the theories of psychoanalysis. While it is unlikely that Freud himself would have foreseen the later phases of this turn, in terms of literary theory and interpretation, it is arguably one of the twentieth century's most influential developments. Interpreters began to view texts in Freud's psychoanalytic discursive framework of dream interpretation. Although the "latent content" hidden in the unconscious of a dream or text could rarely be fully known or expressed, as his theory runs, one could nonetheless approach it through associations with the "manifest content," represented in the mind's conscious state, or on the page of a text. In addition, Freud's insights on subjectivity as partially outside the conscious control of the individual and influenced by repressed, hidden or contradictory

desires led to a new school for analyzing characters and authors (Leitch 811-812).

In very broad terms, the other important influence on twentieth-century thought with which one might credit Freud is the discovery, or at least articulation of, the unconscious, and the disruptive implications that innovation had for the Enlightenment concept of the Self. As Michael Foucault writes of Europe in the post-World War II years in his preface to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, "there was a certain way of thinking correctly, a certain style of political discourse, a certain ethics of the intellectual. One had to be on familiar terms with Marx, not let one's dreams stray too far from Freud" (xiii). This heavy influence of Marx and Freud might be said to ground the Western concept of the Self in the twentieth century. We in the West had discovered that one's identity, far from consisting of the self-determining, isolated thinker such as Enlightenment thinkers Descartes and Kant posited, was better thought of as the product of drives (such as the libidinal unconscious drives of Freud's theories) and forces (such as the socio-economic forces of production of Marx) that are completely outside the control of the individual. That some form of the unconscious, whether Oedipal or not, plays a significant part in identity formation is now a widely accepted supposition.

The interesting implication for me, when I came across the trauma theory debate, was the degree to which trauma played a role in Freud's initial development of his theories. As many trauma genealogists have noted, Freud's theory of the unconscious developed out of his grappling with the complex issues of trauma therapy in alleged rape victims (Herman 1992; Young 1995; Leys 2000; Luckhurst 2013). As Herman writes, scandalously, and in keeping with the feminist movement's reconsideration of Freud's writings, the empirical evidence suggested that female hysteria was the result of childhood rape (*Trauma and Recovery* 13-20); but Freud, incredulous at the scope of the scandal that would ensue in Austrian society, and under pressure from his colleagues, backed away

from this line of inquiry.<sup>1</sup> Instead, he devoted more attention to his theories of childhood sexual development, which subsequently became the paradigm adopted by many Western intellectuals to understand what governs the unconscious. On a much smaller scale, this same sort of reversal of theory application (psychoanalysis applied to literary texts as an interpretive tool for the text, as opposed to literature being used as a way to elucidate psychoanalysis as a method of therapy for individuals) presented itself to Shay, as he was thinking about contemporary posttraumatic stress and literary narratives growing out of the condition: Gregory Nagy writes that “scholars and critics of the *Iliad* would be better able to interpret the great epic if they listened to combat soldiers” as “the perspective of the combat soldier has never been applied in any systematic way to understanding the *Iliad*” (*Achilles* xiii).

To me, a graduate student in comparative literature and a career naval officer who will be assigned to the United States Naval Academy English department faculty, this model has great potential for both research and pedagogy.

In terms of research, if Shay and Nagy are correct in their claim that the traumatized combat soldier’s perspective is an untapped interpretive tool for Homer’s texts, then it follows that the model could be applied to other texts as well, yielding new or insightful interpretations. In terms of pedagogy, the combat soldier’s perspective is something with which many of my future students will be intimately

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1 On his pulling back from the truth of the “seduction theory,” see Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984). He would revisit PTSD again later on treating soldiers suffering from combat neurosis in World War I. His discoveries would lead to a major revision of his theories of identity development, which up to that point had operated on the “pleasure principle,” an assumption that humans were driven to actions that would fulfill their desires, or grant them pleasure. However, the compulsion to repeat the traumatic incidents that he saw in the soldiers, what we would now call a PTSD flashback, led him to rethink this theory. As the soldiers were compelled to act out, relive, recall incidents that were clearly not pleasurable, Freud’s theory of the pleasure principle as governing the unconscious could not explain the phenomenon. Instead, he posited that the compulsion was a manifestation of the death drive, which was a drive toward stasis (death) as opposed to development or change (life). These thoughts were fully worked out in one of Freud’s most influential books, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Many scholars think that Herman’s and others accusation that Freud completely abandoned the “seduction theory” is obtuse. I will deal with this development in more detail in my chapter on the genealogy of trauma.

familiar, as ten to twenty percent of them will have had prior enlisted service as sailors and Marines and likely will have seen combat in either Iraq or Afghanistan. The students who will not have served prior to their appointment at USNA will likely be interested in the perspective because, in a few years, they themselves will likely be in the role of a combatant or supervisor of combatants.

Even more interesting for me, again as both a literary scholar interested in research as well as a military officer interested in pedagogy, is Shay's claim that both narrative and Athenian theatre were effective forms of therapy for soldiers with PTSD. Further, Shay argues that communal therapy of war trauma was one of the reasons the Athenian theatre festivals were held, going so far as to argue that "the distinctive character of Athenian theater came from the requirements of a democratic polity *made up entirely of present or former soldiers* to provide communalization for combat veterans" (*Achilles* 230 note 14; "The Birth of Tragedy — Out of the Needs of Democracy"). Many other scholars have written that Athenian theater festivals were constituted almost entirely by combat veterans — the playwrights, actors, directors and audience members were all soldiers at some stage of their career (Jones 1986; Salkever 1986; Winkler 1990). For instance, Sophocles was a thrice-elected general in the Athenian army (Marvell); Thomas Palaima writes that "Aeschylus was a (*Marathōnomakhes*), a 'Marathon-fighter,' the Athenian equivalent of an American veteran of the D-Day landings" (262), whose pride in his military exploits so overshadowed his pride in his success as a dramatist that his self-written epitaph on his grave in Gela, Sicily mentions his valor at Marathon but, conspicuous due to its omission, absolutely nothing about his plays (263). John Winkler, in "The Ephebes' Song: Tragōidia and Polis," writes that the chorus (*kouros* means "youth or young man" (27)) was made up of young soldiers: "'ephebe' came to be the specified designation of the eighteen-to-twenty-year-old-citizen in military training" (27), and that audience members sat in sections determined by their military organization (30-31). Shay notes of the "prominence of military matters in the procession and

ceremonies held before and between theatrical events,” and cites Aristotle on use of the theater space for military training graduations (Shay 230 note 14). In short, Shay’s argument is that what we refer to as Athenian theater was, in addition to a seasonal cultural form, an ancient Greek “distinctive therapy of purification, healing, and reintegration that was undertaken as a whole community” for returning veterans (230 note 14).

In contrast, he claims that our current cultural practice of diagnosing combat trauma as a disorder of posttraumatic stress relegates its victims to the periphery of society and puts the treatment in the hands of the health care system, or worse, the prison system, rather than tying the condition to the community itself. Other cultures, such as ancient Greece, used practices, “rooted in the native soil of the returning soldier’s community” that were less deficient than ours in “providing for a reception of the Furies of war into community” (*Achilles* 194). His recommendation:

We must create our own new models of healing which emphasize communalization of trauma. Combat veterans and American citizenry should meet together face to face in daylight, and listen, and watch, and weep, just as citizen-soldiers of ancient Athens did in the theater at the foot of the Acropolis. We need a modern equivalent of Athenian tragedy. Tragedy brings us to cherish our mortality, to savor and embrace it. (194)

Such a suggestion, that combat trauma therapy be moved out of the hands of the mental health professionals and into the hands of the community and the artists, is likely to interest any student or teacher of literature.

These are the hypotheses that interest me about Shay’s work and what point me to revisit the question of trauma narratives: one, that narratives and performative theater, for various reasons I will discuss further below, are effective trauma therapy practices, and, two, that the very origins of Athenian theater and Homeric epics were connected with the healing of combat trauma. These hypotheses are



even more compelling to a military officer trying to structure a research project in comparative literature. The Greek epics and tragedies are the very origins of our Western literature. If it could be shown that they were created out of a context of combat trauma, either to represent it or to cure it artistically, then the implications for this interpretive model for use with other texts in Western literature, and possibly other literatures, would be significant. And if it could be shown that trauma played as large a role in the makeup of the unconscious as childhood sexual development did, which was Freud's hypothesis, then this would have enormous implications for the way that we conceived of the Self — it might have implications as wide-ranging for both philosophy, psychology and literature as Freud's writings did at the turn of the century.

My approach to graduate studies was aimed at investigating the potential for this idea of trauma as a literary catalyst and subject. During my time as a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, I took European Renaissance scholar Wayne Rebhorn's seminar on Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* and wrote a paper on the possible traumatic origins of that work, which devotes approximately thirty pages of its preface to the psychological trauma and terror instilled in Europeans who witnessed the Black Death in the fourteenth century. Boccaccio himself lived through the plague and attested to the healing powers of communal narrative — the very reason his "brigata," his 'company of friends,' in the *Decameron*, fled Florence to spend ten days passing the time telling one another stories in the countryside. As Wayne Reborn said in an anecdote he gave during his 2014 PEN award acceptance speech for his translation of the recently released Norton edition, "it is the perfect text to teach" at a moment of crisis — he had a class scheduled the day of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and had debated canceling it, but decided against it, in the spirit of the brigata, who sustained each other in the face of trauma by telling stories: "They do so because stories allow us to escape a sometimes nightmarish reality. They do so because stories amuse us, because they console us, because they make

life meaningful” (Rebhorn). I saw the *Decameron* (1353) as doubly effective in terms of trauma therapy through narrative: in the preface is a traumatized narrator who writes to console himself in the midst of a nightmarish world, and inside of that frame is the story of a group of persons who tell one another fictional stories to sustain themselves through the same nightmare. In another class, I wrote a paper on Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *The Cenci* (1819), diagnosing the character Beatrice Cenci, purportedly a victim of incest and a parricide, with PTSD. A course on Chinese Tang Dynasty (618-906 AD) poetry led me to a paper on three of the poet Du Fu’s poems about painful, personal loss in the wake of a rebellion that overthrew the Emperor he served. Research done during a course on the literature of the Great War helped produce work on veteran Robert Graves’ poetry and prose. A Modernism course led to a paper that compared Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), about which the claim that World War I trauma is present on every page is nothing new, as an influence on a contemporary Colombian Juan Gabriel Vasquez 2011 novel *The Sound of Things Falling*, about the individual psychological trauma caused by the drug violence in the nineteen nineties.

One might describe my approach to graduate studies as passing a “PTSD Geiger Counter” over the past two millennia of World literature and focusing deeper research on sites where it spiked. If it spiked on texts representing symptoms of combat PTSD, all the better; but any trauma, regardless of the cause, was the primary criteria. But despite my finding many fascinating instances of literary representations of PTSD, I was still not satisfied that I had found the right combination of historical circumstances, violent events, and literary representations of the psychological aftermath in persons who had lived through them. I could have focused on one of the many bodies of conventional war literature, of course, but that was a body of work that had been explored many times over.

Even though the vast majority of work on trauma narratives focused on narratives by and about Vietnam-era veterans and on literature of the Holocaust, I found a different combination of violence,

history, trauma and literature when I came across recent texts that represents the violence and trauma in contemporary Colombia. Many of these novels are branded, mostly by publishers with an eye to the market, as “narcoveliterature,” because they deal with the widespread violence surrounding Pablo Escobar’s personal war against the state in the late nineteen-eighties and early nineteen-nineties. Others depict the social injustices that persist because of entrenched interests influencing political power and shaping events by the use of private militias whose size and firepower rival that of the state’s armed forces. These paramilitary forces are not part of any drug cartel organization, yet they are responsible for much of the violence and displacement of people throughout Colombia over the past two decades. Other novels I came across tell the stories of these displaced peoples, who were usually rural peasant farmers pushed from their land by some powerful interest who wanted it for its strategic position along a trade route or for the rich minerals that sat beneath it. Most of these villagers migrated to the slums of Colombia’s major cities and lived there illegally in conditions of squalor and under constant threat of violence from both street criminals and paramilitaries.

What struck me about this body of literature was that it depicts many different types of trauma and instances of PTSD arising not from straightforward confrontations with violence (a battle, a plague epidemic, or a conventional war), but something much more systemic: a unique blend of historical circumstances that have plagued Colombia with violence for generations. These texts spoke to Shay's insight that the causes of PTSD in an individual had a cultural basis: he repeatedly refers to PTSD as a moral injury, by which he means that the undermining of one’s expectation of trust and fairness in the world is equally as psychologically damaging as violence is. To wit, Homer’s Achilles developed his acute symptoms not after a physical injury but after a moral injury, when the commander Agamemnon publicly dishonored him by taking away his war prize. And here I discovered a new, consistent framework that can be considered traumatogenic: it is not an exaggeration to claim that Colombia has

passed through a sustained, multi-generational, complex period of violent conflict that has left its mark both on the nation as a collective and each on individual who experienced that era, whether or not they themselves directly experienced this culture's violence. This focus on a broader vision of the violence causing of both individual cultural trauma made this literature from Colombia seem to me to be an appropriate field that could be illuminated by using the Shay's model of combat trauma. Thus I took up this literature as a corpus related to the work that Shay and others discussed, but with its own profile, and perhaps with its own message about representations of trauma.

In sum, I came to see Colombia, unfortunately for the country but fortunately for my project, as the ideal context in which to study a different corpus of literary representations of violent trauma from the perspective of Shay's model of combat trauma. In this literature, there were multiple violent actors who terrorized the country and its citizens in various ways over a long period of political destabilization and crisis. Colombian citizens, most of whom were non-combatants, innocent civilians, and bystanders to the conflicts, were subject to circumstances just as psychologically traumatizing as those that affect soldiers in wartime. In addition, this world foregrounds the role of trauma from other factors, such as political corruption, mendacious official discourse, and economic and social instability that fit in with Shay's model, as I will demonstrate in detail below.

This study will address texts taken from Colombia to expand on the ideas of narrative and trauma that have come from many scholars of literature on war and genocide. Its goal is to use the case of Colombia and its literature to speak about narrative trauma as a cultural phenomenon – as a catalyst for rehabilitating public speech in traumatic times, not only to help individual writers or readers recuperate from their own traumatic experiences.

## INTRODUCTION

This study is a literary analysis of three contemporary Colombian novels using combat trauma theory. As I noted in the Foreword, I committed to the approach before I committed to the material – my search was for a body of work that might be illuminated by the particular theoretical approach. At first glance, the approach might seem utterly incongruous with the material. Combat trauma theory seems best suited to use on the vast body of extant war literature – Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1982[1929]), a novel of the brutality in the trenches of the Great War, might seem a much more suitable candidate than, for instance, Darío Jaramillo Agudelo’s *Cartas cruzadas* (1995), an epistolary novel of the disintegration of the love affairs of bourgeois Colombian urbanites. However, I will demonstrate that the Colombia in which these novels are set is in fact the ideal setting to produce texts that can be interpreted to advantage using combat trauma theory. The wars in Colombia and Latin America over the last half-century were not conventional conflicts between one state and another; there were few official declarations of violence, yet the conditions in which both fighters and innocent civilians lived were as dangerous or more than the conditions faced by soldiers fighting the greatest conflicts of this century. The notion that we now live in a post-conventional war

age may be reasonably defended: for the last thirteen years, the conflict that has shifted the balance of power in global politics has been a war that one nation declared against a *concept*, not another nation, nor even a group – the War on Terror. War literature as we know it is likely growing as extinct as conventional warfare.

But a new age of unconventional, asymmetric, chaotic war has just begun, and we wait for a literature that will capture it and articulate it for us like Homer sung of Troy for the ancient Greeks, or Michael Herr with *Dispatches* (1977), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) captured Vietnam for the Americans. In fact, the new venue for violent conflict might not involve state military forces at all, but rather state-funded mercenaries fighting against insurgent groups, or protecting valuable natural resources in unstable areas. These conflicts will inevitably produce conditions of prolonged exposure to violence for non-combatants as well as combatants, in areas of extreme political instability, in systems whose social order is subject to abrupt and radical change happening faster and on a greater scale than its citizens are prepared for. This is exactly what happened, and is still happening, in Colombia.

Colombia's history attests not only to a long series of violent acts at the heart of the nation, but also to their lasting effects, well beyond direct memories or even beyond what today is called postmemory (Hirsch). Ed Vulliamy writes that Colombia has been conducting “the world’s longest war” since 1948, when the country found itself torn in two over a ten-year period known as *La violencia*, a country-wide struggle between military arms of the Liberal and Conservative parties. Forrest Hylton (2006) and others trace the origins back even farther, to the nineteen-twenties. Historians such as Mary Roldan, in *Blood and Fire* (2002), corroborate Vulliamy’s claim that the war is still ongoing, noting how the country’s rural areas that suffered the worst violence and forced displacement in recent years were the very same areas that were the sites of violence and murder half a

century ago during *La violencia*.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), which keeps a cumulative count of displaced persons throughout the world starting in 1985 to the present,<sup>2</sup> Colombia led the world in the number of displaced people through 2013, with almost six million cumulative. Syria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo surpassed it in 2014 (Reid), but today it still remains at the top of list, with over ten percent of its population displaced due to a combination of violence, conflict and organized crime (Bargent). In 2013 Colombia's homicide rate was still the tenth highest in the world (Sheldon), a statistic which is, paradoxically, by its authorities presented as progress, because it has decreased by half since its high in the early nineteen-nineties (Tomaselli). From 1995-2008, Colombia periodically alternated with South Africa for the top position among the world's countries in terms of homicides (Petrini). During the same period, it led the world in guerilla attacks and kidnappings as well (Sánchez et. al).

In broad strokes, all this violence might be considered the result of a four-way civil war between the following politico-military movements: guerillas (insurgents), narcotraffickers, state sponsored armed forces, and paramilitaries. As for the insurgent guerilla movement, it is comprised of organizations such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and the National Liberation Army (ELN). These groups have used terrorist tactics for political leverage and criminal tactics, such as kidnapping and cooperating with the drug cartels in the process of manufacturing cocaine, to generate funds to maintain their operations and existence. Like other guerilla movements in Central and South America, they share as origin and inspiration the successful Cuban revolution in

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2 The IDMC's numbers are based on estimates provided by the Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES) and the Government of Columbia. Another source, the Colombian government's Integral Reparation and Assistance for Victims Unit (UARIV), estimates the number to be over 6,000,000 for the same period ("Global Figures on Displaced Persons 1989-2014"). Yet IMDC conjectures that both of these estimates much lower than the actual figure, due to a backlog in registering persons displaced by paramilitary successor groups known as "bandas criminales," (BACRIM)s, or criminal bands (Bargent).

1960; but unlike the movements, most of which had extinguished by the end of the nineteen-eighties, Colombia's guerillas persisted, largely due to the influx of money from cooperating with narco-trafficking. The FARC is both the most familiar and the most notorious among them, largely because it could maintain income from cooperation with the cartels, kidnapping and its de facto control of large sections of land. The trauma it caused, however, is not always directly related to violence. In many parts of the country, the FARC was the only entity providing basic governmental services to the rural population, and so could justify its extortion on that ground (Hilton, *Evil Hour* 87-90).

Narco-traffickers were responsible for much of the violence in the nineteen eighties and nineties. The drug business, while violent under normal circumstances, reached fever-pitch in Colombia due to factors such as the enormous influx of capital, access to the US market to sell the drugs, and existence of large former paramilitary groups, which themselves owe their existence in part to the legacy of a weak central government and a wealthy landed elite. The event generally considered to mark the escalation is when Medellin Cartel boss Pablo Escobar made clear his open war against the state in 1984, with the assassination of Justice Minister Roderigo Lara Bonilla in retaliation for Lara Bonilla's pressure to toughen the extradition laws against narco-traffickers, a law whose passage would have condemned Escobar and others to a fate in a US prison. Two motorcycle-mounted assassins, known in local slang as *sicarios*, drove up to the Minister's vehicle in his motorcade and shot him through the window. What followed was an asymmetrical war of Escobar and the "extraditables" 'those who could be extradited' against the state, a period marked by assassinations of many high-profile politicians and public servants, bombings at public places such as shopping malls, and even a bombing of a civilian flight in a botched assassination attempt on presidential candidate César Gaviria, killing all 107 passengers on-board (Prendergast).

Paramilitary organizations are another source of political and social instability as well as the



source of massive violence of the last half-century. Some writers trace their origins back to the hitmen from *La violencia* in the late 1940s (Hylton, *Evil Hour in Colombia* 43-46), others to the groups of mercenaries that ranchers hired in the nineteen-eighties to protect their lands from the dual threat of narco-trafficking and guerilla warfare kidnapping (Leech). After Law 48 was passed in 1968, allowing the military to arm mercenary units (they called them “self-defense” units) to conduct “cleansing” operations to rid the rural peasantry of guerilla and criminal elements while providing the military with plausible deniability for the atrocities committed, many different paramilitary groups blossomed (Bernquist 268). Over the years the names changed and the organizations disbanded and regrouped, ever-shifting in their loyalties to the state, narco-traffickers, the landed elite, or simply to themselves alone; but always present was the groups’ track record of carrying out violence on a large scale, with or without state legitimization.

Even after the violence surrounding Escobar’s threat to the state and public subsided at the turn of the twenty-first century, paramilitary organizations continued their use of violence, just as they had been doing throughout the twentieth century, and the numbers of dead at their hands at least equaled the number of Colombians who were harmed at the hands of the narcos or the guerillas (Sánchez et al), but the number of displaced persons actually increased; in 2012 the number surpassed the number of displaced in 1993, the year of Escobar’s death (Loughna; “IDP refugee numbers”). Furthermore, homicides and displacements were more intense in areas of strategic importance to the paramilitaries. For instance, in the department of Antioquia from 1994 to 1997, under the governorship of Álvaro Uribe, whom paramilitary leader Carlos Castaño later supported for President in 2002, describing him as “the man closest to our philosophy” (Hylton, *Evil Hour* 104), the homicide rate increased dramatically: it doubled in 1995, and trebled in 1996; in 1998, the year after Uribe’s departure, it dipped back down to 1994 levels, which, to put things in perspective, was still forty times higher than it

was in the US at the same time (Hylton, *Evil Hour* 94). I draw these comparison to demonstrate that the violence and trauma to which Colombia's citizens were subject did not at all subside with the death of Escobar, which is a commonly held misconception due to Escobar's demonization in the media and high-profile, terrorist-style attacks on the population and the state.

External factors, such as the US meddling in its "war on drugs," also exacerbated Colombia's stability and led to inflows of funds and arms that were not only ineffective in stemming the production of cocaine but also largely destabilizing politically because of misuses and corruption (Hylton 2006; Franco 2002; Levine 1990; Salazar 2001).

Finally, events of violent trauma are still occurring in Colombia. Paramilitary organizations that the government has taken credit for disarming have simply changed their names. They now call themselves "Criminal Bands," (BACRIMs), which on the surface seems like a name that calls a spade a spade, but it really is the result of a white-washing trick to allow the government to claim success on eradicating the paramilitary organizations who committed so many atrocities in the past decade. These groups comprise the same men with the same guns receiving the same money through entrenched interest laundering operations, but at least now the government can baldly claim that they are no longer paramilitary. BACRIMs continue to do the dirty work of the powerful interests, murdering and displacing people at rates comparable to the years of atrocities in the past (Sánchez et al.). To rub a white, granular material into the wound, Colombia still leads the world in cocaine production and the cartels are alive and well, despite the public death of one of the most famous bosses, Pablo Escobar, twenty years ago. And although their power and funds have been considerably diminished, guerilla organizations still exist.

The broad and cursory exposition of the trauma and violence that has plagued Colombia for the past five decades is necessary to bolster my claim that that country is not only still at war, but is still in

the middle of the longest war that the world has ever known. To put the violence in quantitative perspective, according to the most recent CNN report, the total number of US casualties from the combined operations Iraq and Afghanistan is between nine and ten thousand (“Home and Away: War Casualties”); by contrast, the number of homicides in Colombia in 2012 *alone* is over 14,000 (Sheldon). While not all of the Colombian deaths can be attributed to the combination of narcotics, paramilitary, police and guerilla attacks, most researchers list those groups as the source of the violence in that country.

Thus, Colombia is not just at war, but is in a multi-generational, multi-sided, chaotic, asymmetrical and unconventional war. Perhaps French sociologist Daniel Pécaut captured it best in the title of his study in the complex and varied sources of violence in Colombia – it is a war against *society* (*Guerra contra la sociedad* 2001). Conditions have considerably improved in the urban centers in the recent years: Medellín is no longer the war zone that it was during the time about which Fernando Vallejo writes *Our Lady of the Assassins* (1998[1994]). But the rural sections of the country are still under siege and the slum sections of the city are growing in population and shrinking in safety. The civilian population is subject to the same stresses that soldiers are in wartime: continual threats from unnamed actors, social instability, forced displacement, bombs, and guns. A weak central government results in a complex power dynamic throughout the country: in some places the FARC is the government, in other places the local government wields influence, other areas are run by paramilitaries, others by narco-traffickers – and the suspicion that bribery has reached the highest levels of government is widespread (Gutiérrez 1).

As I will show in the chapters that follow, it is the combination of prolonged exposure to extreme violence combined with a radically epistemologically and phenomenologically destabilizing environment that leads to the acute, chronic cases of PTSD. This is why Colombia is the ideal setting

for combat trauma theory, which is the same reason that World War I and Vietnam produced so many psychological injuries. What was traumatogenic in those cases was not simply that soldiers had been subject to long periods of violence. It was, rather, that the violence occurred amidst the shattering of a former world-view, a radical disillusionment with authority, and moral injury. In England, the schoolboys trained on the fields of Eton to continue the grandeur of the English empire found themselves massacred in large number on the fields of Flanders, subject to incompetent military command and ineffective politicians. In America, soldiers brought up in the wake of a resounding victory in World War II that saved the world for democracy found themselves mired in a counter-insurgency far from home under an incompetent command fighting for corrupt pseudo-democratic governments and returning to an unsympathetic public. By comparison, in Colombia, citizens have been not only subject to violent attacks and forced displacements, but also subject to a system of corrupt authority, dirty politics, lawlessness and chaos. It is one thing to suffer violence. It is quite another to suffer it and have no recourse to justice, to have the attacker escape into anonymity or impunity: like the machine-gun attack destined for someone else that shot off the foot of Darío Jaramillo Agudelo, the writer of *Cartas cruzadas* which I analyze in my fourth chapter. PTSD stems from a *moral* as well as physical injury. The scars it leaves behind are psychic as well as somatic.

All in all, I will argue that it is this complex situation, a multi-generational trauma on the national level and still ongoing, that makes Colombia an ideal setting for a combat trauma theory that can contribute to our knowledge of trauma after conventional warfare. This environment produces texts and narratives that either try to represent this reality, to react to it, or to make some meaning out of it, a meaning that might be psychologically therapeutic in the ways that I will describe. At the very least, the psychological recovery for all of the main characters in the novels I will discuss either succeeds or fails in direct relation to the characters' ability to construct and communicate a narrative

about their traumatic past.

Chapter One will be a brief genealogy of the contemporary concept of trauma. I will trace the origins of our current notion of PTSD, from its early forms in the nineteenth century as the psychic component of jarrings in railroad accidents, referred to as railway spine, to hysteria, “the female malady,” to its affliction of the male gender in the wartime, through to the present day. The current debate surrounding the nature of PTSD is fervent, and it will be difficult to grasp it in all of its complexities if one does not have the full picture of how it came to be a classification of mental disorder in the official Western medical discourse. While I side firmly with Shay in the conviction that Achilles’ and Odysseus’ war trauma symptoms sung by Homer are remarkably similar to the PTSD symptoms of the modern soldier, I realize that the disorder, as we conceive of it as a category of modern mental disorders, is heavily dependent on its cultural context. Tracing the disorder through from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day will show how in modern Western culture, technological and scientific advances have continually (re)shaped how we understand the malady. At the end of the chapter I will discuss and attempt to answer some of the most incisive critiques of the contemporary approaches to trauma that share the same theoretical underpinnings as Shay’s and Herman’s model, those of cultural critic Cathy Caruth, whose influential body of work I see as a nodal point for varied discourses on trauma, and psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, who is representative of the newest neurobiological research on how trauma effects the brain’s chemistry and has spearheaded many experimental forms of therapy. But, overall, the aim of the chapter is nothing more than its title suggests: a genealogy. The distinct advantages of Shay’s model of combat trauma may not be perceived if one does not have an understanding of the complicated route that modern science took to arrive at its current understanding of the psychic injury.

Chapter Two contains, first, a detailed definition of the contemporary concept of PTSD, second,

an exposition of Shay's model of combat-PTSD, which has yet to have its own category in medical discourse, and third, various unorthodox therapeutic recommendations, which all involve some degree of narrative reconstruction of the trauma turning it into public testimony, redressing the moral injury, through various media. Books, whether imaginative literature, testimonials, or autobiography, are examples of this kind of narrative destined for public discourse, one that purports to impart knowledge to the community. Within this section, I include some of the strongest criticism to this approach as well as my rebuttals.

One of the reasons that Shay's model of combat trauma remains primary in this discussion is that it highlights an aspect of the phenomenon that most other trauma theorists, from the mid-nineteenth-century practitioners, through Freud and his circle to Judith Herman, Ruth Leys, and even David Morris, who writes specifically about combat PTSD, have not emphasized explicitly: the "berserk" mental state that some combat PTSD sufferers may enter into. I will argue how my extensions of Shay's model takes into account the trauma of the perpetrator, which is a perspective that has not been given as much attention by other scholars, who usually focus on the trauma of the victim, and that it thus needs to be used in discussing trauma and narrative, especially in situations where global power networks, not just interpersonal conflicts familiar from traditional situations of war and violence, are a necessary factor in assessing any narrative from such situation. Two of the texts I have chosen for analysis, Fernando Vallejo's *Our Lady of the Assassins* (1998[1994]) and Darío Jaramillo Agudelo's *Cartas cruzadas* (1995), deal explicitly with the trauma of the perpetrator of violence. The other texts touch on it implicitly, as the line between perpetrator and victim is blurred in their stories.

Finally, the end of the chapter addresses the particular therapeutic qualities of fictional narrative both in terms of trauma therapy according to Shay and other practitioners, as well as literature's freedom of form that might privilege it over other discourses to represent traumatic memory – if such a

thing be possible. This section goes a long way to explaining my choice of fictional narratives over the abundance of trauma testimonials written in Colombia and Latin America.

But after this chapter, I will turn to three sets of case studies that demonstrate the ways in which life for the authors and protagonists of these Colombian texts has become a violent conflict similar to war. Some go “berserk,” just like Achilles and Shay’s veterans did. The moral betrayal to which they are subject doesn’t necessarily come at the hands of their direct superiors in the chain of command but rather at the hands of a society whose leaders and institutions and norms of justice can no longer be trusted. An analysis of these texts from the perspective of the extended trauma theory that I have argued in the first two chapters of the study, combat trauma theory in particular, will illuminate aspects that have been largely ignored by previous criticism. I had meant to include more novels in the case studies, but time slipped away as the current project grew. These will be ideas for future projects. Héctor Abad Faciolince’s novel *Angosta* (2003) and his memoir *Oblivion ‘El Olvido que Seremos’* (2010), and Evelio Rosero’s *Los ejércitos ‘The Armies’* (2007) are examples of excellent texts that tell the paramilitary piece of the trauma in Colombia. The only reason that they are not included in this study is that I could not write fast enough. Let them stand here as evidence of a growing corpus of the new generation of combat trauma literature that I am defining through this project.

Chapter Three is a reading of Fernando Vallejo’s *La virgen de los sicarios ‘Our Lady of the Assassins’* (1998[1994]) in which I use the combat trauma theory outlined by Shay to arrive at a completely new interpretation of that foundational text of narcoliterature. Not only do I offer a PTSD diagnosis for the narrator and protagonist Fernando, who I argue literally becomes an assassin in narrative discourse and can therefore articulate the mental state of one, but I also show him as having entered into what Shay calls a “berserk” state of homicidal rage, one that damages permanently the psyche of the victim. The paradox of viewing with any degree of sympathy a narrator who in addition

to becoming a mass murderer also portrays himself as a pedophile, classist, bigot, racist, misogynist necrophiliac, is the tension that Vallejo harnesses: he is forcing the reader to an encounter with an Other (a hitman, a sicario) that is despicable to him on every possible register – Vallejo has almost assured this by allowing Fernando with his sardonic nihilism to anathemize almost every category of person in the world.

Shay's model of combat PTSD in the soldier and Rachel MacNair's study of Perpetrator Induced Posttraumatic Stress (PITS) (2002), are the kind of models uniquely suited to understanding the psychological breakdown of such a perpetrator of crimes. While I never argue that Vallejo is trying to set the reader up to sympathize with Fernando, he is trying to force the reader, even traumatize the reader, as I will show, into a sympathetic view of the sicarios, who are mostly extremely disadvantaged youths from the poorest slums in the country, forced by poverty and circumstances, or simply coerced into a life of crime. Comparing them with foot soldiers drafted into war, such as American youths sent to the jungles of Vietnam against their will half-a-century ago who were forced to kill and in some cases commit atrocities, and even Shay's reading that views Homer's Achilles as a combat soldier who suffers from PTSD symptoms, proves itself apt.

I begin with a brief survey of the criticism on the novel, to establish two major trends: critics who emphasize the degree to which *Our Lady of the Assassins* is an intervention in the discourse of cultural trauma in contemporary Colombia, and those who emphasize the individual trauma depicted in the work. After that, I interpret the novel as the tragedy of Fernando just as Jonathan Shay read the *Iliad* as the tragedy of Achilles, whose symptoms of combat PTSD lead to the destruction of his moral character. Finally, I will argue that Vallejo represents the discourses of violence in Colombia on a continuum with more traditional moral and legal discourses – and that they all fail in understanding a Colombia in which its citizen-victims are also often perpetrators.



Chapter Four is Darío Jaramillo Agudelo's *Cartas cruzadas* 'Crossed Letters' (1995). Written while the famed poet was convalescing from a machine-gun booby trap set by a narco for someone else, this epistolary novel tells the story of loves and friendships falling apart in direct relation with the rise of narco-trafficking's influence on Colombia society in the nineteen-seventies and nineteen-eighties. As he states in interviews and other writings, the novel was Jaramillo Agudelo's attempt to make sense of a world where citizens could be subject to such random acts of violence. He tells the story of how ordinary Colombians are all somehow tarnished by the drug trade, even if they have no direct involvement in it. My theoretical approach in this chapter is much different than it was in the previous chapter on Vallejo. Here I rely on Kurt Spang's claim that "the true space of the epistolary novel is the human soul" (652), that the epistolary form is privileged, in terms of psychological criticism, because the reader gets a profundity of insight into the psychological state of the characters writing the letters that other fictional forms do not offer. Instead of Shay's method, I rely more on the writings of Jacques Lacan, Edgar Allan Poe, and Jacques Derrida. But the focus is the same as in the other chapters – on psychological trauma caused by not only prolonged exposure to a system of violence but also to a system without justice or morality, and I demonstrate how narrative reconstruction of traumatic memories shows itself to be psychologically therapeutic for those characters who do it successfully.

Chapter Five is a reading of Juan Gabriel Vásquez' *El ruido de las cosas al caer* 'The Sound of Things Falling' (2011). This novel is another fictional attempt to show the effects of personal, psychological trauma and the victims' recovery through narrative reconstruction of their past. This narrative traces the origins of narcotics in Colombia back farther than the two previous works I wrote about, locating it in the networks of marijuana sales and cultivation between Colombia and the US first established with the Peace Corps volunteers in the nineteen-sixties. It traces the origins of multigenerational trauma in such situations back farther as well, focusing on an early twentieth-century

airshow crash that killed some political elites as a microcosm of cultural trauma, the effects of which still linger as trauma in its characters through to the present day. To argue for the necessity of combining cultural and personal perspectives in trauma study, I turn to Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory for a theoretical framework to discuss instances of cultural or collective trauma that are transmitted down to future generations.

*The Sound of Things Falling* emerges here as a particularly insightful representation of the way that public events shape private lives, and this is an important aspect of Shay's theory that the current trauma debates tend to overlook: how the cumulative effects of lesser traumas might either themselves cause PTSD in a subject, or how their psychic stress built up over time might precondition the subject to develop a more severe form of PTSD following a more serious psychic blow. Another aspect of public trauma that Vásquez weaves masterfully into his work is how the medium through which the story of the trauma is transmitted can shape the traumatic memory and the symptoms. I turn to Alison Landsberg's idea of prosthetic memory to theorize this phenomenon – how delivery of traumatic events through news media or recording devices such as the “black box” in the airplane cockpit can affect victims. The memories can either suture themselves into one's consciousness, like a prosthetic limb becomes part of a body, or the news media, through the inundation of violent threats and alerts, can exacerbate an already traumatic situation, drawing continuous attention to lurking dangers, compounding real threats with a heightened sense of danger. Both of these aspects of prosthetic memory exacerbate the narrator's traumatic symptoms. The combination of postmemory and prosthetic memory at work in this novel serves to illustrate how the cumulative effects of lesser traumas tend to be as damaging or more to the psyche than an isolated blow might be.

Here I must add that I beg the reader's tolerance for the specific ways in which I make my case for a new era of how relations between literature and trauma can be conceived – the burden that I set

for myself is the burden of a literary critic, not a cultural critic or a social scientist, despite the fact that my primary model for unpacking what and how these texts represent their traumatic objects is that of a psychiatrist reading Homer and diagnosing Achilles with a modern mental disorder. I am aware that I sometimes dwell too much on formal elements of the novels, such as syntax and rhetoric, to the detriment of larger ethical and cultural lessons that could be drawn. I only beg sympathy that the approach is in its early stages and that the narratology of these texts may be also a key to identifying a new corpus of trauma literature, perhaps extending beyond wars into other cultures of violence. My larger goal for this investigation is, after all else is said, to come up with a way to illuminate texts that operate according to a new way of understanding traumatic memory. Psychoanalytic criticism, independent of whatever its influence on psychoanalysis as a discipline might have been, led to many innovative critiques of fictional texts. I hope that posttraumatic criticism can do the same.

All in all, I will argue that Colombia, at certain times and places for certain groups, produced warlike circumstances and conditions, all of which are likely to cause PTSD in the individual exposed to violence. I will use Shay's model of combat PTSD primarily, but many other trauma models as well, to help paint the entire picture of trauma in Colombia. I will argue that this complex situation, a multi-generational trauma on the national level, still ongoing, that predisposes individuals affected by it to develop PTSD when exposed to another traumatic event, produces unique texts that are informed by it or are in reaction to it. An analysis of these texts from the perspective of trauma theory, combat trauma theory in particular, will illuminate aspects that have been largely ignored by previous criticism.

## **Chapter One: A Brief Genealogy of Trauma**

As excellent genealogies of trauma and PTSD already exist from writers like Allan Young (1995), Ruth Leys (2000), Ben Shephard (2001), Roger Luckhurst (2013), and David Morris (2015), among many others, it is unnecessary to cover the same ground here. But, as background, I will at least give a cursory overview of how our contemporary concept of PTSD came about as a classification of a mental disorder in medical discourse. I will as well touch on some of the controversy surrounding the different approaches to trauma and the concept of PTSD, focusing on those writers who take the hardest line against the theoretical underpinnings of Shay's model for trauma and recovery.

There are also philosophical and epistemological aspects to be considered, those that consider PTSD to be a disease of modernity, one that could not have existed before the Enlightenment altered the West's concept of the Self. I will deal with these in my response to the critiques of sociological ethnographer Allan Young. One of his arguments is that the idea of an intrusive and parasitic nature of traumatic memory, beyond conscious recall of a patient but still intruding at will into his consciousness, called into question certain key concepts at the heart of the Western Self, such as free will and self-knowledge, and ushered in the era of therapists who claimed an ability to help the patient access these

memories that were hidden from them; access to the memories allowed the subject mastery over them and the ability to use the memories to reconstruct their damaged subjectivity (Young 1995; Elster 1985). Despite that Shay's book diagnoses ancient Greek heroes with the contemporary mental malady of PTSD, his concept of the disorder and recommendations for therapy derive from the various aspects of the West's treatment of trauma in the modern age. To say this is not to argue against his thesis but rather to trace the genealogy of the disorder in the modern West. In the next chapter I will trace in detail all of the similarities between Odysseus' and Achilles' war trauma and the modern notion of PTSD.

But to begin at the beginning, the etymology of the word "trauma" suggests a tight correspondence. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word in English derives from the Greek word for wound: τραύμα (traúma). First used in seventeenth-century medicine<sup>3</sup> in reference to a physical injury, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that it began to be used to describe a psychic injury<sup>4</sup> in medical discourse to describe the psychological shock that accompanied the physical shock that persons experienced following railway accidents. The condition was present throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to be sure, but it fell under various other names such as hysteria and psychoneurosis. Shay holds that the first attempt to explain combat trauma in medical terms was also in the late 17th century. Medical student Johannes Hofer coined the word "nostalgia" (suffering pain 'algos' from a desire to return home 'nostos') to describe the homesickness of Swiss mercenaries fighting on foreign expeditions far away from home. It was understood as a form of melancholy, a

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3 Morris cites a 1656 entry in the Oxford English Dictionary that refers to "trauma" as something "belonging to wound or the cure of wounds" (62).

4 Allan Young writes that in 1866 a London surgeon named John Erichsen published a book on railway spine in which he described trauma in terms of emotional distress; in *On Railway Spine and Other Injuries of the Nervous System*, Erichsen writes that in the shock of the railway accident "the nervous force is to a certain extent shaken out of the man" (Erichsen 95 qtd. in Young 14); see also (Morris 62) and (Shepard 16). For a later example, Roger Luckhurst cites a reference in a 1895 edition of *Popular Science Monthly* that refers to "psychical trauma, a morbid nervous condition" (Luckhurst 2).

mental affliction caused by the prevention of one's desired return to home (Broncaccio). The rise of the workmen's compensation movement in Europe shed light on the complexities of traumatic neurosis in legal discourse when it came to assigning blame and determining adequate medical and financial compensation for on-the-job injuries. The towering figure in the discourse is Sigmund Freud, who wrote about trauma from external sources only scantily, first in reference to psychological trauma due to sexual abuse and second in commentary on others' work on war trauma, but in between those writings he developed his theories of infantile sexual development and repression which would become the foundations of his theory and method of psychoanalysis. Immediately following the Great War there was an outpouring of literature on trauma, then more commonly referred to as shell shock or neurasthenia, but a lull followed in the inter-war years, then another resurgence came about after World War II and the awareness of the Holocaust. The feminist movement together with the Vietnam protest movement led to significant advances in the field, culminating in the official recognition of the symptoms in the guidelines for diagnosis in such organizations as the American Psychological Association (APA) and the World Health Organization (WHO). In the last twenty years a fervent ethical debate in the humanities has erupted regarding the nature of the traumatic memory as veridical or not, and the efficacy of various methods of therapy.

In the chapter that follows, I will devote a short section to each of these periods in an attempt to give a broad sketch of the concept of trauma in the West and to outline the theoretical debate at the center of the approach I take in using the combat trauma model for textual analysis.

### **1. Railway Spine and Worker's Compensation**

Despite the references to trauma as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the contemporary concept of PTSD is most closely related to the historical discourse surrounding the phenomenon of railway spine,

which was first diagnosed in the nineteenth century. On railway spine, Roger Luckhurst writes of a “strange effect on the nerves” (21) reported by passengers who survived a railway accident, citing an 1862 report by the British Medical Association warning that “the violent jarring of the body in an accident might induce permanent but invisible damage” (21). In a landmark 1862 personal injury compensation case, a passenger was awarded £700 based on his claim that due to “a feeling of nervous depression” that befell him following a 1858 railway accident, his ability to conduct his business satisfactorily was diminished (Shepherd qtd. in Harrington 212). Railway spine makes it into literary discourse in the diary of none other than Charles Dickens himself, who writes in his diary of suffering “all manner of subjective disturbances” (Luckhurst 22) in the months following his having assisted injured passengers after a derailment in 1865: “I am not quite within, but believe it to be an effect of the railway shaking” (Dickens qtd. in Trimble, “Post-Traumatic Neurosis” 28). He began to obsess about it, writing more and more, even developing a phobia of railway travel, and at his lowest point was “curiously weak – weak as if I were recovering from a long illness” (Dickens qtd. in Trimble, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” 7).

The cases of railway spine were seminal to the modern conception of trauma not only because they shed light on the complexities in the legal discourse of assigning blame and determining compensation, but also because they combined somatic, external causes (the jarring, in this case) with psychological, internal causes (the fright, in this case) in a complex mix of factors that have yet to be sorted out. In 1882 University College Professor of Surgery John Eric Erichsen published an influential book “to direct attention to certain injuries of the spine that may arise from accidents that are often apparently slight, from shocks to the body generally, as well as from blows inflicted directly upon the back” (Erichsen 1) . Erichsen articulated explicit differences in physical and moral causes of symptoms: “the mental or moral form” of shock “may occur without the infliction of any physical

injury” (195); this shock is to be distinguished from the injuries due to physical injuries due to compression of the spine. But despite these disclaimers, litigants seized on his book as scientific verification for railway accidents causing a variety of symptoms in the clients, and extracted generous settlements (Trimble, “PTSD” 9). Railway companies employed their own expert in self-defense. The Surgeon to the London and North West Railway was one Herbert Page, and in his 1885 rebuttal to Erichsen he argued that the symptoms were essentially psychological in origin rather than physical<sup>5</sup>.

In nineteenth-century Germany, railway spine played a large part in trauma studies from external shocks, and they adopted the term “traumatic neurosis,” following the diagnosis of neurologist Hermann Oppenheim (Lerner 14). In the decades that followed, however, for the most part due to pragmatic political reasons of the state’s inability and unwillingness to payout pensions and disabilities, the cause of the disorder was claimed to be mental and internal rather than external and physical (15). The state took the position that the symptoms were exaggerated, adopting the term “compensation neurosis,” outlined in studies by I. Rigler (1879) and Adolph Strümpell (1888) that noted an upsurge in post-traumatic invalidism correlated with the 1871 Prussian establishment of a system of financial reimbursement for accidents incurred on their railway (Evans 594). Furthermore, the predominant discourse that gendered the disorder, characterizing traumatic neurosis as an irrational, female malady, allowed the state to side-step any responsibility for its causes.

In England the workmen’s compensation movement lagged Germany’s by a decade or so, but by 1906 an act was passed that guaranteed coverage across the nation, and within a few years the

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5 See Herbert Page’s *Injuries of the Spine and Spinal Cord Without Apparent Mechanical Lesion* (1885) as well as an excellent discussion of the debate in Trimble (1985). As Page puts it: “We cannot help thinking that it is this combination of the symptoms of general nervous prostration of shock [psychological symptoms, which he argued previously were common after railway accidents] and pains in the back [which were incontrovertibly due to the physical compression in the railway accident] which has laid the foundation of the views – erroneous views as we hold them to be – so largely entertained of the nature of these common injuries of the back received in railway collisions” (106).



number of reported injuries from job-related accidents rose by 44 percent (Trimble, “PTSD” 10). At the heart of all these debates was the etiology of the traumatic neurosis. Was it caused by an external event? Was the trauma physical and biological, or entirely psychical? Was the condition caused by one factor or the accumulated stress from a number of lesser factors? Were the claimants lying for financial compensation or, as we will see in the war neuroses later, malingering to shirk putting themselves in harm’s way on the battlefield? These issues haunt the debate to this day. Whatever the position one takes on the etiology, it is difficult or impossible to refute any counter-arguments: for instance, even if one holds that the traumatic memory had an external, physical cause, the past two centuries of scholarship on memory studies hold that memories are influenced by one’s pre-traumatic psychic disposition as well as by other post-traumatic factors, whether they are one’s cultural discourse, one’s desire of self-preservation, or one’s ulterior motives for avarice or medical compensation – in other words, memories are subject to distortion, even if those memories were about something verifiable. This is an unresolvable impasse, one of the many concerning trauma studies on which Ruth Leys expounds provocatively in *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000), as I will discuss later.

## **2. Hysteria and Psychoneurosis**

Hysteria is the next precursor disease of PTSD that requires a brief genealogy because the unresolvable controversy over its etiology is still mirrored in the current trauma discourse. Is hysteria, as we understand it in the West a disease of civilization, a nervous disorder of the upper classes, a syndrome of the female “wandering womb” disturbing other organs, PTSD symptoms from actual sexual abuse, symptoms from working class industrial accidents, blasts from a shell in war, a soldier’s nerves drove to distraction from prolonged exposure to combat, or all of these things at different times and different places? Is contemporary PTSD caused from psychic trauma from one event or the

combination of accumulated psychic trauma from many lesser events? A brief look at the discourse of the disorder in the West will show that familiarization with it is indispensable for understanding contemporary PTSD.

According to Dr. Thomas Palaima, the word “hysteria” derives from the Greek word “ὑστέρα,” “ὑστέρη” in Ionic Greek, referring to the ‘upper part of the belly area,’ which in women is the womb. Conditions or suffering having to do with the womb, or stemming from it, were described by the ancient Greeks as “husterikos,” a word from which the English “hysterical” derives. In nineteenth-century medical Latin the “ia” suffix was added to coin “hysteria,” although this form was not used in either ancient Greek or Latin (Palaima, citing Hoad 225). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “hysteria” refers to a “functional disturbance of the nervous system” that is “usually attended with emotional disturbances and enfeeblement or perversion of the moral and intellectual faculties” (“Hysteria” def. 1), or is a “morbidly excited condition; unhealthy emotion or excitement” (“Hysteria” def. 2). According to Andrew Scull, Hippocrates held the womb to be “the origin of all diseases” (Scull 13). Others attributed the nervous symptoms to a “wandering womb,” as if shifting or displacement of the organ were the cause, and others attributed the symptoms to sexual deprivation (Veith 21). That the word was the predominant term for the nervous symptoms from antiquity through to the nineteenth century and is still in use today suggests that we have not yet slipped free from the prejudice that pathologizes the female reproductive organs, even though hysteria has never been considered exclusively a female malady. Scull writes of a London case in 1602 in which the lawyer for a widow who was accused of witchcraft for causing a young hysterical woman to be demoniacally possessed argued in the widow’s defense that the young woman was suffering from a nervous disorder, not a supernatural one (6). Following Scottish physician George Cheyne’s publication of *The English Malady* in 1733, the nervous disorder was seen as a “disease of civilization” (Scull 48). Evidence that

Georgian England was preoccupied with the disorder can be found in its use as a subject in cultural forms such as Pope's *Rape of the Locke* (1712), and David Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739) (Scull 51-53). As for other parts of Europe, Michael Trimble cites a long list of "great men in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" in his overview of neurotic disorders, to include "Willas, Sydenham, Boerhaave, Whytt, Cheyne and Cullen" (Trimble, "PTSD" 6). In Victorian England, figures such as physician Robert Brudenell Carter (1828-1918) and gynecologist Isaac Baker Brown (1811-1873) advocated for what are by contemporary standards unduly harsh and sadistic therapeutic methods to cure females of this malady. Brudenell Carter held that "these derangements are much more common in the female than in the male, – woman not only being more prone to emotions" (26), and he advocated waging "mental warfare" of "humiliation and shame" and "threats of exposure" (Brudenell qtd. in Scull 70) against hysterical women whom he saw as concealing a real, physical ailment. Isaac Baker Brown, for his part, having postulated that excessive female masturbation was to blame for their hysterical symptoms, performed clitoridectomies: "under the influence of chloroform, the clitoris is freely excised either by scissors or knife – I always prefer the scissors" (Baker Brown 17).

The histrionic public demonstrations of female hysterical patients held in the Parisian Salpêtrière hospital under the direction of Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893), "the Napoleon of the neuroses" (Roff), as well as subsequent dissemination of photographs of the patients with the most pronounced symptoms, may have done the most to associate hysteria as a female malady in Continental public discourse; although again it must be stressed that Charcot himself insisted that hysteria could affect men as well as women – by the early 1880s approximately one-quarter of his admitted hysteric patients were male (Scull 105;125). Charcot embraced hypnosis as a therapeutic method, a practice that survived there into the earlier twentieth century under his successor Pierre Janet. Freud visited there in 1886 and endeared himself to Charcot, gaining access to his inner circle, by offering to translate

Charcot's writings into German. Charcot's most famous patient was possibly "Augustine," who was admitted in 1875 when she was 15 and remained there for five years giving hysterical performances, apparently under Charcot's hypnotic suggestion, until she escaped; later scholarship uncovered that she had been raped at knife-point by her mother's lover and sexually attacked by other men in her neighborhood when she was thirteen (Scull 120), which is a more likely explanation for the hysteria than any "wandering-womb" she might have had. Augustine's case is an early instance in the debate between external, real causes for hysteria, such as sexual assault, and internal, subjective causes, such as "wandering womb" or Freud's theory of botched negotiation of childhood sexual development, which we will see below, persist in the discourse of trauma to this very day.

### **3. Freud**

The immense influence that the writings of the founder of psychoanalysis wields in the trauma field dictates that he should have his own section here even in this brief genealogy. Twentieth century theorists of trauma such as Lyotard, Felman, Leys, Caruth, Young, Herman and Shay all owe very much to Freud's ideas, and the field of psychiatry in general even up to today owes much to his suggested therapeutic methods.

Freud explicitly focused his attention on trauma as an external agent only twice in his writings. The first period was in from 1892 to 1896 when, together with Joseph Breuer, he wrote about the causes and symptoms of hysterical neurotic attacks in women. All the cases were based on Breuer's reporting to Freud of his interviews with hysterics years earlier from 1880-1882 (Gay 60-61); Breuer had relented to Freud's incessant pestering him for the details – the result was a collaborative publication that, in the view of many scholars, brought psychoanalysis into being (Webster). The second period followed the Great War when Freud wrote briefly on combat neuroses in veterans.

During the first period, from 1892 to 1895 and through publication of *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), Freud shared with Janet and Charcot the idea that hysteria in woman stems from an external cause of trauma, that the hypnotic state in which he placed his patients was another form of it, and that what was relayed to him of the trauma in that state came from the pure source of that patient uncontaminated by the suggestion of the therapist (Borch-Jacobsen 29). However, in opposition to explanations offered by other prominent practitioners such as Hermann Oppenheim and John Erichsen (Young 36), Freud and Breuer held that traumatic hysteria has more to do with memory than it has to do with circumstances perceived during the event itself; thus his famous formulation: “hysterical symptoms are derivatives of memories which are operating unconsciously” (“The Aetiology of Hysteria” 106). Furthermore, with the publication of this article in 1896 Freud had made a distinction between neurosis generating from actual events, which he called “actual neurosis,” and neurosis generating from events in early childhood, which he called “psychoneurosis,” and would later develop into his larger theory of the Oedipal stages of childhood sexual development (“Aetiology” 96-100).

The theory that the neuroses stemmed from an actual event came to be generally referred to as his “seduction theory” (Young 38) because in many of the case studies in question the patients claimed that they were victims of sexual abuse – a claim that would have undermined much of the previous medical knowledge and opinion on hysteria, especially that which relied on the assumption that it stemmed from a malfunctioning womb in “weak” females; rather, the explanation in many cases would have been simply that the patient was suffering from what today we would call PTSD symptoms from a sexual assault. But even in these cases Freud urged caution because what the patient holds is the actual memory of the event may be a “screen” for the memory created during infantile sexual development, having nothing to do with the actual abuse. His position was that early sexual traumas could have as much to do with disturbances stemming from the deviations of sexual aims in developing infantile

stages (anal, oral etc...) as they had to do with instances of actual sexual abuse. These traumas tended to be forgotten in youth only to re-emerge later in adulthood. As Peter Gay emphasizes, insisting “that Freud never denied that child abuse was an appalling reality” (111), Freud never completely abandoned or refuted the seduction theory, but for the next two decades, in his practice and writing, he turned his attention to the psychoneurosis theory. Freud’s skepticism about the analyst’s ability to elicit the ground truth of the event from the patient, or even the patient’s ability to recall the event in the first place, shows a significant foresight into the nature of traumatic memory. We will see ramifications of this idea playing out in still today in the debate about false memory syndrome, the legal discourse of assigning criminal culpability based on testimony and determining financial compensation, and the still fervent debate about the way that traumatic memory is structured psychically and biologically (Caruth 1995; van der Kolk 1995, 1996; Leys 2000; Shay 1994, 2002). And while Freud’s abandonment of the seduction theory was the subject of much polemical writing, especially in the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties,<sup>6</sup> a close reading of his writing will reveal, as Roger Luckhurst puts it, that “Freud never simply replaced the ‘real event’ with fantasy, truth with falsity. Rather, he considered traumatic memories as particularly hemmed in by resistances to being brought into conscious recall, and were thus subject to multiple tricks of transformation and displacements, intertwining the real and fanstasmic” (47).<sup>7</sup>

6 For pointed accusations against Freud, all claiming for the most part that he ignored actual evidence of sexual abuse to pave a more convenient way for his libido theories, see Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson’s *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (1984); due to his position as project director at the Freud archives, Masson had access to publicly inaccessible documents that he claimed proved the extent of Freud’s about-face on the seduction theory and denial of evidence from his patients (Borch-Jacobsen 21). See also Patrick Mahoney’s *Freud’s Dora: A Psychoanalytic, Historical, and Textual Study* (1996), Judith Herman’s *Father-Daughter Incest* (1981), A. Scott’s *Real Events Revisited: Fantasy, Memory, Psychoanalysis* (1996), Florence Rush “The Freudian Cover-up” (1977) and Borch-Jacobsen (1996). Nor was Freud by far the first to uncover the issue of real child abuse at the heart of neurosis. Albert von Schrenk-Notzing, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Leopold Lowenfeld, and Albert Moll had all written on the issue in the 1880s (Sulloway 277-320).

7 Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen’s important paper “Neurotica: Freud and the Seduction Theory” (1996) added fuel to the fire of this debate and provided a fresh perspective by arguing that Freud’s seduction theory was based purely on the evidence obtained during sessions under hypnosis in which Freud suggested, or fabricated, the child abuse memories; his patients then complied by constructing “memories” of this abuse. Borch-Jacobsen finds evidence in previously unreleased

Yet in some cases one could argue that Freud went too far toward fantasy and away from reality, toward Oedipus and away from verifiable and external causes of neuroses. For instance, in what might be considered his most famous failure in treatment, the case of “Dora” (Ida Bauer), who desisted treatment after only three months, Freud repeatedly ignored evidence of sexual advances on her by her neighbor, Herr K, to whom she had been offered by her father as a sexual prize in return for Herr K’s compliance with the affair Dora’s father was conducting with Frau K., Herr K.’S wife. While Freud himself did not dispute the facts either of the advances, the affair, or her father’s pimping of her (“Fragment” 238), any one of which would have been a perfectly reasonable cause of her traumatic symptoms, Freud nevertheless browbeat her into contorted justifications of his own theories.<sup>8</sup> As Patrick Mahony puts it:

Dora’s case history exemplifies a remarkable amount of coercion. A male adult forced himself upon a young female who afterward was forced by her father into therapy sessions where the therapist elected to force her or “direct” (32) her associations, the pursuit of his own theories

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letters from Freud to Fleiss that Masson uncovered in his work, but Borch-Jacobsen’s trenchant reading of some of the letters reveals insights that Masson himself missed. The crown jewel here is a 1933 letter that Freud addressed to Max Eitington after the death of Ferenczi in which Freud admits explicitly “(and states nowhere else so explicitly) that these fantasies of seduction were fantasies elicited *under hypnosis*, hence liable to be cases of suggestion and/or autosuggestion” (Borch-Jacobsen 42 note 127). Borch-Jacobsen contends that the real reason Freud abandoned his seduction theory was that to hold to it (as it actually happened, under hypnotic suggestion) would have “been an admission, not only of the defeat, but of the dangers of his ‘psychoanalytic’ method” (Borch-Jacobsen 42) – a method that Freud himself admitted was “nothing but ‘suggestive psychotherapy’ à la Bernheim” (Borch-Jacobsen 41). Thus in this well-researched paper Borch-Jacobsen is effectively accusing Freud of being one of the first perpetrators of False Memory Syndrome; Freud’s basing his entire theory of psychoanalysis on childhood sexual development was his attempt to argue himself out of that corner. Thus according to Borch-Jacobsen, it isn’t that Freud didn’t listen to the stories of his patients, as Judith Herman and other feminists have suggested, but rather that *he himself implanted* the incest memories in their minds during hypnotic suggestion to bolster his theories, and then backed off when things got out of hand and his patients were accusing one-third of Vienna’s best families with child sexual abuse. I won’t take up this debate here, but I deem it necessary to present the work on traumatic memory in all of its complexity.

8 Here are just some examples of the ridiculous conclusions that Freud draws from the evidence, all of which conveniently conform to his libido theory outlined in the first edition of his “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” (1905) released that same year: that “Dora” turned to Frau K, the only adult acquaintance in whom she could place any trust, Freud saw as evidence of Dora’s repressed homosexual desire for Frau K; Dora’s dream of her father rescuing her from the burning house at which Herr K. tried to seduce her was evidence of her burning sexual desire for her father; her repulsion at Herr K.’s attempt to kiss her masked her repressed urge to be kissed. Freud would have done well to have taken his own advice here: sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

perforce interfering with his free-floating attention. Freud built gratuitous reconstructions, projecting onto the young Dora his own excitability and wishes for her excitation and corralling her desires within the orbit of his knowledge and ambitions. Failing in common sense and common decency, he dismissed much of the victim's complaint but praised the attacker. (143)

The second time he revisited the issues was in 1920 when, in the face of overwhelming empirical evidence in the cases of combat neuroses following the Great War, he found it necessary to revisit the central assumption of his earlier work, outlined in the theoretical seventh chapter of his *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), that people's dreams operated according to the pleasure principle, by which the "unconscious mental processes [...] strive towards gaining pleasure; psychical activity draws back from any event which might arouse displeasure" ("Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning" 301-302). To the contrary, new evidence from traumatized soldiers showed that dreams were not always aimed towards wish-fulfillment. "Dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 598); he notes that "the traumatic experience is constantly forcing itself upon the patient" and that "the patient is, as one might say, fixated to his trauma" (*BTPP* 598).

This is Freud's famous compulsion to repeat while dreaming – the victim's unconscious drive to return to the site of the trauma, an experience which is by all accounts distinctly unpleasurable. The other example of the compulsion to repeat occurred during consciousness as opposed to during sleep. In another conjecture that will be significant to subsequent psychodynamic therapies, Freud, having observed his grandchild playing the *fort-da* (German for "gone" and "there" respectively) game with his toys by hiding them under some object and then immediately finding them again, speculated that the child was staging the traumatic experience of his mother's departure and the joyful elation at her



return (*BTTP* 599). His analysis was that “children repeat unpleasurable experiences for the additional reason that they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could be merely experiencing it passively” (*BTTP* 611). In the case of fort/da, as opposed to the dream, Freud speculated that it was the child’s conscious, not the unconscious, that compelled the repetition; this the compulsion is an attempt to reestablish control rather than an intrusive traumatic memory, an attempt at self-therapy rather than a suffering of a traumatic symptom. Regardless, Freud’s intimation about reestablishing control and power over a situation is a significant insight, the repercussion of which we will see in later therapeutic methods for complex-PTSD.

What is significant to psychoanalysis is that, in both of Freud’s cases, the pleasure principle manifestly failed to account for the compulsion to repeat. In the case of dreams, there is ample evidence of combat veterans involuntarily reexperiencing excruciatingly painful and troubling combat flashbacks. In case of fort/da, the child seemed compelled to repeat a simulation of the trauma of his mother abandoning him, a distinctly unpleasurable experience, only to attempt to empower himself to summon her return, which of course was a pleasurable experience, but it was one arrived at through a traumatic one. In its compulsion to repeat the trauma, Freud conjectured, as the unconscious, and even perhaps the conscious, was driving the person to do something that was manifestly contrary to his or her own pleasure, there had to be another drive at work. In a highly speculative section in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud attempted to salvage his earlier model, or at least bring the two theories of neurosis (one, external trauma and two, disrupted infantile sexual development, outlined in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905)) under one unified framework. He speculated that the end-state of living beings is stasis (death) rather than motion and change (life), and that the drive at work in the cases of the compulsion to repeat is a “death drive,” a drive back to the inert stasis before living. He borrows from Schopenhauer for one of his most famous quotes, that death is the “true result

and to that extent the purpose of life” (Schopenhauer, 1851; qtd. in Freud *BTPP* 618). Having posited the death drive, Freud then sets it in opposition to the sexual instinct, establishing here the struggle between the Thanatos and Eros drives, which are far beyond the scope of this analysis.

What is pertinent in terms of trauma studies, however, is that Freud’s entire theoretical framework, Oedipus, so influential to the humanities in the twentieth century, was called to question by the cases of trauma from external sources, or actual events if you will, as opposed to botched stages of infantile sexual development, and the subsequent traumatic neurosis that came about; that it shook the very foundations of his theory of psychoanalysis is shown by the strained and speculative arguments he makes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and other forums like the “Introduction to Ferenczi, et al.” (1921) to salvage his unified model of the unconscious. This is not to undermine Freud’s penetrating insight into the complex nature of memory formation, which he in his writings has always been careful enough to hypothesize as some mix of objective reality and subjective perception. But it does have interesting implications for the humanities in general and literary criticism in particular, which has invested so much intellectual energy in engaging the Oedipal model. That model might be enhanced or even replaced by the posttraumatic model, given the role that real traumatic events played in the cases that Freud looked at during the formative years of his Oedipal model.

#### **4. The Two World Wars**

War neurosis preceded the Great War by many years in the United States, as, for example, Philadelphia doctor Silas Weir Mitchell attests in his *Gunshot Wounds and Other Injuries of Nerves* (1864), written following the US Civil War. Despite that the origins of his investigations into hysteria were the war neurosis,<sup>9</sup> in his long practice Mitchell went on to treat many members of the social elite,

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<sup>9</sup> For an excellent account of US Civil War veterans suffering from combat stress, especially in terms of how the institution of the insane asylum took shape at that same time, see Eric Dean’s *Shook Over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress*,

to include writers Henry James and Edith Wharton. Hysteria dominated the discourse of neurosis of the latter half of the nineteenth century until the Great War. Then, when German soldiers started “breaking down in epidemic numbers, showing functional disorders of sight, hearing, speech and gait as well as insomnia, tremors, and uncontrollable emotionality” (Lerner 16) in the trenches of World War I, Hermann Oppenheim saw a confirmation of his trauma theories of the 1880s on external causes of the neurosis. But the establishment disavowed his diagnosis again, Paul Lerner claims, because it would have made the state liable for the disability claims of all the soldiers who fought (16-17).

The term “shell shock” was coined by in February 1915 by Charles S. Myers, who later that year became chief army specialist and later Consultant Psychiatrist to the Army, in the article “A Contribution to the Study of Shell Shock,” published in the respected medical journal *The Lancet* (Luckhurst 50). The metaphor yielded itself to F.W. Mott’s interpretation in his *War Neurosis and Shell Shock* (1919), in which he held that the condition was brought about by physical damage done to the brain from the pressure change from an ordnance blast or carbon monoxide poisoning (62; 229). Much later, in a study that he was prompted to write at the onset of World War II to advise against committing the same errors in diagnosis and treatment that he felt had been made in the previous war, Myers differentiated the two causes, naming the first, which referred to the physical trauma caused by a blast, “shell concussion” and the second, which referred to the psychic trauma caused by emotional stress, fright and other disturbances that were not necessary related to explosions, “shell shock” (*Shell Shock in France, 1914-1918* 24-30).

Neurophysiologist, psychologist and anthropologist W.H.R. Rivers is mentionable not only

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*Vietnam, and the Civil War* (1997); Dean cites multiple first-hand accounts of soldiers’ reaction to wartime trauma which all bear the same symptoms as the shell shock or neurasthenia of World War I or the PTSD of Vietnam. Combat trauma from the Civil War has received scant attention when compared to the literature following the later wars, which may be due to the Civil War’s having occurred before the most radical advances were made in the field of psychiatry and invention of psychoanalysis. See also Trimble (1985).

because his treatment of Siegfried Sassoon, the most famous World War I protester, resulted in Sassoon's return to combat duty, but also Rivers pragmatically combined many existing therapeutic methods and schools of thought,<sup>10</sup> as might have been predicted from his eclectic scientific pedigree. For instance, he was a proponent of the talking cure of the Freud, Breuer and Janet school while not completely subscribing to Freud's libidinal theory for application in the war neuroses cases<sup>11</sup>, nor did he completely approve of the hypnosis methods that Janet still held to. He did, however, hold that there was "not a day of clinical experience in which Freud's theory may not be of direct practical use in diagnosis and treatment," for Freud had developed a "theory of the mechanism by which...experience not directly accessible to consciousness, produces its effect" (qtd. in Shephard 87). His support of the humane talking cure put him in the minority of practitioners and against the predominant practices of the army, the most prominent proponent of which was Lewis Yealland, who in his 1918 *Hysterical Disorders of Warfare* recommended a therapy based on threats, shaming, punishment and electric shock (Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* 21). Herman holds that one of Rivers' most influential contributions to the field, a principle "that would be embraced by American military psychiatrists in the next war" (*Trauma* 22) was that he demonstrated that men of "unquestioned bravery," such as Sassoon who had been twice decorated for conspicuous gallantry,<sup>12</sup> could also succumb to war neurosis; it was not just a

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10 For an excellent historical fiction in which Rivers appears as a character, see Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (1993-1995), which was short-listed for the Booker Prize. Real-life characters Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and W.H.R. Rivers, based closely on biographical information, appear amidst entirely fictional characters. The trilogy superimposes modern trauma theory in a historical-fictional account of some of the most famous literary figures in World War I. There is a particularly skin-crawling rendering of Rivers' visit to Dr. L. R. Yealland at the National Hospital in London (220-228); Yealland's harsh methods were exaggerated to the point of sadism probably for novelistic effect; but, nevertheless, the version is based on the therapeutic practices that Yealland outlined in his published works. Another account of Rivers is in Siegfried Sassoon's well-known *Sherston's Progress* (1936), "memoir" of fictional character George Sherston, who is a thinly disguised double for Sassoon himself.

11 In his adopting this method Rivers followed the work of English Freudian David Eder, who Ben Shephard claims was the "first person to adapt to warfare the Freudian idea that neurosis is produced by mental conflict" (86). Eder held that the mental conflict, however, was not due to sexual repression, but rather from the tension between "a sense of duty and an unconscious wish to survive" (86). Luckhurst sees Rivers as "one of the earliest, if very cautious, English readers of Freud" (53).

12 Graves in *Good-bye to All That* (1998 [1929]) wrote that Sassoon's nickname in his unit was "Mad Jack," for the near-suicidal feats of bravery that he routinely committed. He had been awarded the Military Cross for retrieving a wounded

disorder for the malingerer and the weak or feminine-minded.<sup>13</sup> David Morris holds that Rivers' most important contributions were some of the conclusions in his study of war neurosis for the War Office, "fifty years ahead of their time," in which he reported finding that the intensity of war neurosis symptoms related directly with the degree of control the soldier perceived in having over his surroundings: "the more helpless the patient felt, the more likely he was to be traumatized, a finding that remains essentially unchanged to this day" (Morris 97).<sup>14</sup> The aggravation of trauma due to the loss of control figures as well in the cases of trauma in the novels I analyze. The protagonists' inability to control their surroundings and level of exposure to life-threatening danger, even though theirs was not a question of being confined spatially, nevertheless exacerbated their posttraumatic symptoms.

The work of Rivers and the subsequent writings of Myers had far-reaching consequences for the field, the most important of which for my purposes was that the discourse began to differentiate a short-term reaction from a long-term reaction in language that precipitates the simple-PTSD and complex-PTSD categories that Herman will adopt seventy years later and that I will detail in the next chapter. Short-term reactions to a significantly traumatic situation (simple-PTSD) began to be covered under the rubric of hysteria; the term still carried the gendered overtones from its use in the nineteenth century for women (Bourke 59) as well as a sense of moral weakness in working-class or conscripted soldiers (Bourke 65-66). The more complex kind of neuroses was referred to as neurasthenia, which was "the

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soldier from near enemy lines under heavy-fire. On another occasion Sassoon had single-handedly, in broad-daylight and under heavy fire, taken a trench occupied by over sixty German soldiers by scaring them off – a feat that the entire Royal Irish regiment had failed accomplish the day before. Then, instead of signaling for reinforcements, an act that would have ensured tactical victory as well as an award for Sassoon, he sat down for the next two hours alone and read a book of poems that had had brought with him (Graves 210; Egremont 103).

13 The case might be made that Sassoon be considered a malingerer because he was sent to a mental hospital to avoid a court martial, a solution brokered by his superior and friend Robert Graves. But the retort is that Sassoon was conspicuously gallant even in his malingering. He issued his refusal to continue fighting in an open letter published in the *Bradford Pioneer*, a periodical with wide circulation, on 27 July, 1917; the letter was subsequently read before the House of Commons. Well aware that he might be given the death-sentence for failure to obey orders, Sassoon's opening line was the broadside: "I am making this statement as an act of willful defiance of military authority, because I believe that war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it" ("Finished with the War").

14 See also (Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* 182).

result of prolonged exposure to the perpetual anxiety of the front, causing nervous ‘wear and tear’” (Luckhurst 54, quoting Bourke); this was the precursor to complex-PTSD: the causes were complex, more of a summation of smaller frights or radical moral disillusionment than a reaction to one “shock,” and the symptoms were longer-lasting and more acute.

The most complete and exhaustive study of war trauma following the Great War came in 1941 with Abram Kardiner’s study, *The Traumatic Neuroses of War*, which was the source document for the structure for the working groups and that produced the PTSD emendation in the 1980 publication of the American Psychological Association’s third edition of their Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, *DSM-III*, and widely considered a landmark text in the field (Young 89; Leys 193). Giving due credit to the work of “W.H.R. Rivers, William McDougall” as well as “Ferenczi, Abraham, Simmel and Jones,”<sup>15</sup> Kardiner writes that his own book “seeks merely to explore a highly specific syndrome which can be called the *traumatic neurosis*. Its purpose is to establish the symptomatology, criteria for differential diagnosis, and to establish a rationale for therapy” (3). Ruth Leys praises the book as “the first systematic account of the symptoms and psychodynamics of the war neuroses” (193).

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15 Simmel is Ernst Simmel, the German neurologist and psychoanalyst, credited as one of the discoverers of war neurosis. Heavily influenced by Freud’s model of infantile sexual development and a practitioner of the cathartic method (Freud, “Introduction” 2) Simmel was one of the contributors to the extremely influential *Psychoanalysis and the War Neurosis* (1921) by Ferenczi, Abraham, Simmel and Jones, with an Introduction by Freud, that came out of the working group established in 1918 at the Fifth Annual Psychoanalytical Congress in Budapest. Simmel’s work to which Kardiner refers in his bibliography is *Kriegsneurosen u. Psychische Traumata* (1918). William McDougall was an English psychologist most famous for *Body and Mind* (1911) in which he argued for a mind-guided theory of evolution. Kardiner cites his 1926 book *Outline of Abnormal Psychology*. Abraham refers to Karl Abraham, a former pupil and collaborator of Freud’s. Ferenczi is Sándor Ferenczi, another key figure on the psychoanalytic school, “arguably his most gifted and attractive disciple” (Leys 120), who later broke with Freud because Ferenczi gave greater credence to the seduction theory, which held that a real incident of sexual abuse was at the heart of the patient’s neurosis. Freud also had reservations in regard to Ferenczi’s adherence to the method of cathartic abreaction, which undermined the truth claims of the patient because it was in some respect performative. Kardiner relied much more theoretically on Ferenczi than on Freud, rejecting the libido theory for one that explained neuroses “as the manifestations of a more primordial mode of reaction by which the injured ego tried to cope with the dangerous world” (Leys 145). Ferenczi’s reactionary *Clinical Diary*, a text in which he called to question the efficacy of many of the methods of psychoanalysis, was blocked from publishing by the psychoanalytic establishment until 1985 in German and 1988 in English, following the 1984 revisionary work of Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Leys 122). Kardiner here refers to Ferenczi’s publications in the nineteen-twenties. W.H.R. Rivers, McDougall’s professor, is the English psychiatrist and neurologist, who treated many shell-shocked patients at the Craiglockhart War Hospital in Scotland, to include Sigfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.

In it Kardiner makes a connection between the neurosis of produced in war and that which is produced in peacetime from other means, such as natural disasters, and in line with Myers and Mott admitted that wartime “concussion syndrome with or without somatic damage” (Kardiner 3) might not be covered under the rubric of traumatic neurosis. However, he did hold that peacetime traumatic neuroses are “the same in structure as those precipitated in war” (v). Furthermore, he urged further study of the issue because it became evident that the pool of victims had likely expanded: “The problem is much more urgent because, owing to the widespread aerial bombardment of urban centers, the traumatic neurosis is now no longer likely to be confined to combatants” (v).

This comment foreshadows what had always been part of war trauma but had rarely been forcefully articulated, and what I will focus on in my theoretical discussion of the trauma discourse as well as my analysis of Colombian novels, which is that the causes of the disorder were more complex and varied – often they could not be traced back to one etiological physical (like a bomb blast) or psychic (like a fright from one bomb blast) event. Rather, as Kardiner argues, “many factors may contribute to the formation of the traumatic syndrome, organic lesions, self-preservative interests, and conflicting ideals” (4). The empirical evidence stemming from “large numbers of neuroses” that “were found with no evidence of concussion but still with symptoms in many ways like those in which the evidence for organic injury was unquestionable” (4) called to question the paradigm that called for one etiological event. And, more significantly, his observation that trauma not be limited to only combatants but to anyone subject to a prolonged period of exposure to violence or the threat of violence, such as urban dwellers in a city under bombing siege, is particularly pertinent to the character’s plights in the Colombian novels I will analyze. Not only that, but Kardiner “completely repudiated the value of Freud’s libido or instinct theory in favor of a functional-operational emphasis

on the traumatized organism's failure of adaptation to the external world” (Leys 193)<sup>16</sup>.

Finally, Kardiner’s trenchant insight that this trauma field needed rigorous standardization without delay because of the “many and complicated forensic problems which it brings in its wake. The chief of these is the problem of compensation and the management of the veteran with such a neurosis” (v). This is reference to the legal discourse surrounding trauma: how to assign blame, to what extent traumatic neurosis can be used as an exculpatory defense for crimes, and to what extent traumatic neurosis can be used to extract financial compensation from the state. Leys claims that the US Army and the Pension Committee wanted to avoid the chronicity because of financial liability, but Kardiner’s study “explicitly dealt with chronic cases” reaching back to World War I (Leys 193). These issues haunt the discourse to this day. Along these lines, Alan Young in *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (1995) goes so far as to suggest that PTSD symptoms are *invented*. A crudely simplified scenario of what he suggests would work like this: veterans learn what to say and how to say it to the US Veteran’s Affairs Administration psychiatrists in order to extract the full amount of disability pay and benefits they feel that is their due; practitioners play along with the game because it keeps the government grant money flowing their way to conduct future studies.

While Young’s is an extreme view, the extent to which such compensatory motives might color a patient’s language, memory and articulation of his or her symptoms must be carefully taken into account. Kardiner clearly recognizes this complexity.

While on the one hand the question of whether or not traumatic memories are true is of the utmost importance in terms of assigning blame and determining adequate compensation, on the other hand, many would argue, paradoxically, that it diminishes in importance when psychological therapy is the objective. Thus the two discourses, legal and therapeutic, might be seen to be at loggerheads on

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16 Here Leys refers to Kardiner’s statements in his 1977 book *My Analysis with Freud: Reminiscences* (111), not his 1941 *Traumatic Neuroses*



this issue. The work of British psychiatrist William Sargant shows him to be someone with a foot firmly in both camps. Assigned to the medical duty at the Belmont Hospital outside London in 1940, he noted that the traumatic neuroses of soldiers from the retreat of Dunkirk shared the same clinical features as the cases of railway spine and shell shock from World War I decades before. Leys speculates that Sargant had a mind to undermine the British Ministry of Pensions' Committee's position that "war neuroses only appeared in persons constitutionally disposed to them" (190) in his first paper on the subject when he reported, just as Rivers had before him in the previous conflict, that "men of reasonably sound personality may break down if the strain is severe enough" (Sargant 1). In addition, Sargant's experimental administration of sodium amytal, a barbiturate derivative colloquially known as one of drugs that can be used as "truth serum," to a hysterical soldier was the advent of pharmacology in military psychology (Shephard 205). Shephard writes that Sargant noticed that as a side-effect of the drug, soldiers would suddenly regain "suppressed memories of the horrible experiences that had 'caused or hastened [their] breakdown' and would start to relive them before the doctors. After venting their pent-up terror or hostility to their officers, they seemed suddenly to improve" (Shephard 208 quoting Sargant). While pharmaceutical therapy in psychiatry is beyond the scope of this overview, Sargant deserves mentioning here both because of the interesting complexities his work raises regarding the verifiability of the traumatic memory, and his later privileging of therapeutic catharsis, a "frightening emotional release" (Sargant 88), over verifiable truth. By the end of the war he adopted ether instead of sodium amytal because he felt it was more effective in provoking emotion (the essential factor for cathartic abreaction to be successful). As Shephard puts his finger on the controversy, "in the end Sargant decided that the memory recalled didn't need to have been *correct* so long as there was emotion associated with it" (226).

Such a position would bring about considerable repercussions in the field because, as Leys

writes, “a presumption in favor of the idea that traumatic repetitions were veridical representations of the origin had guided the practice of abreaction from the start” (203). She explains how Kardiner gave more support to that assumption in *The Traumatic Neuroses of War* (1941). He characterized the traumatic flashbacks as “virtually exact or cinematic replays of the past” (Kardiner 88-89). More importantly, Leys argues that subsequent trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth and Bessel van der Kolk have seized on these elements in Kardiner to legitimize their position that “trauma involves the literal registration of the traumatic event in a special traumatic memory system that can never be brought into recollection and self-representation” (Leys 204). The position is that victims can suffer traumatic flashbacks that are imposed on their consciousness by the unconscious, but they can never consciously recall the traumatic event at will – it is stuck in their mind somewhere beyond representation; yet it is still a veridical, play-by-play of what happened, like a video recording. With regard to the value of the accuracy of the traumatic memory, the views of Caruth and van der Kolk are radically different from those of Sargant. I will show some of the implications of how the polemic plays out in the next section.

## **5. Contemporary Trauma Debate**

Here I jump to the era of increased interest in trauma studies in the humanities due both to the enormous influence of the work of Cathy Caruth, which synthesized varied approaches to trauma in the social sciences, as well as the intense controversy surrounding her statements regarding both the truthfulness and asymbolic recording of traumatic memories. Using Caruth as a central figure will allow me to cover in broad strokes a vast body of work on trauma on the Holocaust, the feminist movement focus on childhood sexual abuse,<sup>17</sup> and much of the Vietnam War literature on trauma.

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<sup>17</sup> For more on this connection see Ian Hacking “The Making and Molding of Child Abuse” (1991), Barbara Nelson *Making an Issue of Child Abuse: Political Agenda Setting for Social Problems* (1984), and Judith Herman *Father-Daughter Incest* (1981).

In my individual chapters I touch on some theorists of trauma from the Holocaust such as Marianne Hirsch, whose idea of postmemory I use to help analyze Juan Gabriel Vásquez' *The Sound of Things Falling*, but I don't do justice to the influential figures of Holocaust writing such as Dominick LaCapra, Primo Levi, Shoshana Felman, the Vietnam veteran "rap groups" of New York psychiatrists Chaim Shatan and Robert J. Lifton, and many, many others who focus on the specific trauma associated with the wars of the 20th century. Similarly, the feminist movement's contribution to contemporary trauma studies is immeasurable, and I note some small part of it in my discussion of Judith Herman's writings, especially in her concept of complex-PTSD. And Shay's model is just a small part of the Vietnam literature, although much of the debate shows through in the current structuring of the *DSM* – as I mentioned above, figures like Robert Jay Lifton and Chaim Shatan had worked with various veteran's groups had on the revision of the *DSM-III* released in 1980. In any case, the field is too vast and too complex to be adequately covered in any one overview, and I have to choose my areas of focus. Caruth is a useful nodal figure to center the discussion of the whole controversy. In addition, Shay's and Herman's theories rely heavily on the same neurobiological work on which Caruth bases her theories, and penetrating critiques of their theoretical methodologies and clinical practices, in particular the critiques of Ruth Leys, need to be addressed.

In the introduction to a 1991 special issue of "Psychoanalysis, Culture and Trauma" in the journal *American Imago*, much of which was reprinted in her first book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Caruth makes the strong claim that the intrusive memories that a PTSD victim suffers, commonly referred to as flashbacks, are a sort of "*possession by the past*," and that this possession "extends beyond the bounds of a marginal pathology and has become a central characteristic of the survivor experience of our time" (Caruth, *Trauma* 151). What is particularly problematic about the nature of these memories is that, due to her theory on the unique nature of traumatic memory's being

seared or imprinted in the psyche beyond conscious memory's access, these "insistent reenactments of the past do not simply serve as testimony to an event, but may also, paradoxically enough, bear witness to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred" (151). Her theory on the special nature of traumatic memories owes much to the work of psychiatrist and neuroscientist Bessel van der Kolk and many others<sup>18</sup> who hold that "while the images of traumatic reenactment remain absolutely accurate and precise, they are largely inaccessible to conscious recall and control" (Caruth, *Trauma* 151). But this "lack of integration into consciousness" (152) is not as revolutionary a claim as the corollary that the trauma "was never fully experienced as it occurred" (151), or as she puts it again later, the traumatic event "*escapes* full consciousness as it occurs" (153). For this claim she relies on the work of "modern neurobiologists" (by whom she means Van der Kolk et al.) who have "suggested that the unerring 'engraving' on the mind, the 'etching into the brain' of an event in trauma may be associated with its elision of its normal encoding in memory" (153). This logic allows her to make the astounding claims that have generated so much controversy: first, that "the flashback or traumatic reenactment conveys, that is, both *the truth of an event*, and *the truth of its incomprehensibility*" (153); second, "for a history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (8). In more simple and straightforward language, it might be said of Caruth's position that the frustrating thing for sufferers of PTSD is that they are haunted by an "instant replay" of the traumatic experience in their mind, a veritable testimony to the crime, but they have no

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18 Here I am lumping the work of a large body of collaborators. For some examples of his and his associated vast body of work that bear on combat trauma, see Bessel Van der Kolk, Robert Blitz, Winthrop Burr, Sally Sherry and Ernest Hartmann (1984), Van der Kolk and Van der Hart (1995[1991]), and Van der Kolk, McFarlane, and Weisaeth (1996), and most recently Van der Kolk (2014). Van der Kolk and his associates have been at the center of trauma studies since the nineteen-eighties. He has been past president of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, Professor of Psychiatry at Boston University Medical School, and is currently founder and medical director at the Trauma Center at the Justice Resource Institute in Brookline, Massachusetts.

conscious recollection of the event while it was happening, nor can they later access the memory when they want to. They have a video recording in their head but no memory of how it was made, even though they were the stars in the show.

If one keeps in mind the opposing priorities of the legal discourse on trauma versus the therapeutic discourse on trauma that I have touched on in earlier sections, the revolutionary disruptive implications of these claims can be seen at once. If it is true that a traumatic memory is an absolutely accurate, precise, and pure record of the event, then its value as legal testimony would be enormous: it would be like having the crime captured on video. However, the flip side of Van der Kolk's theory is that an important first step in trauma therapy is to reintegrate the traumatic memory back into conscious memory. The problem here for those who value the memory for legal testimony, though, is that "the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others' knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall" (153). In other words, this is a PTSD "Catch-22": if you can tell me it happened, then that means that your memory of it happening has been corrupted; so how can I believe that it really happened like you said it did? If you want to use the memory as testimony in a trial to assign guilt or blame, you have to leave the victim untreated and hope that he has a flashback, which will be a veridical account of the traumatic event – not a conscious, narrative, diegetic memory but rather a flashback of a repressed, eidetic memory that was seared into the unconscious during the traumatic event. This state of affairs might work out well for the lawyers, judges, historians and scholars, but it leaves the poor victim continually re-traumatized, which is unconscionable. But, then again, if you want to cure the victim, you run the risk of tampering with the purity of the memory, and render it inadmissible as evidence in a trial – you have to choose: testimony or therapy. Caruth's position here thus puts the legal and therapeutic discourses back at loggerheads.

Caruth's theoretical model had important implications for literary theory and scholarship as well, for traumatic memory brings about another paradox, this time temporal and spatial. Since the "event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in other time," (8) for Caruth, traumatic memory is at the center of a crisis of representation and access: "It is the fundamental dislocation implied by all traumatic experience that is both its testimony to the event and to the impossibility of its direct access" (9). If the only way to access the traumatic memory is through the discourses of psychoanalysis and literature, then those discourses are particularly useful and privileged. As Caruth offers as the reason Freud so often turns to literature "to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing" (*Unclaimed Experience* 3).

But before I go further into the repercussions of Caruth's body of work, I will first situate her in the literary and philosophical discourse that made possible her argument. Roger Luckhurst sees her work as deriving from "three distinct lines of thought" (5): one, Theodor Adorno's and Jean-Francois Lyotard's writing on the aporia of representing the unrepresentable in the wake of the Holocaust, two, the Yale school deconstructive theories, and third, psychoanalysis (5-11). As regards Adorno, Luckhurst elucidates his "famous and much misquoted statement, that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'" (qtd. in Luckhurst 5). As a German-Jewish philosopher whose work began in the Marxist vein, Adorno felt not only the weight of the Holocaust but of "remorselessly expropriative capitalism" (5) as well, and found himself throughout his career coming back to this declaration which had spun out of his control: "For Adorno, all Western culture is at once contaminated by and complicit with Auschwitz, yet the denial of culture is equally barbaric" (5). The paradox is that post-Holocaust subjects in Western culture are ethically forced into a crisis of representation: of saying the unsayable. Lyotard followed in this wake by developing a post-traumatic theory of aesthetics, seeing the avant-

garde movement as best exemplifying the paradox: “What art can do is bear witness not to the sublime, but to this aporia of art and to its pain. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it” (Lyotard qtd. in Luckhurst 6).

The second influence Luckhurst discusses is that of the Yale school of deconstructive critics, namely Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman and Shoshana Felman. Derrida and de Man are particularly germane to my project because I turn to some of their writings to help my analysis of Colombian novels in later chapters, although I chart a markedly different course than Caruth. In terms of influences on her, though, Derrida took what many refer to as the “ethical turn” (Voloshin 1998; Sokoloff 2005; Critchley 2000), which was at the center of a revival of ethics’ relevance in the humanities at that time.<sup>19</sup> Derrida’s writing was always concerned with ethics, the influence of the ethical philosopher Emanuel Levinas was heavy from the beginning, for instance, but in the last two decades of Derrida’s life the focus shifted decidedly in that direction. As he elaborated in eponymous *Aporias* (1993), always at the center of his arguments is this concept of a contradiction or unresolvable paradox. When Derrida’s object of analysis was the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure or the structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, for example, Derrida used the aporia to demonstrate the untenability of certain core assumptions in the logic, thereby “deconstructing” the theory.<sup>20</sup> But when Derrida’s object of analysis shifted to politics and ethics, aporia was still at the center – the

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19 Derrida’s late work such as *Aporias* (1993) and *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1987[1980]) in which he again took up his earlier writings on the unresolvability and contradiction in Freud’s models first taken up in 1967 in *Writing and Difference*, and *The Work of Mourning* (2001), and *Memoirs for Paul de Man* (1989), in which he wrote of the complexities of mourning in his late friend Paul de Man’s work, all show that Derrida’s focus on the aporia was central to his “commitment to responsible thought, ethics and politics: the trauma was that most Western thought suppressed this passage of undecidability, that all metaphysics enacted a kind of violence” (Luckhurst 6). Sokoloff (2005) is just one example of how Derrida’s philosophy has spilled over into legal and political discourse.

20 My explanation here is of course a gross oversimplification of Derrida’s project and deconstruction in general. At the very least it should be added that Derrida’s project always had in mind a critique of the privileging of presence over absence in Western metaphysics since Plato, and therefore speech over writing, or one political regime over another, or one system of thought over another; for example, the aporia was used in his dismantling of Saussurian linguistics to put writing on equal footing with speech.

ability to conceptualize undecidability in language and thought for him became a standard by which responsible thought ought to be judged. To gloss over the complexity led to gross philosophical and political mistakes, or what he characterized as a kind of metaphysical violence (See “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas” in *Writing and Difference* (2001)[1967]).

Paul de Man, Derrida’s colleague at Yale, used the method in a very technical way, “more pedagogical than philosophical” (de Man, “Rosso Interview” 790) to analyze tropes in, most famously, his book *Allegories of Reading* (1979) that contained deconstructive readings of Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust. Building on Russian formalist Roman Jakobson’s conception of the dual axis of linguistic modes, grammar and rhetoric, de Man shows that an irresolvable tension between the two modes always prevents the resolution of one particular interpretation – a state of indeterminacy that for de Man was the criteria for good literature. More importantly, his own attempt to articulate the differences between his approach and Derrida’s helps illuminate the tenet that the text contains within in it the elements of its own deconstruction: “In a complicated way, I would hold to that statement that ‘the text deconstructs itself, is self-deconstructive’ rather than being deconstructed by a philosophical intervention from the outside of the text” (“Rosso Interview” 791).

Extending this work combining deconstruction with trauma theory, Hartman turned to Holocaust writing in the nineties, co-founding the Fortunoff Holocaust Video Archives at Yale. Luckhurst claims that by 1995 “Hartman had effectively translated his long critical career into variations on the study of trauma” (6). Before making his own ethical turn, Hartman published many deconstructive readings of Romantic literature and commentaries on Derrida’s work. In 1992 Shoshana Felman (at Yale as well from 1970 to 2003) and psychoanalyst Dori Laub published *Testimony* in which they claim that the Holocaust is “here interpreted for the first time as a radical historical *crisis of witnessing*, and as the unprecedented, inconceivable, historical occurrence of ‘an event without a



witness' – an event eliminating its own witness" (xvii), although one could argue that Lyotard had made a similar claim years before in "The Différend, the Referent, and the Proper Name" (1984). The argument in both cases varies on the theme that testimony of any Holocaust survivor is undermined by the fact that, if she had really been present at the Holocaust, she should not be around to tell about it now; her mere existence as a *survivor* indicates that her story must be either false or fragmentary – she couldn't have witnessed the real thing and still have survived. The paradox, again, is that the story of the trauma is somehow inaccessible; not in this case because of the nature of traumatic memory, as it is in Caruth, but because of the strangeness of the situation; in any case what is at issue is once again a crisis of representation: as Lyotard says, "You are informed that human beings endowed with language were placed in a situation such that none of them are now able to tell about it" ("The Différend" 4).

All of this bears on Caruth because she can be considered a product of this deconstructive school. She earned her PhD from Yale in 1988 and taught in the English department there from 1986 to 1994. As Luckhurst notes regarding de Man's influence on Caruth, "there is a whole chapter on theories of referentiality and language in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996)" (Luckhurst 6). Caruth takes the aporias that run through the Yale school critics' writing and superimposes them on traumatic memory, broadening the discussion to ethics by turning them into questions of truth and history – a turn that all or most of the critics seemed to be making in their later writing, but none so explicit and synthesizing as Caruth in her two books. She holds that traumatic memory contains within it this paradox, it deconstructs itself, because, to quote once again her oft-quoted claim, "the flashback or traumatic reenactment conveys, that is, both the truth of an event, and the truth of its incomprehensibility" (*Trauma* 153).

Finally, there is the towering influence of Freud on her work. Luckhurst points out that an entire chapter of *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) is based on Paul de Man, but he fails to mention that

three of the five chapters are devoted to Freud, and half of her one-chapter contribution to her edited volume, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) is a discussion of Freud's influence on her interviewee, Robert Jay Lifton. In *Unclaimed Experience* it was her choice of Freud's later texts, though, that makes her work particularly influential across the disciplines in the humanities. She looked at Freud's late writings, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* contained a section that revisited traumatic memory, as I mentioned before, and Caruth, always holding to her theory of traumatic memory as a literal engraving of the event on the psyche, elaborated on his idea of the intrusive memory as "a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality that is not otherwise available" (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). This approach could thus be easily applied to questions of history and truth, to realms that lie beyond the individual subject. She takes this further in her discussion of Freud's intimations of cultural trauma in her chapter on *Moses and Monotheism*, in which, in an attempt to understand the Nazi persecution of the Jews, Freud posited, in the fantastically speculative fashion of revisionist history that was much more palatable in the nineteenth century literary tradition that molded Freud than it is today, that the Jewish race as a whole is suffering from the traumatic memory of having murdered Moses: "for after the Egyptian Moses led the Hebrews from Egypt, Freud claims, they murdered him in a rebellion; repressed the deed, and in the passing of two generations assimilated his god to a volcano god named Yahweh" (Caruth, *UE* 14). Then the Jews went through a period of latency during which memory of the crime was repressed, but after that the "forgotten Mosaic god" (Freud, *Moses* qtd. in Caruth, *UE* 14) returned to the consciousness of the Jews, and "it was only the idea of this other god that enabled the people of Israel to surmount all the their hardships and to survive until our time" (Freud, *Moses* qtd. in Caruth, *UE* 14).

*Moses and Monotheism* is an astute choice of texts for the Caruth's trauma theory and the way

she wants to use it as cultural criticism. Freud in this text is rethinking the foundations of monotheism in terms of his earlier models of traumatic memory in the individual. As Roger Luckhurst perceives, in *Moses* Freud writes “one of his clearest summations of the aetiology of traumatic neurosis” (10). Freud holds that the intrusive flashbacks (compulsions) derive from a traumatic memory trace and are characterized by “great psychical intensity and at the same time exhibit a far-reaching independence of the organization of the other mental processes” (Freud, *Moses* qtd. in Luckhurst 10), acting like a “State within a State” (Freud, *Moses* qtd. in Luckhurst 10). The analogy here takes the individual model of traumatic memory and applies it to the level of culture and politics, with the Jews as the “unassimilated foreign bodies in European nations” (Luckhurst 10), the memory trace of the trauma lying below the level of consciousness, repressed, but compelled to return.

The explosion of trauma studies in the nineteen-nineties owes a debt to Freud’s speculative writings in *Moses*, in which he applied his individual theory to a collective body. Maurice Halbwach’s work on collective memory is a major influence as well, but the synthesis of psychoanalysis, literature, and cultural studies that Caruth ushered in with her work influenced many subsequent theorists of cultural trauma, such as Jeffrey Alexander, Andreas Huyssen, Jay Winter and Marianne Hirsch, Ron Eyerman, Neil Smelser, and Ian Hacking, to name only a few.

But the humanities were not the only discipline into which Caruth’s ideas spilled. Ruth Leys devotes an entire chapter of her book *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000) taking aim at the “fact that modern neurobiology and certain versions of poststructuralism share virtually the same account of psychic trauma” (229). She notes how psychiatrists Bessel van der Kolk, Alexander McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth, in their book *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body and Society* (1996), quote one of Caruth’s comments, taken from her Introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), to defend their ideas, although Leys dismisses this collaboration as nothing more

than the psychiatrists returning the favor for Caruth's having relied on their science to bolster her own theories (Leys 230-231). If this accusation can be seen as Leys' shot across the bow of the Caruth/van der Kolk ship, then the two chapters that follow are Leys' total-war bombardment of the vessel. What is at issue is Caruth's strong claim, on which all of her subsequent arguments were built and for which she relies on the neurobiology of van der Kolk et al., of the special nature of the traumatic memory as a pristine and untouchable recording of the traumatic event. Leys makes short shrift of this. Just as Jacques Derrida blew enough holes in the ship of structuralism at Johns Hopkins University in his 1966 delivery of "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" to leave it irreparably damaged but far from sunk, so does Leys' incisive writing shoot holes all through Caruth and van der Kolk's trauma theory.

Leys starts by undermining the scholarship and methodology of Bessel van der Kolk and his associates. Based on a careful reading of a selection of van der Kolk's publications on the subject as well as many of his critics such as Allan Young and Fred Frankel, Leys eviscerates his claims that traumatic memory is a literal recording of the event: "evidence for such claims is flimsy and the claim itself badly formulated" (274). She accuses him of shoddy scientific methods such as failing to establish controls for his experiments (260) and structuring them in a way that will yield the desired outcome (261). His claims are based on weak scientific evidence (255), his arguments undermine themselves when "the predicted outcome failed to occur" (257). She attacks his theory as muddled; for instance, Pierre Janet, a figure on whom Caruth and van der Kolk rely heavily, "did not regard traumatic memory as wordless" (262), van der Kolk's terminology "slips and slides", and his "ideas about the nature of icons and images are mistaken" (249) as he treats "pictures and visual images as if they were inherently nonsymbolic, which is of course absurd" (249). According to Leys, and this attack seems particularly malicious, if van der Kolk succeeded at anything it was at obtaining research

funds: “in terms of promoting his research program he has been remarkably effective” (255). How effective, one might wonder? The “VA now provides an important career niche for the study of PTSD” (265). The implication is that van der Kolk’s principle accomplishment has been forging a lucrative and prestigious career for himself.

Caruth undergoes a similar bashing in Leys’ next chapter. She is accused of cherry-picking passages in Freud to support her arguments, and worse, in some cases, deliberate misquoting. Here is one: “Her [Caruth’s] analysis depends on a ruse, because it involves the omission of the very words in the passage she cites that would appear to disprove her contention” (288). Leys implies that Caruth’s attitude towards trauma is one of bad faith: she is “attempting not to provide a genealogy of the concept of psychic trauma but to use the notion of trauma as a critical concept in order to support her performance theory of language” (275). Finally, “It is only on the basis of an extremely forced reading that Caruth can claim that Freud himself, in *Moses and Monotheism*, proposed a history of Jewish monotheism based on the analogy of the accident and involving a literary engraving of the mind by an incomprehensible reality that ‘continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time’” (283). Caruth and van der Kolk are characterized as two scholars engaged in a project of circular legitimization, one bolstering the other’s work, neither of which holds to the standards of academic or scientific rigor. The stakes are high for Leys because she implies that the fetishization of the traumatic memory can have alarming consequences. Leys holds that Caruth, van der Kolk, Laub and Shoshana are of the school that the

concept of trauma as literal provides an essentially ethical solution to the crisis of representation posed by trauma in our time. As such a solution, trauma in its literality, muteness, and unavailability for representation becomes a sacred object of ‘icon’ that it would be a ‘sacrilege’ to misappropriate or tamper with in any way. This is how Laub presents the photography of a

victim of the genocide. (252-253)

For Leys, making trauma sacred is an execration. She finishes her chapter with the startling suggestion of the “chilling implications” (297) of Caruth interpretation of Freud’s allusion to the tragedy of Tancred and Clorinda from Tasso’s epic in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Leys holds that Caruth makes Tancred, the murderer, the victim of trauma he himself perpetrated because he is haunted by the voice and testimony of Clorinda, the victim; the implication by following this train of thought to its inevitable end is that “Caruth’s logic would turn other perpetrators into victims too – for example, it would turn the executioners of the Jews into victims and the “cries” of the Jews into testimony to the trauma suffered by the Nazis” (297).

Well, one can, after taking a deep breath, certainly appreciate Leys’ scholarship and trenchant criticism while at the same time recognizing the hyperbole in her rhetoric. At the very least I hope that my focus on the trauma that the perpetrator suffers in certain situations, such as prolonged combat, does not by default make me a Nazi sympathizer. And the conspicuous absence of any mention of Jonathan Shay’s writing in her exhaustively thorough work on trauma is telling: his focus, in a well-researched, balanced and sympathetic study, is decidedly on the trauma suffered by the perpetrator as well as the victim. As Leys mentions Herman and many others on whose work Shay relies and with whom he converses, it is highly improbable that she was unfamiliar with his work at the time of writing her genealogy: *Achilles in Vietnam* came out in 1994 and her book in 2000.

Furthermore, I did not spend so much time on Caruth only to leave her in a tattered wreck. Luckhurst has the best perspective on the seemingly unresolvable polemic between Caruth and Leys in the wake of Leys’ attack: “After this mauling [Leys’ critique of Caruth], it might be tempting to discard Caruth, were it not that the length of Leys’ critique acts as a strange sort of monument to its importance” (13). While this assessment neither does anything to dull the edge of Leys’ criticism nor

to refute her assertions, it does attest to the fascination with Caruth's elision of various disciplines around the concept of trauma. I turn to Caruth here, as so many other have before, as the nodal figure through whom these discourses intersect: aesthetics, the poststructural crisis of representation, legal questions of blame and guilt, historical questions of truth, and the legacy of Freud on modern thought in general and trauma in particular. I also include Caruth because of the degree to which her work relies on the writings of van der Kolk. Shay and Herman's therapeutic recommendations rely on his work as well. And I want to address head-on the questions that might arise from the fact that my the model that I espouse is mired in such controversy – that will be covered in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Two: PTSD and Therapy**

In this chapter, I will discuss in detail the theoretical model that I will use throughout this project. I will begin by defining the concept of PTSD that I will use in this work, combining the most current definitions from various sources, such as the American Psychological Association and the World Health Organization, as well as emendations suggested by psychiatrists, such as Jonathan Shay and Judith Herman, which have not been fully incorporated in the official publications. Shay and Herman not only address deficiencies in the models of the current discourse on trauma but also propose other models that account for trauma in a violent context in a way that the APA and WHO models fail to do.

Next, I will cover certain aspects of Shay's concept of combat PTSD and show why they are particularly applicable to the context of Colombia. While upon first consideration it may seem a gross mismatch to use a theory of trauma coming from a soldier's experience in conventional state-to-state warfare, I will demonstrate that PTSD can befall anyone in a situation of prolonged exposure to violence and moral betrayal, reiterating Freud's and Ferenczi's arguments from last century. Furthermore, the gap between conventional war and unconventional war is closer than one might



consider. As Derek Summerfield writes in his contribution to Bracken and Petty's *Rethinking the Trauma of War* (1998):

Over 90 percent of modern wars have not been conducted between sovereign state and are 'internal': the majority of those targeted come from the poorest sectors of society, and from ethnic minorities with few allies at home or abroad. In Africa, Asia and Latin America, such wars are frequently played out against a backdrop of subsistence economies, with rural dwellers bearing the brunt. Many do not have a clear-cut endpoint, many become endemic and thus a part of 'normal life,' incorporated into the day-to-day decision making of whole populations.

("The Social Experience of War" 10)

This kind of war may be the new norm in most of the countries of the world, and models of combat PTSD may be their population's most widespread neurosis. The last part of the chapter will deal with certain recommendations for PTSD therapy, focusing on those which play the largest role in the novels I analyze, which are forms of narrative therapy recommended by Shay and Herman that set out to reconstruct a psyche damaged and shattered through the continual reexperiencing of intrusive traumatic memories. I will include as well a sustained discussion of various critics of this method of therapy, mostly because the trenchant and incisive critique of Ruth Leys in her book *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000), which I outlined in the last chapter, calls to question the methods of psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, on whose work much of Herman's and Shay's conclusions rest. Finally, I will include a defense of fictional narrative as especially psychologically therapeutic particularly suited to representing traumatic memory.

## **1. Defining PTSD/Simple and Complex PTSD/Combat PTSD and Berserk Rage**

## 1.1 PTSD Definition

While at first glance it may seem like I am working in reverse chronology, a reasonable place to start in defining PTSD, along with any other mental illness, is the American Psychological Association's (APA) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)* (2013). As the manual is designed to facilitate the work of health care professionals to identify and diagnose a disorder, the form of the entries are like a check-box chart: put enough checks in the boxes and your patient meets the criteria for PTSD. While this approach to the complexity of psychic disturbances is reductive, the entry is a good introduction to the kinds of events that might be considered traumatic, and the kinds of symptoms that exposure to such events might produce in the individual. As I provide the entire section of PTSD diagnostic criteria in the Appendix, here I will give a condensed version.

According to the *DSM-5*, a person meets full PTSD diagnosis criteria if, six months after a psychologically traumatizing event, he or she experiences a set symptoms of “functional significance” (social or occupational) that persist for more than one month. The traumatic event (or events) are defined as (Criterion A): “Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways: (1) Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s); (2) Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others; (3) Learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend. In cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental; (4) Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g., first responders collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse)” (*DSM-5* PTSD section). I will have much more to say about the exposure itself and the four sub-categories, but for now I will move on to the symptoms that they discuss.

First (Criterion B), there must be present one or more of the following “intrusion symptoms,” by which they mean memories, dreams or flashbacks “intruding” into the victim’s consciousness: (1) “Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event(s);” (2) “Recurrent distressing dreams in which the content and/or affect of the dream are related to the traumatic event(s);” (3) “Dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks) in which the individual feels or acts as if the traumatic event(s) were recurring. (Such reactions may occur on a continuum, with the most extreme expression being a complete loss of awareness of present surroundings);” (4) “Intense or prolonged psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s);” (5) “Marked physiological reactions to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).”

Second (Criterion C), there must “persistent effortful avoidance” evidenced by at least one of the following tendencies: (1) “Avoidance of or efforts to avoid distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings” associated with the traumatic event; (2) avoidance of external stimuli, such as “people, places, conversations, activities, objects, situations” that might bring about distressing memories of the event.

Third (Criterion D), at least two of the following “negative alterations in cognition and mood” must be present: (1) “Inability to recall key features of the traumatic event”; (2) “Persistent (and often distorted) negative beliefs and expectations about oneself or the world”; (3) “Persistent distorted blame of self or others for causing the traumatic event or for resulting consequences”; (4) Persistent negative trauma-related emotions (e.g., fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame); (5) “Markedly diminished interest in (pre-traumatic) significant activities”; (6) “Feeling alienated from others”; (7) a “persistent inability to experience positive emotions.”

Fourth (Criterion E), two or more of the following “alterations in arousal or activity” must be present: (1) “Irritable or aggressive behavior”; (2) “Self-destructive or reckless behavior”; (3)

“Hypervigilance”; (4) “Exaggerated startle response”; (5) “Problems in concentration”; (6) “Sleep disturbance.”

Finally, in addition to meeting the criteria for experiencing the above symptoms, the person experiences “a high level of either of the following” dissociative symptoms: (1) Depersonalization, defined as an “experience of being an outside observer of or detached from oneself”; or (2) Derealization, defined as an “experience of unreality, distance, or distortion.”

The definition of the traumatic event in the current DSM is a marked departure from the original definition, first included in the DSM third edition (1980) as a direct result of the persistent efforts of psychiatrists Robert J. Lifton, Chaim Shatan and others working with various Vietnam veterans' groups, who all changed the course of the comprehensive review started in 1973 and spearheaded by Columbia psychiatrist Robert Spitzer (Morris 153). When the *DSM-III* was released, the definition of a traumatic event was a “psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience” accompanied by “intense fear, terror, and/or helplessness” (*DSM-III* PTSD section). While this definition is sound and certainly easier to follow than the current Criterion A in the *DSM-5*, it was soon found that, unfortunately, traumatic experiences such as child abuse and sexual abuse occurred far too frequently to be characterized as “outside the range of human experience” (MacNair 94). Despite these changes, all of which have contributed to a conception of PTSD that is at once more precise and more broad, this first definition is the most concise expression that captures the disorder: something extremely psychologically disturbing that when it occurs is accompanied by fear, terror, and a sense of helplessness.

But these definitions, while they may seem exhaustive, merely account for the APA’s articulation of the disorder in its diagnostic manual whose objective is to aid physicians in quickly diagnosing a disorder – fitting it conveniently and neatly into their current method of categorizing

mental illnesses. The World Health Organization (WHO) relies on a different manual for diagnosis, the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD)*, which is currently in its tenth revision (*ICD-10*), endorsed by member states in 1990 and put into use in 1994. According to the WHO, PTSD “arises as a delayed or protracted response to a stressful event or situation (of either brief or long duration) of an exceptionally threatening or catastrophic nature, which is likely to cause pervasive distress in almost anyone” (*ICD-10* PTSD section F43.1). Symptoms are described in narrative form as “typical features.” They may include “episodes of repeated reliving of the trauma in intrusive memories (“flashbacks”), dreams or nightmares, occurring against the persisting background of a sense of “numbness” and emotional blunting, detachment from other people, unresponsiveness to surroundings, anhedonia, and avoidance of activities and situations reminiscent of the trauma” (*ICD-10* PTSD section F43.1). In addition, “there is usually a state of autonomic hyperarousal with hypervigilance, an enhanced startle reaction, and insomnia” (*ICD-10* PTSD section F43.1). While there is considerable overlap in both the APA’s and the WHO’s description of PTSD symptoms, the WHO’s definition of the event itself leaves much more room for interpretation. The stressful event or *situation* can be of brief or long duration, and it may cause distress in *almost anyone*. The WHO’s broadening of the definition will play a large part in how Shay conceives of trauma in the combat veteran, and how I show trauma to be represented in the Colombian novels I analyze.

A synthesis of these several conceptions of PTSD, a combination of the APA definition from the *DSM-III* (1980) and the *DSM-5* (2015), and the WHO definition, might be a better way of understanding the causes of and symptoms of the disorder broadly, rather than adhering to one school of thought or the other. But even these definitions fail to cover ground that writers such as Herman, Shay, and Morris, in line with many recent studies of trauma (Atkinson et al. 2009; Hodge et al. 2004), argue are important characteristics of trauma. While that entire discussion is beyond the scope of this

study, one aspect of PTSD that merits further analysis because it bears directly on my use of the concept, as it is tied up in the very origins of the modern conception of the disorder, is the nature of the cause of the trauma: is it, as it is conventionally understood, one event that causes the psychological injury, or rather is it a prolonged stressful situation or even a cumulative effect from many psychologically stressful events? While both the APA and WHO's definitions leave some room for ambiguity on this question (the APA notes that PTSD might come from "repeated exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event" and the WHO notes that PTSD might come from a "response to a stressful event or situation") neither of them satisfactorily articulate that PTSD might just as well come from the accumulated psychic damage from prolonged exposure to stressors and stressful situations that, taken alone, might not meet the criteria for causing PTSD.<sup>21</sup> I stress this point not only because many of the writers on combat PTSD list this prolonged exposure as a significant cause of the disorder, but also because the texts I analyze show it explicitly as well – the prolonged exposure to violence and the threat of violence in Bogotá and Medellín during the Escobar years is continually referred to as a source of psychic trauma. This is another reason that I turn to combat-PTSD theorists for that time period in Colombia. While there was not a conventional war declared, the conditions of violence that accompany war were ubiquitous, and the average citizens were subject of them in their daily life.

As David Morris notes: "And as I discovered undergoing imaginal therapy with the VA [Veteran's Affairs healthcare], post-traumatic stress is frequently caused by a whole series of stressful

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21 These claims that PTSD may be caused by the accumulation of lesser traumas as opposed to one traumatic event are by no means new, or even limited to Shay, Herman and Morris. Freud himself over a century ago listed these as possible origins for hysterical attacks from which his patients suffered: "summation" of lesser frights, mortifications, and disappointments" (Freud, "On the Theory of Hysterical Attacks" 151-154; Young 36; Breuer and Freud 1955). I highlight them here because this "summation" cause has largely fallen out of focus in contemporary discourse, especially in the writing of Caruth and Leys. Psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi is a famous example of a proponent of the summation theory. As Eric Leed writes: "Ferenczi and others objected to this kind of simplified equation between the symptom and the event, with its inherently naturalists biases. To see the symptom as the crystallization of a particularly traumatic event was to miss the importance of the day-to-day climate of warfare. Ferenczi insisted that rarely can the symptom be traced to a single traumatic instance" (*No Man's Land* 179).

events, a large swath of time spent under stress, rather than a single, discrete event that can easily be isolated” (222). I have also found this to be the true for many of the cases of combat trauma. From reading case-studies and interviews with combat trauma victims such as Shay (1994; 2002) and Young (1996) published, for instance, more often than not one gets the sense that the subject has difficulty fixing one event that caused the symptoms. In the psychological literature the continuum of trauma exposure is referred to as the “dose-response curve,” which predicts a higher probability of PTSD symptoms in persons who have been exposed to a series of traumatic events, or placed in a traumatic situation for a long period (Herman 57; Atkinson et al. 2009; Office of the Surgeon Multinational Force Iraq (OSMF) 2006; Card 1983). The dose-response curve might be thought of as a radiation exposure detector for trauma: like the device the workers in a nuclear power plant wear that indicates whether their accumulated exposure to radiation is too high over time, the dose-response curve can indicate whether an accumulated exposure to mentally stressful situations meets the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis, or makes the person pass the threshold beyond which their susceptibility to PTSD will become especially sensitive. Examples of such mentally stressful situations in combat are: constant exposure to violence or the threat of violence against oneself; constant disruptions in sleep; witnessing violence done to others; feeling isolated from the rest of the world (Shay 121).<sup>22</sup> Other studies of natural disasters correlate a higher percentage of the population showing symptoms of PTSD who have had greater exposure to traumatic events (Shore et al.; Rivière et al.; Berninger et al.). All in all, there is significant empirical data on the cumulative effects of exposure to trauma and conditions of

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22 The *National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study*, C-2 through C-8 (Kulka et al. (1990)) attempts to categorize four aspects of war trauma and assess their cumulative contributions to PTSD: exposure to combat, exposure to abusive violence and related conflicts, deprivation, and loss of meaning and control. While the combat category is self-explanatory, the other three cast a wide net and require some explaining. For instance, “exposure to abusive violence and related conflicts” includes involvement in torturing, witnessing the murder or harm of innocent civilians, young or old, helping someone who has asked to die; “deprivation” includes inadequate nourishment and shelter, lack of sleep, physical and emotional fatigue; “loss of meaning” includes feeling out of touch with the world, loss of personal freedom, and not counting as an individual. Another exhaustive discussion of deprivation in combat can be found in *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle* (Holmes 108-135).

deprivation, all of which suggests that combined exposure to small events that, taken individually might not meet the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis, will meet the criteria when taken together. Again, I stress aspect of PTSD here because this is precisely the kind of trauma to which Colombian citizens were subject in the last decades of the twentieth century, and the trauma that affects the characters in the texts I analyze. This is especially true in the case of Juan Gabriel Vasquez' *The Sound of Things Falling* (2011), in which the main character's PTSD symptoms have more to do with his past exposure to violence and violent threats than his current gunshot wound, which would be reasonably expected to have been the more traumatic. It is implicit in the case of Fernando, the narrator of Fernando Vallejo's *Our Lady of the Assassins* (1998[1994]), whose Medellín has degenerated into a post-apocalyptic epicenter of total war.

## 1.2 Simple-PTSD versus Complex-PTSD

In the cases of prolonged and repeated trauma such as the accumulated exposure in the previous section, Shay and Herman go so far as to argue that the symptoms that can develop are not adequately accounted for in either the APA or the WHO definitions of PTSD. Herman calls for a new classification of the disorder that she calls "complex post-traumatic stress disorder" (119) in contrast to "classic" or, for lack of a better term, and certainly not to denigrate the severity of the symptoms in the sufferers, "simple" post-traumatic stress disorder, which is the kind of PTSD outlined in the *DSM* editions. She sees all stress reactions to trauma on a range or spectrum, rather than fitting in to a model of symptoms that stem from one event. In language similar to that used by the adherents of the dose-response curve model, she says: "The responses to trauma are best understood as a spectrum of conditions rather than as a single disorder. They range from a brief stress reactions that gets better by itself and never requires a diagnosis, to classic or simple post-traumatic stress disorder, to the complex



syndrome of prolonged, repeated trauma” (119). Noting that complex-PTSD has never been outlined systematically, she does cite a number of clinicians who recognize the inadequacies of the *DSM* model to account for the complexities of the trauma cases that confront them. In an “attempt to find a language that is at once faithful to the traditions of accurate psychological observation and to the moral demands of traumatized people” (120), she offers a new diagnostic table for complex-PTSD and advocates for its inclusion in the *DSM*. While many of her emendations are reflected in the new *DSM-5* narrative section that follows the diagnosis chart, such as the section on “Pretraumatic” environmental risk factors and the section on dissociative symptoms of depersonalization and derealization, there is still no dedicated section for complex-PTSD. Since I have included Herman’s entire chart in the Appendix, here I offer a brief overview of the major differences.

In terms of causes, those most susceptible to it are persons who have had “a history of subjection to totalitarian control over a prolonged period” such as hostages, prisoners of war, concentration camp survivors and victims of domestic abuse. While there is some overlap with the simple-PTSD symptoms in the *DSM*, complex-PTSD symptoms are more severe and chronic, involving long-term personality and consciousness changes. Some of the most acute symptoms listed are: “chronic suicidal preoccupation, self-injury, explosive or extremely inhibited anger, amnesia or hypermnnesia for traumatic events” (121). The alterations in self-perception include: “sense of helplessness or paralysis of initiative, sense of defilement or stigma, and a sense of complete difference from others” (121). In cases of sexual assault or child abuse, there can be delusional perception or identification with the perpetrator, including attributions of unlimited power to him or her, “idealization of paradoxical gratitude” and a “sense of special or supernatural relationship” (121). Finally, the victims can suffer from a radical loss of faith in their former world view, to include such symptoms as “persistent distrust” of others, “isolation and withdrawal,” “loss of sustaining faith” and a “sense of

hopelessness and despair” (121). Many of the symptoms are similar to those of simple-PTSD, with most of the differences in degree rather than kind – but the changes in degree are acute: contrast “irritable behavior and angry outbursts” in the *DSM* to “explosive or extremely inhibited anger” in Herman, “reckless of self-destructive behavior” in the *DSM* to “chronic suicidal preoccupation” in Herman, or “feeling of detachment or estrangement from others” in the *DSM* to “sense of complete difference from others (may include sense of specialness, utter aloneness, belief no person can understand, or nonhuman identity)” in Herman (121). Those symptoms that are not reflected in the *DSM* are those that describe radical personality change and tectonic shifts in perception bordering on the psychotic, such as a “sense of special or supernatural relationship” with the perpetrator or “persistent dysphoria” (121).

Shay makes a much simpler and more concise definition of complex-PTSD: “simple PTSD *plus the destruction of the capacity for social trust*” (*Odysseus* 4). He defines “social trust” as “*the expectation that power will be used in accordance with ‘what’s right’*” (*Odysseus* 151). “What’s right” is the best that Shay uses to approximate and condense in English the ancient Greek term “Θέμις” ‘thémis,’ which he, drawing from Martha Nussbaum’s work in *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986), translates thus: “the whole sweep of a culture’s definition of right and wrong: we use terms such as moral order, convention, normative expectations, ethics, and commonly understood social values. The ancient Greek word that Homer used, *thémis*, encompasses all these meanings” (5). The etymology derives from the Greek word “títhēmi,” ‘to put,’ and might be translated literally as “that which is put in place” (Teknia). Moses Finley in *The World of Odysseus* writes that *thémis* “is untranslatable. A gift of the gods and a mark of civilized existence, sometimes it means right custom, proper procedure, social order, and sometimes merely the will of the gods (as revealed by an omen, for example) with little of the idea of right” (76 note 2).

Complex-PTSD for Shay, therefore, is simple-PTSD compounded with a radical disillusionment with one's former ideals and phenomenology, particularly in relations of power dynamics. To turn to the example from his first book on the subject, *Achilles in Vietnam* (1994), Achilles suffers from complex-PTSD because his psychological injury occurred in the context of a radical destabilization of his moral order: Agamemnon's public dishonoring of him by taking away his war prize, Briseis, a prize of honor awarded him democratically by the troops to recognize his valor in combat, was a blatant affront to the normative expectations and commonly understood social values of their warrior society. Thémis had been violated by the commander of the Greek troops, who wielded the most power. It was not only the accumulated stress of nine years of bloody battle and extended campaigning that pushed Achilles over the edge into complex-PTSD, but rather it was the combination of that stress *and* the moral injury sustained when he realized that social trust had been profoundly violated in the exercise of power. His world was not being run the way it should be run, and he realized, in radical disillusionment, his foolishness in believing that it had been run that way before. Shay reads Homer's *Iliad* from the perspective of the combat soldier. In this sense he reads it not as a heroic epic but rather as a tragedy: the tragedy of Achilles, citing Plato's ironic description of Homer in Book 10 of the *Republic* as "the best of the poets and the first of the tragedians" (*Achilles* 31). The tragedy Shay sees is the destruction of Achilles' character, which is presented in the beginning of the *Iliad* as exemplary in terms of social consciousness, charity, and sense of duty. By the end of the story Achilles has become a monstrosity, concerned for only himself, his personal loss and the avenging of it.

This radical readjustment of the way one sees the world, usually brought on by a betrayal by those in power of the normative expectation that power will be used ethically, is characteristic of all the cases of complex-PTSD that Herman and Shay treated. Many of Shay's Vietnam veterans, for example, who were already suffering from simple-PTSD due to the common stressors of war or a

violent event, developed complex-PTSD when confronted with the clash between the army's jingoistic discourse and their youthful patriotism, the realities of the anti-war movement at home, the government's mendacity in foreign policy, and the betrayal of their military leadership in committing them to conflicts without adequate logistical support. Instead of returning home victorious to ticker-tape parades as their fathers had done at the end of World War II, for example, they came home rather to protesters spitting in their faces. Herman focuses more on victims of sexual abuse, but the radical shift in phenomenology that causes complex-PTSD was present there as well, only in a different form. In those cases, cases of sexual assault that meet the criteria as causes of simple-PTSD by any standard, the symptoms were exacerbated into complex-PTSD because the assault was coming from someone whom the victim had formerly considered benevolent, a protector, such as a father or an uncle. The victim's abject powerlessness and simultaneous realization that the abuse was coming from someone's abusing their position of power was the combination of factors that contributed to their victim's developing complex-PTSD. In the cases of victims of natural disasters, subjects of totalitarian regimes, or atrocities, the logic is the same. While these cases all meet the criteria for simple-PTSD due to their violent and traumatic nature, they are as well a shattering of the former world-view of the victim – the sudden realization that the world operates according to a different logic that is not governed by any overall moral force for good; this violation of *thémis* brings about complex-PTSD.

The powerlessness of loss of control that Herman claims is a major cause of complex-PTSD in victims of rape and solitary confinement overlaps as well with how Shay and others write about the soldier's experience of modern warfare. As opposed to warfare in earlier times, the modern soldier is often confined to a small space and condemned to relative inactivity while he is under attack. As Joanna Bourke says, "What was unbearable about modern warfare was its passivity in the midst of extreme danger" (58). She cites psychiatrist John MacCurdy, she notes how due to the dearth of hand-

to-hand combat in modern warfare, soldiers are deprived of the opportunity to personally retaliate in combat, and forced to wait for death to come to them while confined to a small trench or dugout (MacCurdy 14).<sup>23</sup> Soldiers who are subject to powerlessness and loss of control in the face of extreme danger is a microcosm of Herman's identification of people who are particularly susceptible to complex-PTSD, those who have had "a history of subjection to totalitarian control over a prolonged period" (120) such as prisoners of war and concentration camp survivors.<sup>24</sup>

Whether or not one agrees with these categorizations of trauma, it seems a conservative enough claim to make that we need a vocabulary robust enough to build a discourse around the wide range of traumatic experience in human affairs. Posttraumatic symptoms, whether they are called complex-PTSD or something else, engendered by a prolonged exposure to violent death, which entail complex personality changes, are going to be quite different in both degree and kind from posttraumatic symptoms engendered by, for example, a one-time car accident. Shay and Herman have not only provided such a vocabulary but have pointed out the inadequacies of the current medical discourses on trauma to handle the issue.

But even the complex-PTSD model has limitations when it comes to dealing with certain types of complex personality changes that come about in situations of extreme violence, in particular when considering the psychological trauma suffered by the perpetrator of the violence, which is the case with many soldiers in wartime. Shay's work focuses on this type of trauma in a violent context, and in the

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23 MacCurdy's work overlapped with W.H.R. Rivers', who wrote the Preface for this 1918 edition of MacCurdy's *War Neuroses*.

24 For more literature on the correlation between powerlessness and PTSD symptoms, see, for instance, Lars Weisaeth, "Combat Stress Reactions" in *World Health* (1994). The study reports that in its sample pool, those soldiers who perceive that they are in control of the circumstances did not develop combat stress reaction (CSR), which is another term for PTSD; further, it contends that soldiers who do not feel in control during combat do develop CSR: "the most important protective factors are group cohesion, trust in the commanders, high motivation, being well armed and protected, a high quality of combat training, and a reliable medical corps" (24). See also Arthur Egendorf's *Healing from the War: Trauma and Transformation After Vietnam* (1985) on social sources of trauma: that "more often than not, it is the powerless and the disenfranchised who are traumatized" (159).

next section I will focus on one aspect of it that is pertinent to my literary analysis. It plays a large part in the psychology of the protagonist of Fernando Vallejo's novel *Our Lady of the Assassins*, the subject of my third chapter – Shay calls it the “berserk rage.”

### 1.3 Berserk Rage

What Shay refers to as the “berserk” stage of PTSD as early as 1994 is still a relatively unexplored phenomenon in the social sciences (*Achilles* 90).<sup>25</sup> In contrast to the conventional definition of it as a state of reckless abandon in warriors, in Shay it might be thought of as a particularly acute stage of complex-PTSD that is encountered in situations of extreme violence; reckless abandon is a part of it, but Shay focuses for the most part on the subsequent psychological injuries. The most famous literary representation of the berserk state might be Achilles' indignation at Agamemnon's dishonoring him and later battle fury on learning of the death of his comrade Patroclus.

In fact, a close reading of the epic's opening lines suggests that Achilles' berserk rage is the primary subject of the work. The lines do double-duty: they serve both as Homer's invocation of the

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25 Retired Army Officer and former US Military Academy psychology professor David Grossman in his *On Killing* (1995) writes on the exhilaration that some soldiers experience when they kill in combat, especially in kill-or-be-killed scenarios, the high caused from a large amount of adrenaline released into the system in situations of extreme danger. He refers to this as a “combat high” that can be as addictive as any drug (234-237). Other case studies (Solrush 1988; Nadelson 1992, among others), drawing on interviews with many combat veterans, report that the majority of them claim that they have become attached to killing, addicted to the “high” or “rush” that they get from homicide in combat. Further, Solrush reports that the PTSD symptoms of intrusive flashbacks and nightmares are more pronounced in these soldier “combat high” addicts, especially when they are faced with situations of powerlessness in the face of authority either at work or in civil society after having returned home from the war. These are, of course, the same criteria that Shay lists as necessary for entering into the berserk state. But none of these studies specifically refer to the “combat high” as the berserk rage. While there are striking similarities between the two states, “combat high” is devoid of the emotional deadening and psychosis of the berserk state.

Rachel MacNair's *Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress: The Psychological Consequences of Killing* (2002) is the most comprehensive study of anything similar to the berserk state that Shay writes on, and the symptoms of perpetration-induced traumatic stress (PITS) are very similar to the berserk symptoms, the injuries are not the same. One can enter into the berserk state without having to have been a perpetrator. Kirby Farrell published a book *Berserk Style in American Culture* (2011), but it is a cultural critic's take on how Shay's berserk state might be represented in cultural forms like political discourse and movies, not a psychological examination of the mental state.

Muse and as an unequivocal exposition of his theme. Peter Green translates the first lines thus:

Wrath, goddess, sing of Achilles Peleus's son's  
calamitous wrath, which hit the Achaians with countless ills –  
many the valiant souls it saw off down to Hades,  
souls of heroes, their selves left as carrion for dogs  
and all birds of prey, and the plan of Zeus fulfilled –  
from the first moment those two men parted in fury,  
Atreus's son, king of men, and the godlike Achilles. (1:1-7)

I choose Green's translation because his syntax holds close to Homer's original Greek in terms of the emphasis placed on "wrath;" not only does Green place the word at the very beginning of the poem, as Homer did, but he puts it at the beginning of the second line as well, which is connected to the first line by an enjambment ("calamitous wrath" in the second line is the predicate of the first line - "Achilles Peleus's son's / calamitous wrath"), thereby placing even stronger emphasis on Achilles' wrath.

As Dr. Palaima explains, Homer starts the poem with the word μῆνιν,<sup>26</sup> which "means 'wrath,' especially of the gods, but also of Achilles." (Palaima email). Verbal forms of the noun mean "to rage," although the etymology is unknown. Achilles' wrath or rage is described by an enjambment connecting the first and second lines with the word "οὐλομένην" *oulomenēn*, "which is a medio-passive participle of the verb form ὀλλυμι 'to ruin, destroy, lose'" (Palaima email). Green's choice of "calamitous wrath" as a translation of *oulomenēn* therefore catches the sense of the original: "This means that Achilles at one and the same time can be 'destroying (with his own intent)' others or 'self-destructive'. In fact it is both." (Palaima email). Green's placement of the word in the line precisely follows Homer's syntactical emphasis of the descriptive term. The play's theme is thus both announced and highlighted

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26 "μῆνιν" is the objective case for the nominative "μῆνις" *mēnis* (Palaima, email, citing Beekes).

in the opening lines. Homer supplicates that the goddess should sing about Achilles' wrath, one that destroyed him just as much as it destroyed the Trojans – and the Achaians as well. In fact, the latter half of the second line is a relative clause further describing Achilles' rage as that which has brought countless woeful pains (“ἄλγε”) upon the Achaians, Achilles' allies, and not, paradoxically, upon the Trojans, Achilles' enemies. In fact, pains to the Trojans are not even mentioned in the first stanza.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, my reading, based on the scholarship of Palaima, Shay, Beekes and Hoad, holds that the syntax of the first lines of the *Iliad* suggest that the theme of one of the foundational texts of Western literature is a rage that brings calamity and woe not only to one's enemies but to oneself and one's allies as well – a warrior's berserk rage. But as clear as this claim might seem from Homer's poetry, very little scholarship has been done on the individual psychological implications of the rage itself.

One reason might be that berserk rage is a difficult object for study because it happens in circumstances of extreme stress. Shay writes that the gathering of empirical and clinical evidence on the berserk rage is particularly difficult because subjects usually enter it under circumstances of extreme duress that are difficult or impossible to reproduce in a controlled environment: “No one has ever drawn a syringe of blood or cerebrospinal fluid from a berserk warrior nor mapped the electrical activities of his nervous system” (Shay, *Achilles* 91). The existence of this state, however, is something which has been documented in testimonies of the victims themselves and of observers of people in a berserk rage. While the exact neurological processes are still unknown, Shay has gathered a significant amount of evidence on the symptoms of those in a berserk state. Shay's insights into this state are a valuable contribution to the existing literature and scholarship on trauma.

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<sup>27</sup> Here are the first two lines in ancient Greek: **μῆνιν** ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος / **οὐλομένην**, ἣ μυρὶ Ἄχαιοῖς **ἄλγε** ἔθηκε. The words in bold are, respectively, one, “wrath,” two, “calamitous or destructive,” three, “woeful pains. Notice the enjambment connecting the first and second lines, placing strong emphasis (because the word begins line 2) on the “calamitous or destructive” descriptor for Achilles' wrath.



Trigger events for the berserk state in Vietnam veterans are as follows: “betrayal insult, or humiliation by a leader; death of a friend-in-arms; being wounded; being overrun, surrounded, or trapped; seeing dead comrades who have been mutilated by the enemy; and unexpected deliverance from certain death” (*Achilles* 80). Culling of the Vietnam veterans’ testimonies as well as the five instances of combat fury in the *Iliad* produces the following list of characteristics of someone who is in the thrall of the berserk state:

- Beastlike
- Godlike
- Socially disconnected
- Crazy, mad, insane
- Enraged
- Cruel, without restraint of discrimination
- Insatiable
- Devoid of fear
- Inattentive to own safety
- Indiscriminate
- Reckless, feeling invulnerable
- Exalted, intoxicated, frenzied
- Cold, indifferent
- Insensible to pain
- Suspicious of friends (*Achilles* 82)

Despite the considerable overlap of these berserk state symptoms with Herman’s list of complex-PTSD symptoms, such as the berserk “socially disconnected,” “cold, indifferent,” and “Godlike,” the berserk symptoms are markedly more violent, unrestrained, and malicious; for instance, the berserker is “intoxicated, frenzied,” “cruel, without restraint of discrimination” and “insatiable” (82).

Here are some testimonies of Shay’s Vietnam veteran patients, all soldiers who were both perpetrators as well as victims of violent trauma, who have gone through the berserk state. On the beast-like delusion: “I became a fucking animal. I started putting fucking heads on poles. Leaving fucking notes for the motherfuckers. Digging up fucking graves. I didn’t give a fuck anymore.

Y’know, I wanted – . They wanted a fucking hero, so I gave it to them. They wanted fucking body count, so I gave them body count. I hope they’re fucking happy. But they don’t have to live with it. I do” (*Achilles* 83).

On the godlike delusion, one soldier tells of his third berserk episode, which occurred when he and his men were under heavy enemy fire and in danger of having their position overrun after their helicopter crashed. He was the only one brave enough to risk injury and return fire: “Everyone was so shocked, all the firing stopped except me, and then I stopped. It was silent. I felt like a god, this power flowing through me. Anybody could have picked me off there – but I was untouchable” (*Achilles* 84). On recklessness to the point of endangering comrades and the shrinkage of the moral horizon, a sniper tells this harrowing account of his berserk period:

Before, I’d let two Dinks [pejorative term for North Vietnamese soldier] pass, one Dink pass. After that I don’t let no [sic] passes. You know, I was endangering five other people [the members of his unit]. But I wasn’t worried about that.... Y’now, they were seasoned. If they want to come along for the fucking ride, come along. Hardened. I didn’t want them motherfuckers. (*Achilles* 90)

Homer’s depiction of Achilles’ berserk rage in the *Iliad* is well known and hardly needs summary here. Shay demonstrates how Achilles’ manifested every characteristic of the berserk rage described above from the time of Patroclus’ death to Achilles’ assent to return Hector’s body to Priam for proper burial.

Research still has to be done on the exact physiological changes that someone in a berserk state undergoes. However, Shay does provide a physical description based on evidence gathered in interviews and research of the literature: “The heart pounds, the muscles tense, the senses are on extreme alert. This is widely known as the ‘fight-or-flight’ reaction” or in clinical terms, the

“autonomic and endocrine hyperarousal” (*Achilles* 91). Adrenal hormones are released that numb sensibility to pain and fatigue but sharpen the senses that may alert the subject to danger. Release of adrenaline is often pleasurable at first: “adrenaline rush” is a well-known phenomenon both in and out of combat. But the long-term symptoms of sustained adrenal activity are deleterious to health and moral character: “The human body is not adapted to constant emergency mobilization” (*Achilles* 92). The body may develop ulcers, a diminishment of appetites for nourishment and sex, and an emotional coldness and distance. Shay speculates that these long-term effects may be a result of the combination of the simultaneous release of “opiatelike substances by the brain itself in response to terror and pain” and adrenaline released by the adrenal gland during fight-or-flight mode (*Achilles* 92). Just as Achilles lost appetite for food after the death of Patroclus, so did one of Shay’s veterans after entering his berserk state: “I ate the equivalent of maybe a third, a third of a bologna sandwich a day. And that’s all I ate. I don’t know. I just didn’t want to eat.... Why I became like that? I was all evil. All evil. Where before, I wasn’t. I look back, I look back today, and I’m horrified at what I turned into. What I was. What I did” (*Achilles* 93).

For the berserk state, there is no standard duration. Nor is there a common event that resolves the crisis by returning the sufferer to sanity. One of Shay’s patients remained in the state for two years, well after his tour in Vietnam was finished:

They took...my life. Somebody had to pay them back for that. And it was me, because it was my life. That’s how I looked at it. I couldn’t get enough. I could have had my hands around ten Gooks’ throats a day and it wouldn’t be enough. I carried this home with me. I lost all my friends, beat up my sisters, went after my father. I mean, I just went after anybody and everything. Every three days I would totally explode, lose it for no reason at all. I’d be sitting there calm as could be, and this monster would come out of me with a fury that most people

didn't want to be around (*Achilles* 95).

For many, the cure for the berserk state is death in battle. But survival is sometimes not much better. For those who do make it through, the berserk state “imparts emotional deadness and vulnerability to explosive rage to [the victim’s] psychology and a permanent hyperarousal to his physiology” (*Achilles* 98) is one of the “hallmarks of post-traumatic stress disorder in combat veterans. My clinical experience with combat veterans prompts me to place the berserk state at the heart of their most severe psychological and psychophysiological injuries” (*Achilles* 98). While the field still remains in the early stages of study, Shay reminds us that Homer “helps us to hear what many veterans have been trying desperately to tell us about going berserk” (*Achilles* 99).

I include a discussion of this state here because it is an aspect of PTSD that I see as largely neglected by the literature, from the APA definition to the discussion of trauma in the humanities, with the exception of such scholars as Shay, Farrell, and MacNair. Perpetrators of violent trauma, whose actions deprive them of most people’s sympathy, are just as susceptible to PTSD as the victims are; and in the case of the berserk rage, they are uniquely susceptible – it is a state in which the most violent atrocities are committed, and is induced in a context of violence. Further, Shay claims that entry into the state leads to “life-long psychological and physiological injury” (*Achilles* 98) such as a “permanent hyperarousal to his physiology” (98) – an irrevocable, chemical change in the brain.

Even more importantly for the purposes of my literary project, I will diagnose the protagonist of the first book that I analyze as a PTSD victim who has passed into the berserk rage, which is a claim that no other critic has made about the book, and perhaps one that can only be arrived at through the trauma theory offered by Shay, which focuses on the trauma of combat soldiers, people who are traumatized in the context of extreme violence – just like the character Fernando in Fernando Vallejo’s *Our Lady of the Assassins* (2001[1994]).

## **1.4 Other Aspects of Combat PTSD Pertinent to the Situation in Colombia**

I refer in the following sub-sections to “aspects” of combat PTSD rather than either symptoms or causes precisely because in many cases it is difficult to distinguish between symptom and cause. These aspects fall under what I wrote about earlier as the cumulative effects of exposure to trauma, or what the clinical literature calls the dose-response curve: they are epistemologically and phenomenologically destabilizing aspects of situations of violent conflict that can exacerbate PTSD – they might be symptoms that get worse in a violent context or causes that can turn simple-PTSD into complex-PTSD, their cumulative effect compounded. These are only some of the aspects of combat trauma that Shay writes about; I have selected those that pertain to the trauma of the characters in the texts that I will analyze later when I argue that the combat trauma model is appropriate for the everyday experience of Colombians in the Escobar years because of the high degree of violence to which citizens were continually subject.

### **1.4.1 Loss of Faith in the Ability to Perceive Reality**

The tactics of guerilla warfare such as ambush, concealment, booby traps and camouflage can undermine a soldier’s faith in his own ability to perceive reality. These tactics were employed in Vietnam at a much higher rate than in other modern conflicts. Eleven percent of the deaths and seventeen percent of the injuries in Vietnam were due to booby traps, as opposed to three to four percent of the casualties in Korea and WWII. Traps were made out of familiar objects such as Coke cans, coconuts and food containers. Shay compares combat to torture, citing Elaine Scarry’s account in *The Body in Pain* of similar tactics of tortures turning familiar objects into harmful objects and the psychological damage that caused to the prisoners. “Prolonged patrolling in Vietnam led to a

decomposition of the normal, the familiar, the safe” and destroyed “the soldier’s confidence in his own mental functions as surely as would prolonged torture in a political prison” (*Achilles* 34-35). With their faith in their own mental functions and ability to perceive reality thus undermined, the soldiers found it difficult as well to take part in ordinary economic, political and domestic life.

The *DSM-5* lists Derealization as a PTSD symptom, and the erosion of one’s ability to perceive reality certainly falls under that definition. Here it is listed as more of a cause than a symptom – the very experience of guerilla combat forced the soldiers to shift their perception of what is real and what is not real. The complex mix of derealization here as both a cause and a symptom is why I include Shay’s discussion of it.

We will see this aspect of PTSD most clearly in the protagonists of Fernando Vallejo’s *Our Lady of the Assassins* and Juan Gabriel Vásquez’ *The Sound of Things Falling*. In both cases, the characters’ PTSD causes them to see a distorted reality, but the context in which they experienced reality was surreal to begin with – they lived in what looked to be a normal city, but there were dangers lurking behind every corner in the form of bombs or bullets. Who is to say if that surreality was the cause or the symptom of the trauma?

#### **1.4.2 Dehumanizing the Enemy**

Dehumanizing, or “Othering,” the enemy is another aspect of combat trauma that can lead to long-term character damage from complex-PTSD. Shay demonstrates by citing many passages in Homer on opposing soldiers’ honoring each other in direct and indirect speech that this “othering of the enemy” was less prevalent in ancient Aegean culture than it was in Vietnam and most other twentieth century modern conflicts. While elevating the status of one’s perception of the enemy may seem inversely related to maintaining one’s own self-image, Shay argues the opposite – the paradox of the

direct relationship between self-respect and respect for the enemy, or the Other: “the veteran’s self-respect never fully recovers so long as he is unable to see the enemy as worthy” (*Achilles* 115). Shay cites J. Glenn Gray, who wrote of the World War II-US-soldiers’ experience in the Pacific against the Japanese:

The ugliness of a war against an enemy conceived to be subhuman can hardly be exaggerated. There is an unredeemed quality to battle experience under these conditions which blunts all sense and perceptions.... This image of the enemy as beast lessens even the satisfaction in destruction, for there is not proper regard for the worth of the objects destroyed.... It is ugly because [of] the image of the enemy... No aesthetic reconciliation with one’s fate as a warrior was likely because no moral purgation was possible. (Gray qtd. in Shay, *Achilles* 116)

Shay speculates that this “Othering” of the enemy may be a product of our Judeo-Christian-Islamic heritage, which “insists on turning every story into a war of good and evil and a drama of blame and punishment” (118). I would add that this Western predilection for conceptualizing all narratives as binary conflict owes as much to Hegel’s influential views on history as it does to religious and biblical influence.

Regardless of the cause of how we have arrived at an “us” versus “them” worldview, Gray’s insights demonstrate the potential for psychological injury on the person who carries such a view with him to a situation of violent conflict. Shay writes of a veteran plagued by dreams and intrusive memories of a Vietnamese soldier he killed, whose corpse was befouled by another US soldier before his comrades had time to restrain him. Shay was able to reduce the frequency and severity of the hallucinations by helping the soldier realize the dignity of the Vietnamese soldier, who was likely a “worthy adversary” (117).

Dishonoring the enemy dead had grave psychological consequences as well. This seems related

to the importance Shay attaches to grieving for one's own fallen comrades in that the respect is professed toward human life in general. The moral horizon has simply extended to the universal, that of the human race, from the particular, that of one's own culture or allegiance. In the example above, the hallucinations experienced over the course of thirty years by the veteran were caused by the trauma of witnessing the dishonoring of a corpse. For those who actively participated in the maiming and disfiguring of corpses, the intrusive memories were even more appalling. One veteran is haunted by intrusive memories every Christmas of "this dead Gook we hung on a tree with a big banner that said 'Merry Fucking Christmas'" (117). Another is haunted by a Vietnamese soldier whose chest he cut open "just to see what his lungs looked like" (117). Throughout his writings, Shay holds that reverent treatment of the dead, both one's own dead and the enemy's dead, because the dead are human and deserving of human dignity, is an important part of healthy psychological behavior. Failure to do so, and especially failure to do so because of a view that the enemy is somehow subhuman or "other" than oneself, can lead to grave cases of complex-PTSD in the victim. In Fernando Vallejo's *Our Lady of the Assassins* we will see many instances of the abject disrespect for the dead as another cause of exacerbated trauma in Fernando. Fernando sees his victims, and the sicarios themselves even though two of them are his lovers, as members of a social class so far beneath him that they are sub-human; the paradox of sustaining this view as he slowly becomes one of them is at the heart of his tragedy.

#### **1.4.3 Death in Life/Loss of the Will to Live**

Shay argues that Homer's depiction of Achilles' reaction to the death of Patroclus uses poetic tropes that suggest Achilles sees himself as already dead. For example, Achilles bows his head and scatters covers himself with dust and ash and stretches himself out along the ground, which is a symbolic burial. The very same word in Greek, *keimai*, that Homer uses to describe Patroclus' death in



battle is used to describe Achilles' prone body in grief. He befouls his face and tears his hair out with both hands. He attempts to slash his own throat and is prevented by the hand of Antiloches. His servant women gather round his body and cry out in sorrow and beat their breasts, which is a common action in funeral mourning. He laments to his mother Thetis that he had ever been born, wishes for a speedy death and leaves off food and drink. When she hears him calling to her she lets out of sorrowful cry, "gooio" in the Greek, which translates as a death lament (*Achilles* 52). Finally, standing before Patroclus' funeral pyre, Achilles renounces any hope of homecoming, literally cutting the last tie that bound him to his home: firm in resolve to "not see my fatherland," (23:163) Achilles cuts off his hair that he had grown as a symbol and vow of safe homecoming and burns it on Patroclus' fire.

Many of the veterans whom Shay treats see themselves as "already dead" or having "died" in Vietnam. In most cases, the term is metonymical in that they mean to imply that a certain aspect or part of themselves, or their personalities metaphorically "died" in Vietnam – that the Self they refer to is a former conception of themselves, and that Self is gone forever. In almost all of the testimonies of those who have gone into the berserk state, this sense of being "dead" or in some kind of zombie-like trance is present. The sense is that they become something beyond human, super-human, impervious to threats on their mortality because they no longer put any stock in it. This state is poetically rendered in Homer and in prose by the testimonies of Shay's Vietnam veterans.

Versions of the symbolic death of the protagonist can be found in each of the Colombian novels in the chapters to follow. Fernando sees himself at various times as dead, zombie-like undead, eternal, and even an incarnation of Hades by the end. Jaramillo Agudelo's character Luis literally disappears from the book, but he had been behaving as given up for dead for many pages. Vásquez' narrator Yammara narrowly escapes death from a gunshot wound; keeping him alive requires multiple blood transfusions; in addition to this, of course, there are many symbolic deaths and rebirths in his story.

#### 1.4.4 Shrinkage of the Moral Horizon

Shay notes how Homer shows a steady progression in the *Iliad*'s discourse of the shrinkage of Achilles' moral horizon from a concern for the well-being of the entire army, even entire race, at the beginning of the *Iliad* to a concern only for himself at the end of it. In the beginning, Achilles is not only an exemplary fighter, but an exemplary leader, human, healer and diplomat as well. Achilles, not Agamemnon, is the one who calls the army assembly to discuss how to appease the gods plaguing the Greek army (1:64). Achilles is also famous for both granting quarter to defeated enemies in battle, holding them for ransom instead of killing them (21:105-109), for his healing arts (Shay, *Odysseus* 237), and for his respect for the enemy dead (6:428-440). As the story progresses, however, we see Achilles gradually caring only about himself and his own contingent of Myrmidons as he threatens to desert the army. After he agrees to remain, his selfishness turns to outright hatred of even his fellow Greeks. He actively wishes that they will get overrun by the Trojans in order that Agamemnon will feel even more acutely the loss of Achilles' battle prowess (1:254-259). By the end, after repeated rejections of the pleas from the highest Greek officers that he return to the fight with them, the only thing that spurs him to battle is his berserk rage at the loss of Patroclus, not the well-being of the army. While on this rage he refuses to grant any quarter to the enemy (22:288-292): his most infamous atrocity is the defilement of the corpse of Hector, tied to the back of his chariot and dragged round Troy and later left outside Achilles' tent to fester and decompose without proper burial until Priam sneaks into the Greek camp to supplicate Achilles to let him return with the body.

What Shay is trying to stress in this analysis is the detachment from the social world that the sufferer of complex PTSD experiences. This detachment is intimately related to the nature of the psychological injury in the first place – that it involved a shattering of the individual's sense of “what's

right,” a destruction of their sense of a just social order, and often a thwarted opportunity to communalize the trauma. He lists many examples of the shrinkage of the moral horizons in the Vietnam veterans as well. Soldiers arrived in Vietnam with a deep sense of ideological commitment to the war and to the national interest. As their time in theater progressed, their views toward the nation became jaded and they learned to distrust the rhetoric of the army. They started to care only about the well-being of their unit. As one soldier put it to Shay: “It was constant now. I was watching the other guys like they was my children.... It wasn’t seventy-two guys [in the company] I was worried about. It was five guys” (24).

In Vallejo, we will see the shrinkage of the protagonist’s moral horizon narrow down from the world simply to him and his lover, as if no one else and nothing else existed besides those two. In *Cartas cruzadas*, Luis relinquishes ties on all that was important to him before becoming involved in drug trafficking, in the end caring only about himself and his profit. In *The Sound of Things Falling*, Yammara during his lows of depression shuts out the world and all of his family in an obsessive investigation into his traumatic past.

#### **1.4.5 Persistence of Survival Skills**

Constant mental preparedness and mobilization for danger are essential survival skills in wartime and other situations of constant exposure to violence. The longer one is exposed to a continual threat of danger, the longer these skills are engaged and honed. But honing them and maintaining them is stressful, and the psychic strain accumulates, building the trauma dose on the dose-response curve. In peacetime, however, those skills can impede the ability to conduct a normal life. For instance, loud noises such as a door slamming may send a veteran ducking for cover under the nearest table. This reaction is burned into muscle memory from so many wartime dives to the ground to avoid gunfire.

The body's constant state of "fight or flight" mode, which is designed exclusively for emergency situations of short duration, can take its toll on overall health as well if it is maintained over a long period of time, such as what happens in modern warfare or periods of political oppression when persons are subject to repeated violent threats: "He begins to suffer not only from insomnia and agitation but also of numerous types of somatic symptoms. Tension headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances, skin disorders, and abdominal, back or neck pain are extremely common. He may complain of tremors, choking sensations, or a rapid heartbeat" (*Achilles* 174). Thus, paradoxically, the survival skills that someone who is exposed to continual danger learns to keep himself alive, which are themselves potential causes of PTSD, are the skills that need to be unlearned when one resumes a normal life that is not subject to a continual threat of violence; but the skills themselves are mixed up as symptoms of trauma, and as such they cannot be so easily unlearned – if indeed they can be unlearned at all.

#### **1.4.6 Unstuck in Time**

Suppression of the will is another survival mechanism that is useful in dangerous situations but harmful in normal ones. Judith Herman describes the damaging after-effects of this tactic on concentration camp prisoners:

Alterations in time sense begin with the obliteration of the future [because it becomes unbearable to hope] but eventually progress to the obliteration of the past.... [At first they] cultivate memories of their past lives in order to combat their isolation...[and then they] lose the sense of continuity with their past. The past, like the future, becomes too painful to bear, for memory, like hope, brings back the yearning for all that has been lost. Thus prisoners are eventually reduced to living in an endless present (89).

Suppression of the will leads to a discontinuous sense of the past and the future, a killing of memory and hope, a damning to live forever in the present. In addition, such discontinuity of the past, present and future undermines the victim's sense of his own personal narrative and may contaminate his sense of his own identity. Shay writes:

“I died in Vietnam” may express a current identity as a corpse. When the ‘I’ who died is understood to be the bearer of a civilized social morality, what remains may reflect a tainted, evil identity, one deserving punishment.... Severe trauma shatters a sense of the meaningfulness of the self, of the world, and of the connection between the two. The same obliteration of meaning has subsequently been confirmed for rape victims, Hiroshima survivors, survivors of the Cambodian genocide, and Vietnam combat veterans (*Achilles* 180).

But the suppression of the will that leads to a disruption in one's sense of time is only a coping mechanism that might manifest itself as a traumatic symptom if the victim is unable to adjust back to a non-threatening environment. It may or may not have long-term effects in the victim's consciousness. On the other hand, traumatic intrusive memories are another example of the disruption of one's sense of narrative time that condemns one to live in an endless present, and these are common symptoms even for simple-PTSD. When the symptoms are aggravated as they usually are in the case of complex-PTSD, one's sense to time is disrupted to a much greater degree. As Shay puts it: “Severe trauma explodes the cohesion of consciousness” (*Achilles* 188).

With this phrase he is not so much referring to whether or not the traumatic memory itself can be recalled and articulated in words (which is a highly controversial subject in trauma theory, as we saw at the end of my first chapter), but rather the way that intrusive traumatic memories, PTSD symptoms, disrupt one's ability to distinguish past, present, and future. Shay writes: “Traumatic memory is not narrative. Rather, it is experience that reoccurs, either as full sensory replay of

traumatic events in dreams or flashbacks, with all things seen, heard, smelled, and felt intact, or as disconnected fragments” (*Achilles* 172).<sup>28</sup> The fact that Shay claims that these memories are “relived, not remembered,” (173), refers to the way that the intrusive memories, unbidden and unwanted, flood the present consciousness, making it seem like the past and present have converged: “severe trauma destroys the capacity to think a future or a past. For many Vietnam combat soldiers, a cramped, eternal present, extending no further than the next C-rations [an Army term for food rations], death, cigarettes, or fire fights, snuffed out all their temporality” (190).

Due to the intrusive nature of the traumatic memory,— the fact that the flashback intrudes upon the consciousness of the complex PTSD victim seemingly of its own volition —, it can be perceived as a threat to the victim’s authority over his own consciousness, memory and therefore identity. Further, traumatic memories are formed when under emotional duress and therefore have powerful affective qualities embedded in them. They are often made under conditions of a complex mix of terror, rage and grief and their recurrence often is accompanied by a powerful simultaneous re-experience of those same emotions associated with the memory (Shay 173; Herman, *Trauma* 37-42; *DSM-5* PTSD section). The re-experience of an intrusive traumatic memory is to the victim a “relivable nightmare” and as a multi-sensory compelling experience the “consciousness remains fixed on it” (Shay, *Achilles* 173). The victim under such conditions is no longer master of his own thoughts and feelings.

One of Shay’s recommendations for coping with trauma is to reestablish authority over one’s memories by constructing a coherent narrative about them, thereby forcing these traumatic memories back into past, as memories, out of the present into which they have intruded: “Narrative can transform involuntary reexperiencing of traumatic events into memory of the events, thereby reestablishing

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28 On the nature of traumatic flashbacks intruding into the consciousness and disrupting the victim’s conception of causality and sense of coherent time, see also Eric Leed, “Fateful Memories: Industrialized war and Traumatic Neuroses” (85).

authority over memory” (*Achilles* 192).

In sum, for a number of reasons, including such coping mechanisms as suppression of the will and PTSD symptoms such as intrusive memories, a PTSD victim’s sense of temporality is often significantly compromised. PTSD victims are often condemned to living in an “endless present” (Herman, *Trauma* 89), which complicates their ability to distinguish present experience from memory and thus can undermine their sense of identity.

I will show how the selected Colombian narratives represent this sense of disrupted time for those that have gone through the trauma there. Especially in Vallejo and Vásquez, narrative time is disrupted, fragmented, non-linear, which is a hallmark of postmodern novel form but is as well a mimesis of traumatic thought in victims – and this is a larger point that I will revisit throughout the dissertation. Posttraumatic criticism offers a conventional explanation for the complex and fragmented jumps in time in the postmodern novel. Far from being a radical critique of the limitations of realism and modernism to represent reality in a post-industrial age, the trauma novel in its fragmentation shares the same aesthetics as novel of realism – mimesis; only the object of mimesis in the case of the posttraumatic novel is posttraumatic thought itself rather than reality.

## **2. Coping with Trauma through Narrative Therapy**

Modern psychiatry has suggested many different coping strategies for trauma, and the debate concerning the advantages and disadvantages of each is ongoing. Hypnosis, medication, yoga, group therapy, individual artistic expression, social ceremonies, and cultural forms are just some examples of the methods that have been attempted and are still being attempted. In this section I will focus on one therapy in particular, the narrative therapy, as outlined by Shay in his books. The debate concerning the efficacy of this therapy is lively, as well, and I will attempt to touch on the most considerable

objections to it. But I focus on this method of therapy because that is what I see as operating in the narrative discourse of each of the Colombia novels I write about in the following chapters. The characters heal or do not heal psychologically from their trauma according to the degree to which they are able to construct a coherent narrative about their traumatic past.

Shay's conception of the intrusive traumatic memory derives from Herman. It can be traced back through Kardiner to Pierre Janet, Charcot's protégé and successor.<sup>29</sup> Shay writes:

Traumatic memory is not narrative. Rather, it is experience that reoccurs, either as full sensory relay of traumatic events in dreams or flashbacks, with all things seen, heard, smelled, and felt intact, or as disconnected fragments. These fragments may be inexplicable rage, terror, uncontrollable crying, or disconnected body states and sensations, such as the sensation of suffocating in a Viet Cong tunnel or being tumbled over and over by a rushing river – but with no memory of either tunnel or river” (*Achilles* 172).

The intrusive memory “explodes the cohesion of consciousness” (*Achilles* 188).<sup>30</sup> The memories are

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29 Herman cites Kardiner claiming that “fixation on the trauma,” which is in reference to Freud’s own language in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, (“The patient is, one might say, fixated to his trauma” (598)). Janet in 1919 was one of the first theorists to make such explicit distinctions between “normal” memory and “traumatic” memory. He described “normal” memory as “an action; essentially it is the action of telling a story”; whereas traumatic memory does not have this narrative quality: “Strictly speaking, then, one who retains a fixed idea of a happening cannot be said to have a ‘memory’ [...] it is only for convenience that we speak of it as a ‘traumatic memory’” (*Psychological Healing* 1925[1919]: 661-663). Leys takes issue with this characterization of Janet’s writing, although she admits that he did make a distinction between “narrative memory” and “traumatic memory.” Her issue is with the memory itself being considered completely eidetic, an idea which she considers to be one that misconstrues Janet: “For according to Janet, trauma does not entail the loss of all speech but only the loss of the kind of speech associated with what he calls “presentification,” involving the victim’s capacity for narrative self-reflection and self-knowledge – that is, for self-representation” (262). But a comprehensive reading of Shay will show that he doesn’t subscribe to the view that traumatic memories are wordless. What he means by “Traumatic memory is not narrative” (*Achilles* 172) is subsequently elucidated throughout his book. It has more to do with traumatic memory defying narrative time because it is fragmentary and multi-sensory than it being completely devoid of verbal language. I belabor the point because this is one of Leys’ central attacks on van der Kolk, who heavily influences Shay. Herman, for her part, does go so far as to call the memories “wordless,” – “The frozen and wordless quality of traumatic memories” (*Trama* 37); and Leys takes her to task for this: “Herman is clearly wrong to imply that traumatic memory is “wordless” (112). Herman doesn’t just imply it. She says it. But, again, as I will show is the case with van der Kolk, a comprehensive reading of Herman shows that while perhaps her language was a bit careless at times, she is clearly trying to characterize the distinct qualities of traumatic memory from normal memory.

30 The “shattered consciousness” and “explosion of the cohesion of consciousness” metaphors and the recommended method of therapy derive in part from psychiatrist Mardi Horowitz’ *Stress Response Syndromes* (1992 [1986]) which



structured differently than non-traumatic memories in that they defy narrative time, occur as image flashbacks or as full-sensory flashbacks. Not only do the flashbacks intrude upon the consciousness of their own volition, but they are often inaccessible to conscious retrieval and control (Caruth, *Trauma* 151; Shay, *Achilles* 172-173). They are like the worst kind of unwanted guest: they come when uninvited, refuse to leave when no longer desired, and are inaccessible when they are wanted. Further, traumatic memories are formed when under emotional duress and therefore have powerful affective qualities embedded in them. They are often made under conditions of a complex mix of terror, rage and grief and their recurrence often is accompanied by a powerful simultaneous re-experience of those same emotions associated with the memory (*Achilles* 173). The re-experience of an intrusive traumatic memory is to the victim a “relivable nightmare” and as a multi-sensory compelling experience the “consciousness remains fixed on it” (173), as Freud had described a century before. The victim while he is under such conditions is not longer in complete control of his own thoughts and feelings.

Key to the therapy is the process of reconstruction of a coherent narrative rather than the accuracy of the content. As van der Kolk points out:

This transcription of the intrusive sensory elements of the trauma into a personal narrative does not necessarily have a one-to-one correspondence with what actually happened. This process of weaving a narrative out of the disparate sensory elements of an experience is probably not dissimilar from how people construct a narrative under ordinary conditions. However, when

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Herman cites: “Mardi Horowitz postulates a ‘completion principle’ which ‘summarizes the human mind’s intrinsic ability to process new information in order to bring up to date the inner schemata of the self and the world.’ Trauma, by definition, shatters these ‘inner schemata.’ Horowitz suggests that unassimilated traumatic experiences are stored in a special kind of ‘active memory,’ which has an ‘intrinsic tendency to repeat the representation of contents.’ The trauma is resolved only when the survivor develops a new mental ‘schemata’ for understanding what has happened” (Herman, *Trauma* 41 quoting Horowitz, *SRS* 93-94). The new “schemata” is what Shay and Herman refer to as a narrative reconstruction of the Self.

people have day-to-day, nontraumatic experiences, the sensory elements of the experience are not registered separately in consciousness, but are automatically integrated into the personal narrative. (“Dissociation and the Fragmentary Nature of Traumatic Memories” 519)

Van der Kolk is describing a process of making the traumatic memories into something more like normal memories through the act of narrating. This recommendation is the “narrative therapy” derived from Herman and van der Kolk. It has roots of course all the way back to Janet and Freud. Another early proponent of the method is F.C. Bartlett (1932). Both Herman and Shay attest to using it successfully to help heal the wounds of complex PTSD in the patients they have treated over the years they have practiced.<sup>31</sup> It also assumes the Cartesian conception of subjectivity in Western philosophy.<sup>32</sup> Allan Young calls to question the possibility of what we now call PTSD symptoms prior to the modern conceptualization of the Western subject. I discuss his arguments in the next section.

In his clinical work, Shay found that the sufferer who can reestablish authority over his traumatic memories by reconstructing a coherent narrative of the events and find a listener or reader to acknowledge its veracity and serve as a public witness, can diminish the severity of the PTSD symptoms (*Achilles* 191; see also van der Kolk 1996; 1995). Books, whether imaginative literature, testimonials, or autobiography, are examples of this kind of narrative that is destined for public discourse and that purports to impart knowledge to the community. I will argue that the authors, narrators, and protagonists of the texts I chose for analysis are all engaged in this therapeutic activity in

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31 For other arguments on the effectiveness of narrative therapy for psychological trauma, see, Pennebaker (1997; 2001), Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (1995); John McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy* (1997);

32 On the relationship between memory and narrative in the creation of the modern subject as well as trauma therapy, see, among many others, and of course in addition to Herman, Shay, and Jaramillo Agudelo – Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (1993); Susan J. Brison “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” in Mieke Bal et al., *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (1999); Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (2000), especially “Memory in Theory” (11-32), and “Rememory and Reconstruction: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” (150-174); Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Becomes Stories: Making Selves* (1999); Thomas C. Heller et al., *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought* (1986).

some way – the struggle to establish their authority over individual memory and at the same time call on the public to bear witness.

In Shay's view, the absence of such opportunities for communal narration of trauma in Vietnam contributes to the soldier's long-term psychological injury. Judith Herman notes the importance of trauma communalization in other contexts as well. Part of what makes the complex-PTSD suffered by childhood victims of sexual abuse by parents so devastating is that the victims have no way to communicate or grieve about their trauma (*Father-Daughter Incest* 1981). If they tell someone else in the family, their story might not be believed. And as they are economically and legally dependent on their parents, the act of denouncing them as abusers is more difficult because the minors have no way of providing shelter and sustenance for themselves. Incest in many cases is thus two types of PTSD-causing trauma in one context: sexual abuse and unjust confinement. They are literally trapped by their persecutors and have no one with whom to grieve. Worse, the thwarted grief opportunity in the cases of soldiers and the incest victims was often channeled into a berserk rage and desire for revenge, which led to even more disastrous psychological consequences for the sufferer.

James Pennebaker is another psychologist who has published extensively on this narrative therapy, most prominently in two books: *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions* (1997) and *The Secret Life of Pronouns: What Our Words Say About Us* (2011). In *Opening Up* Pennebaker reported on his findings that the severity of PTSD symptoms in subjects who subsequently talked (97-98), created a visual art product like a painting or photograph (99) and wrote about (102-103) the traumatic event were less severe than symptoms in those who didn't. Pennebaker's findings were backed up by empirical, clinical studies, to include blood and urine samples, and other somatic tests of the subjects conducted before and after the experiment.

In broad strokes, Pennebaker in these two studies held that the key to psychological trauma

therapy was the process of constructing a coherent written narrative. In one of his most intriguing studies, he noted significant psychological benefits in subjects whose stories of their trauma began as incoherent, disorganized and fragment but then gained coherence over time and re-writes: “day by day, as they continued to write, the episode would take on shape as a coherent story with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Ironically, participants who started the study with a clear, coherent, and well-organized story rarely evidence any health improvements” (103). He concludes: “Just as we are drawn to good stories in literature or the movies, we need to construct coherent and meaningful stories for ourselves. Good narratives or stories, then, organize seemingly infinite facts of overwhelming events. Once organized, the events are often smaller and easier to deal with” (103).

But for Shay, narrative reconstruction of traumatic memory, while essential to recovery, is merely the first step in the complete process of PTSD therapy. The reason that narrative alone is inadequate has to do with the paradox of having to impose narrative time on a memory that by its traumatic nature resists chronological sequence. Western languages have sequential time built into their very grammatical structure. Verbs, for instance, the fundamental building-block of the sentence in most Western languages, are conjugated in the past, present or future tense. A verb cannot be conjugated, and therefore a sentence cannot be made, unless a time tense is decided upon for it. For trauma victims, many of whose memories exist in a perpetual present, this mismatch between medium and content can prove to be an insurmountable challenge. Regardless, Shay holds that “the paradox that narrative temporality can never be completely true to the timeless experience of prolonged, severe trauma...disappears when we look at narration as a step in the survivor’s larger move to communalize the trauma by inducing others who were not there to feel what the victim felt” (*Achilles* 191). Many theorists have argued that fictional writing whose narrative sequence jumps back and forth, a characteristic more common in novels in the postmodern period but that has been around since Homer,

might be privileged in rendering traumatic memory – its resistance to linear, causal logic lets it do what other discourses cannot (Nicholls 1996; Luckhurst 81; Race 2014). I will cover this special quality of literary fiction in the next section.

For now, there are affective elements that need to be considered as well. These are important to consider because they play a role in the psychological healing in each of the Colombian novels I analyze. Since the injury of complex PTSD is as much cultural and social as it is individually psychological – we recall that Shay defined complex-PTSD as simple-PTSD plus an element of social and moral betrayal, a betrayal of *thémis*, or “what’s right,” – the cure must take place in the realm of the social as well. Further, since traumatic memory consists as much of affective elements as it does of cognitive elements, the images and mental traces of the memory itself, the most effective cure involved affective elements as well:

Trauma narrative imparts knowledge to the community that listen and responds to it emotionally. Emotion carries essential cognitive elements; it is not separable from the knowledge. Something quite profound takes place when the trauma survivor sees enlightenment take hold. The narrator now speaks as his or her free self, not as the captive or the perpetrator. The aloneness is broken in a manner that obliterates neither the narrator nor the listener in a reenactment. (*Achilles* 191)

Affective elements were at the heart of the talking cure’s earliest practitioner’s methods. Pierre Janet writes that integrating the traumatic memory into one’s narrative memory alone was not sufficient for successful therapy: “Assimilation constitutes no more than one element in a whole series of modified behaviour which I shall deal with in the sequel under the name of “excitation” (681). “Excitation” was a prerequisite that was necessary to bring about “liquidation,” (Janet) which “demanded a discharge or ‘demobilization’ of psychical energies that Janet linked to Freud’s cathartic abreaction” (Leys 115).

Janet writes later: “Very often I have observed with her [Irène, one of his famous patients] as with so many other patients that the truly useful séances were those where I was able to make her emotional. [...] When the higher functioning is obtained, the subject feels a modification of his consciousness that translates into an increase in perception and activity” (Janet, *La médecine psychologique* 1923, 126 qtd. in Leys 116). Here we clearly have the precursor for Shay’s recommended method. Furthermore, and I will elaborate on the significance of this to a greater extent in a later section on the value of fiction, Leys perceives that through Janet’s techniques of

liquidation and assimilation, patients acquired the ability to produce an account of themselves that conformed to certain requirements of temporal ordering but that did not necessarily entail a process of self-recognition. The distinction between forgetting and remembering thus virtually collapsed in the demand that, whether or not they remember the traumatic “event,” patients became capable of developing a coherent narrative of their lives. (117)

In other words, what mattered in terms of psychological therapy was that the patient constructed a coherent narrative, not whether or not that narrative was a veridical account of the traumatic event: “memory conceived as truth-telling is overestimated but [...] memory conceived as narration is crucial” (Leys 118).

As Shay would argue subsequently, the “something quite profound” that Shay says takes place in the narrator’s consciousness when he realizes that not only the cognitive elements but also the affective elements of his traumatic memory have successfully been transmitted to a listener is what Aristotle had in mind in his *Poetics* when he wrote of catharsis. Teresa Brennan and many others would later call this phenomenon “the transmission of affect” (2004). In his article “The Birth of Tragedy ... Out of the Needs of Democracy,” Shay traces classicist Leon Golden’s analysis of the potential meanings Aristotle could have intended for his term “catharsis” when applying it to tragedy.

By comparison of Aristotle's different uses of the term in *Poetics* and *Politics*, Golden argues that Aristotle was being intentionally ambiguous in the *Poetics* in order to appeal broadly to a mixed audience. Catharsis, in addition to meaning purgation of either an impurity or of pity and fear, can refer as well to a moment of sudden insight and clarification "removing obstacles to understanding, the psychological equivalent of producing clear water from muddy water" (Shay, "Birth of Tragedy" 2).

Shay holds that the transmission of affect, understood as the conveyance of the emotional as well as the cognitive aspects of an experience to the listener or reader, is necessary to bring about this psychological clarification. The transmitter or narrator, who in Shay's case was the trauma survivor narrating a reconstruction of his own traumatic experience, can psychologically heal more effectively when he realizes that he has successfully imparted his knowledge to the community. A listener's catharsis was an indicator that successful communication of the experience had taken place, and that the experience, in all of its complicated, affective, multi-sensory aspects, had been related to another party.

If ancient Athenian theater was, among many other things of course, a form of therapy for combat PTSD, it was so because of the nature of that particular cultural institution. The writers, directors, actors and audience members were all male citizen soldiers at various stages of the careers. They had all likely seen combat because Athens at that time was engaged in continual conflict with other city-states. One's seat in the audience was even determined according to one's military unit and rank within the unit (Doerries). Sophocles was not just a tragedian. He was as well a thrice-elected, extremely effective general. For the ancient Athenians, theater was the medium to narrate and communalize war trauma.

In contemporary society we have different art forms. We still produce war plays, of course, but we are more likely to see a staging of one written by Sophocles than by General David Petraus. And

the theater audience is certainly not organized according to military unit. Still, Shay argues that there is still a pressing need to narrativize and communalize trauma if it is to be treated:

We must all strive to be a trustworthy audience to the abuse of power.... We must create our own new models of healing which emphasize communalization of trauma. Combat veterans and American citizenry should meet together face to face in daylight, and listen, and watch, and weep, just as citizen-soldiers of ancient Athens did in the theater at the foot of the Acropolis. We need a modern equivalent of Athenian tragedy. Tragedy brings us to cherish our mortality, to savor and embrace it. (*Achilles* 194)

Shay speculates that this cultural form, along with many other practices he writes of in ancient Greece, were designed to mitigate the psychological injuries that soldiers suffered from prolonged combat and help integrate them back into civil society; PTSD is a disease of modernity in part because our culture is devoid of these cultural forms on a large scale.

This experience of catharsis through storytelling to an empathetic listener is also a key event in the success and failure of trauma therapy in the Colombian novels I analyze. In the first, Fernando abjectly fails at communicating his trauma; available discourses fail him. In the second, Jaramillo Agudelo takes care to stage, in a couple of different places, group therapy sessions that center around reading of fictional literature. In the third, the culminating moment of Vásquez' narrator's healing journey of self-discovery is his retelling of his own story to another trauma victim.

Books and movies have supplanted the theater in contemporary society as art forms in terms of distribution and consumption. What is lost in books and movies as opposed to theater, in terms of Shay's conception of communal trauma healing, is the physical presence of the audience, the physical site of communalization. But what is gained is the ability to reach a wider community because of the means of distribution of the form. As Walter Benjamin formulated the phenomenon in his influential



essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1935), the ritual aspects and “aura” of a work, that is, the very aspects tied to the affective communalization that happens in theater, might be lost in reproduction. But the reproductions can reach a much wider audience, which for Benjamin gave them potential in terms of inciting revolution.

But regardless of what form the art takes, Shay’s recommendation that victims of PTSD narrate their stories to help them reassert control over their memories still applies today: “Narrative can transform involuntary re-experiencing of traumatic events into memory of the events, thereby re-establishing authority over memory” (192).

## **2.1 Objections to the Narrative Therapy Method and Rebuttals**

Not surprisingly, these theories have been discussed and refuted from many camps. Let us look of some of the most significant of them.

### **2.1.1 Allan Young**

After conducting ethnographic research in the mid-nineteen-eighties by observing PTSD group therapy sessions in Veterans Affairs venues, anthropologist Allan Young published an important study, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (1995) that called to question some of the core assumptions of the contemporary conception of PTSD. In general, the first idea he challenges is the claim that what we now call PTSD can be translated to other cultures and other times – that the symptoms that the characters complained of in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Shakespeare’s *Henry IV Part One*, or Homer, had anything to do with the disorder that we now refer to as PTSD. The second assumption he attacks is the mental health institutions “belief in the solidity of scientific facts and the conviction that psychiatry’s facts, being scientific, are essentially timeless” (9). In essence, his

is accusing the mental health industry of self-serving and self-vindicating practices (10).

As regards the first claim, which goes to the heart of Shay's thesis, Young complicates the retroactive PTSD diagnosis of ancient literary characters and personages. For instance, Young refutes some scholars' claims (Trimble 1985; Grady 1990) that the following passage from Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part One* in which Hotspur's wife, Lady Percy, interrogates him about his flashbacks, has anything to do with traumatic memory as we conceive of it today. Below I print Shay's diagnosis of Hotspur which runs line-by-line from Lady Percy's speech. The left column contains lines from the play; the right column contains PTSD symptoms that correspond to them.<sup>33</sup>

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33 My table is taken from Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam* (1994), which was published as Young's book was going to print, so it is unlikely that Young, who started his book in 1986, was responding directly to Shay – nor are there any references in Young to Shay's work. But Young was responding to Trimble and Grady (they were specifically cited in his book), whose use of the Hotspur's wife's speech as a teaching point to PTSD victims Shay borrowed. The PTSD symptoms I list in the column are a mix of Shay's translating the language of the *DSM-III-R*'s (1987) PTSD diagnostics section, along with Shay's own observations of complex-PTSD symptoms in combat veterans, such as “sense of the dead being more real than the living” (*Achilles* 165), etc....

### Hotspur's PTSD symptoms

O, my good lord, why are you thus alone?	Social withdrawal and isolation
<u>For what offense</u> have I this fortnight been <u>A banish'd woman from my Harry's bed?</u>	Random, unwarranted rage at family, sexual dysfunction, no capacity for intimacy
Tell me, sweet lord, what is't that takes from thee <u>Thy stomach, pleasure</u>	Somatic disturbances, loss of ability to experience pleasure
And thy golden <u>sleep</u> ?	Insomnia
Why dost thou bend thine eyes upon the earth,	Depression
And <u>start</u> so often when thou sit'st alone?	Hyperactive startle reaction
Why hast thou <u>lost the fresh blood in thy cheeks,</u>	Peripheral vasoconstriction, autonomic hyperactivity
And given my treasures and my rights of thee To thick-eyed musing and cursed melancholy?	Sense of the dead being more real than the living, depression
In thy faint <u>slumbers</u> I by thee have watch'd,	Fragmented, vigilant sleep
And heard thee murmur tales of iron wars, Speak terms of manage to thy bounding steeds, Cry "Courage! To the field!" And thou hast talk'd Of sallies and retires, of trenches, tents, Of palisadoes, frontiers, parapets, Of prisoner's ransom, and of soldiers slain, And all the currents of a heady fight. Thy spirit within thee hath been so at war And thus hath so bestirr'd thee in thy sleep,	Traumatic dreams, reliving episodes of combat, fragmented sleep
That <u>beads of sweat have stood upon thy brow,</u> Like bubbles in a late-disturbed stream;	Night sweats, autonomic hyperactivity

(*Henry IV, Part One* act 2. scene 3 lines 35-53)

Table 1: Hotspur's PTSD symptoms as diagnosed by Jonathan Shay

Young is equally dismissive of use of the concept to diagnose *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the writings of Samuel Pepys, a diarist who reported symptoms similar to PTSD in 1666 following the Great Fire of London. Young makes the following strong claim: "none of these writers – neither Pepys, nor Shakespeare, nor the author of *Gilgamesh* – was referring to the things that we now call the

traumatic memory, for this memory was unavailable to them” (4).<sup>34</sup> He reasons that the memory was unavailable to them because they existed before Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and David Hume proposed that memory is “intrinsically connected to our conception of ‘self’ and ‘self-awareness’” (Young 4, citing Graham Richards 159-161). In sum, Young holds that our conception of subjectivity and memory, “together with the practices through which memories are retrieved, interpreted, and narrated” (4) has changed so radically over the centuries, that a retroactive diagnosis of a disorder that owes its naming to contemporary categorization is a gross oversimplification.

It is important to emphasize, however, that Young makes clear that he does not deny the existence of PTSD, nor of PTSD symptoms: “The reality of PTSD is confirmed empirically by its place in people’s lives, by their experiences and convictions, and by the personal and collective investments that have been made in it” (5). He reiterates later: “The suffering is real; PTSD is real” (10). His critique, rather, is with the way that the contemporary concept of traumatic memory and PTSD are the scientist’s phenomena, “products of his technologies, practices, and preconditioned ways of seeing” (10). This point speaks toward the second assumption of the medical industry that he attacks, which is the belief that the traumatic memory is timeless, which he equates with “true”: “But can one also say that the facts now attached to PTSD are *true* (timeless) as well as real?” (10). Without denying the reality of the symptoms, Young is critiquing the industry that he sees as lacking in the ability to look critically at itself, basing its progress on a weak foundation of circular logic and self-vindicating results. He cites Ludwig Fleck’s phrase of a “harmony of illusions,” which is a false-sense of the timelessness of facts built on interpretation of scientific research findings: “The research worker gropes but everything recedes, and nowhere is there a firm support. Everything seems to be an artificial effect

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34 In a book published after this debate, Rachel MacNair included a PTSD diagnosis of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth that show an even tighter correspondence between their symptoms and those listed in the *DSM* (120-121). Young’s comments on this text would be interesting to read.

inspired by his own personal will” (Fleck 94, cited in Young 10). Young’s general impression from observing VA group therapy sessions was that there was conscious and unconscious collusion between patients and therapists to conceive of and talk about PTSD in ways that confirmed the theoretical framework forced on them.

I don’t pretend to contend with Young’s criticism of social sciences’ deficiencies in self-criticism, nor do I contend with the claim that PTSD is a concept that is culturally constituted – it emerged from contemporary discourses and ideas of memory, trauma, and the self (See Morris 60-61; Shephard 385-391; Leys 241-242). I will simply assert that his denial of traumatic memory in pre-Enlightenment writers is to take issue with an error in naming rather than a denial of the existence of the symptoms. In other words, if one doesn’t want to call whatever it was that Hotspur had “PTSD,” then one can feel free to call it something else; but Young isn’t denying the existence of the symptoms, and his critique isn’t refuting the presence of the disorder – call it what you will.

A brief etymology of the term “flashback,” in the way it is used to describe the intrusive memories or the repetition compulsion in traumatic memory, may be useful here, because in observing the degree to which cultural forms constitute the vocabulary for one particular PTSD symptom, one can get an idea of the way that the whole disorder is culturally constituted. As David Morris writes, the term “flashback” was first used by filmmakers in the twentieth century. Widely adopted in the popular media and culture, it was adapted into medical discourse by psychiatrists such as Mardi Horowitz in the sixties and seventies to describe the long-term after-effects of hallucinogenic drugs like LSD (see Horowitz 1969). Morris speculates that Horowitz’ participation in the working groups that advocated for including PTSD in the 1980 *DSM-III* release was a significant factor in the term’s dominance in PTSD discourse to this day (Morris 61; Leys 242; Frankel 328). Further, Morris, citing both a 2002 King’s College of London study of war records back through the Victorian era and Eric Dean’s *Shook*

*Over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War* (1997), claims that “flashbacks were virtually nonexistent among veterans who fought before the age of film. (Civil War veterans who suffered from involuntary intrusive images didn’t refer to them as flashbacks, and they were more likely to describe being visited by a host of spirits, phantoms, demons, and the ghosts of fallen comrades.)” (61). However, the author of Morris’ source material, Eric Dean, himself repeatedly refers to the events as...“flashbacks” (104-105; 112; 122; 157). Thus I could hope to find no better proof for my thesis that the only thing that changed was the terminology than this: the very text that Morris cites to prove that “flashbacks” didn’t exist before the age of film repeatedly uses the term “flashback” to describe the full-sensory intrusive traumatic memories experienced by Civil War veterans. “Flashback” as a metaphor is new; the symptoms are timeless, or at least remarkably similar across cultures and time periods. Call it a “flashback” or call it an “intrusive memory” or call it a “dissociative reaction,” as you will, but changing the name will not change the symptoms, which are remarkably similar across time.

The same logic can be extrapolated to the entire discourse that surrounds PTSD. While the vocabulary for describing the symptoms as well as the epistemological system for conceptualizing them is culturally dependent, the symptoms themselves do have an uncanny similarity between cultures and time periods, whether or not they are talked and thought about in the same manner, which is precisely what the line-by-line *Henry IV Part One* example demonstrates, as does a quick comparison of the symptoms Pepys describes, as do Achilles’ and Odysseus’ symptoms that Shay first noticed that were so similar to the Vietnam combat veterans he was treating for PTSD.<sup>35</sup> And, if one does not want

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35 Young disagrees with the contention, arguing that the interpretation of Lady Percy’s comments as a PTSD diagnosis depends on reading the line “Thy spirit within thee hath been so at war” (*Henry IV, Part One* act 2. scene 3 line 50) to mean that he is psychologically conflicted, as opposed to taking the lines to mean that he is martially inspired, one who has “the warrior’s spirit in him,” for example. Young argues that taking the latter interpretation of the line would yield an interpretation of the entire speech as a pleasurable dream of a bellicose man who is anxious to get to war (291 note 1).

to use the culturally overdetermined term “PTSD,” just as one might object to use of the term “flashback” for pre-cinema traumatic symptoms, one can use a variety of the terms that have been adopted since the disorder was identified: combat neuroses, neurasthenia (late-19th century and WWI), soldier’s heart (post-Civil War), shell-shock (WWI), the thousand-yard stare (Vietnam), to name only the most well-known.

### 2.1.2 Ruth Leys

A few important points of Leys’ criticism need to be addressed here in detail. The first has to do with her objection to the argument that traumatic flashbacks, because they are eidetic, are therefore literal and absolutely accurate recordings of the event as it occurred. What Leys sees as dangerous in this line of reasoning in the hands of someone like Caruth is that it can lead to a privileging of the traumatic memory as historical artifact of one traumatic event over the possibility of repairing the psychic damage done to the victim through therapy, which, under Caruth’s model and van der Kolk’s reasoning, would, by definition, corrupt the memory: “The entire theory of trauma proposed by van der Kolk and Caruth is designed to preserve the truth of the trauma as the failure of representation” (Leys 253).

But a careful reading of van der Kolk’s work will show that, even if he is careless with his terminology at times (Leys’ holds that it “slips and slides” (250), making it difficult to track his

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William Empson’s famous doctrine of “both...and” as opposed to “either...or” when interpreting literary texts can be invoked here to maintain the validity of both interpretations of the lines from Shakespeare, one of the most ambiguous of poets (*Seven Types of Ambiguity* 81). Hotspur is a character given over to war, and his dreams of escapades are probably a mix of both pleasure and pain, not of either pleasure or pain. But one calls to question an interpretation that completely rules out trauma, if not PTSD as we know it, faced with evidence of it in lines such as “Why hast thou lost the fresh blood in thy cheeks,” “what is’t that takes from thee / thy stomach, pleasure,” and “Why dost thou bend thine eyes upon the earth?” I submit that Hotspur is *both* traumatized *and* jingoistic, not simply *either* traumatized *or* jingoistic; those states and dispositions do not have to be mutually exclusive.

thoughts), the thrust of his arguments, based both on somatic and psychosomatic experiments, is simply that traumatic memories are somehow created, stored, and accessed differently than narrative memory. Here are some examples from the article that he contributed to Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995): they are "stored differently and not be available for retrieval under ordinary conditions" ("Intrusive Past" 160); it suffers from a "lack of proper integration" (163) into narrative memory; further, "The experience cannot be organized on a linguistic level, and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level: as somatic sensations, behavioral reenactments, nightmares, and flashbacks" (172); lastly, and this is the kind of language that gets him into trouble with Leys, it is "inflexible and invariable" (163). This phrase can clearly be interpreted, as Leys does, to claim that the traumatic memory is a veridical engraving of the memory; but when the phrase is read in context, an anecdote in which Janet tells of the different accounts that one of Janet's patients gave of her traumatic experience to him with the account she gave to other people, one could also interpret the phrase as an attempt to contrast the traumatic, private memory with a social memory, which is adaptive and malleable to suit the circumstances (163); furthermore, that it is inflexible and invariable in the way that the victim perceives its occurrence does not necessarily imply that he is claiming it is inflexible and invariable because it has privileged access to truth.

To be sure, van der Kolk, throughout his vast body of work, does make many references to the engraving and etching of the traumatic memory, such as this phrase about the repetitive flashback: "Repetitive exposure etches them more and more powerfully into the brain" (*Traumatic Stress* 8); but this phrase, like all the others, must be read in its entire context – in the quote above it is the repetitive experiencing of the flashback that etches the memory into the brain, not the memory's special power to record the event as it occurred. For the most part, van der Kolk's claims are balanced, supported by a



sizable amount of research, and supported with careful references to the existing literature. His introduction to one of the articles Leys cites shows his balanced view: “The nature and reliability of traumatic memories have been controversial issues in psychiatry for over a century” (“Dissociation and the Fragmentary Nature of Traumatic Memories” 505). And the conclusion to his chapter “Memory: Mechanisms and Processes” in his landmark study *Traumatic Stress* is testament to his circumspect judgment: “the question of whether the brain is able to ‘take pictures,’ and whether some smells, images, sounds, or physical sensations may be etched onto the mind and remain unaltered by subsequent experiences and by the passage of time, remains to be answered” (297). He has not subsequently published anything answering this question unequivocally in the affirmative.

Most importantly, on the question of giving priority to the sacredness of the pristine traumatic memory over possibly distorting it through narrative therapy, he comes down on the side of therapy: “The question arises whether it is not a sacrilege of the traumatic experience to play with the reality of the past? Janet (1919-25) provided one example that illustrates the usefulness of such a therapeutic approach in some cases (cf. Van der Hart et al., 1990)” (“Intrusive Past” 179). Here it is significant that he turns to Janet, who among all of the early therapists was most committed to the techniques of hypnotism and suggestion, to the point of making the patient completely forget the trauma (Leys 106; see also Janet 1976[1925]). Here van der Kolk’s support for a technique that completely distorts or erases a traumatic memory can hardly be seen as privileging the sacredness of the traumatic memory over the well-being of the patient.

The second point regarding Leys’ critique that needs to be made is an observation that her objections apply, for the most part, to a theoretical model of traumatic memory that fails to account for PTSD symptoms that stem from trauma caused by an accumulation or summation of psychic stress from events that may have caused a lesser degree of psychic stress when taken individually (this is a

critique that can be leveled at the *DSM-5*'s PTSD section as well – it is a reductive model that only accounts for trauma stemming from one event in particular). But when other models are considered, such as the “summation” model just mentioned (see also Atkinson et al. 2009; Card 1983), or Shay’s and Herman’s model of complex-PTSD as a moral injury, then the objections would likely diminish – there is no longer one particular event that might become the center of contention of either truth or invention.

David Morris’ own case of PTSD is illustrative of the way that the current model is not robust enough to handle the complexities in many of the cases of combat trauma. On arriving at the VA clinic for outpatient PTSD therapy, he was made to complete a Clinician-Administered PTSD Scale (CAPS), which is a diagnostic questionnaire that an interviewer completes based on patient’s responses. The patient is required to choose one or two traumatic events and is then questioned on the nature of his posttraumatic symptoms. Morris and many of the other patients he spoke with expressed intense frustration at having to “condense their traumatic experience down to one or two distinct events” (170). Rather than tracing his PTSD back to the etiological event, Morris describes, in language that captures both van der Kolk’s articulation of Freud and Janet’s notion of a traumatic memory as “mute, unsymbolized, and unintegrated” (van der Kolk, “Intrusive Past” 167), as well as Shay’s, Card’s and Herman’s notion of PTSD as stemming from the accumulated stress of lesser strains and a general moral injury: “But there are other, less easily described moments. Moments with no clear narrative line. Moments of moral chaos. Moments when anything became possible. Moments were nothing was real. Moments that occurred over the course of months. Moments I am still waiting to end. Moments that have yet to be tamed by language” (170).

In these cases of PTSD from a combat environment, etiology is difficult if not impossible. The disorder simply cannot be reduced to having stemmed from one particular event. As I wrote about

before in the PTSD definition section, Eric Leed notes Sándor Ferenczi’s strong resistance to the etiological approach: “Ferenczi insisted that rarely can the symptom be traced to a single traumatic instance. It is the representation of motives that are consistently in conflict within the environment inhabited by the neurotic” (*No Man’s Land* 179). Leed’s comments are in reference to Ferenczi’s contribution to *Psycho-Analysis and the War Neuroses* (1921), in which Ferenczi, giving due credit to Freud’s “frequently and expressly stated” (Ferenczi 13) view that “speaks of an ‘aetiological succession’ in the predisposition [to develop posttraumatic symptoms], the traumatic occasion figuring as reciprocal value with this. A trifling predisposition and severe shock can produce the same effects as an increased predisposition and a much lesser degree of shock” (13). Ferenczi later goes on to break down the loaded word “predisposition” into its constituent elements, one of those being the prolonged exposure to trauma in a combat scenario.

I trace the debate back a century to Freud and Ferenczi to demonstrate again that there is nothing new about the argument that psychic trauma is cumulative, the summation of lesser strains – this is the very theory of “‘aetiological succession’” (Freud qtd. in Ferenczi 13) that Freud had expressed so many times, according to Ferenczi<sup>36</sup> – it goes back to the origins of modern writing on PTSD. By contrast, unfortunately, now the focus both clinically (APA, *DSM-5*, the VA) and theoretically seems to be fixated on the reductive model of one etiological event: this was Morris’ most significant complaint during his treatment, which took place only a few years ago; and the controversy surrounding Caruth’s truth claims occurs in the context of the etiological model. But if the summation

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36 A reading of Leed, Leys, Ferenczi and Freud will show that it was in fact Ferenczi who repeatedly articulated this view, while, on the other hand, Freud had a foot in both camps, always with an eye to preserve his developmental theory – Freud held that there was something about the constitution of the subject that made the predisposition for PTSD more acute, instead of the view that a prolonged exposure to combat could produce the results in anyone. In giving so much credit to Freud (Ferenczi’s saying how Freud “frequently and expressly” stated things), here it seems like Ferenczi is being gracious; this paper came out of the Fifth Psychoanalytic Conference in Vienna, and all important names in the field were present; Freud was asked to write an introduction to the work that came out of the conference – being parsimonious with credit would have probably been bad form on the part of Ferenczi.

model is considered, then the ground is shifted on the entire controversy on the importance of whether or not the event is etched in the mind as it occurred. I am not suggesting that Leys subscribes to the reductive model of etiology traced back to a single event. Far from it. Like Leed, she devotes an entire section on Ferenczi's struggles with that very issue, especially in his late writings (*Trauma* 120-175). But I am suggesting that Shay's model, even though it is based on many of van der Kolk's claims regarding traumatic memory and therapy, some of which have been called to question by her criticism, would escape the brunt of her attacks on this front because its focus is on the complex causes of trauma in prolonged combat rather than one etiological event.

This same defense also applies to my approaches to trauma in the Colombian texts I analyze in following chapters of the present project. In each of them, even though there is a distinct etiological event from which the PTSD symptoms ostensibly stem, the texts reveal that the symptoms are more severe and pronounced due to a summation or cumulative effect of the victims' having lived through a period and environment of sustained danger and stress. In fact, it is as if the texts are written precisely to illustrate this point. The reader's attention is grabbed by a shocking event, such as a gun-shot wound, a murder, or serial murders, from which it is naturally assumed the protagonists' symptoms stem. But as the texts develop, they show that the causes of the traumatic symptoms were manifold, cultural, cumulative – which is exactly how Morris so eloquently describes combat trauma in a conventional war.

Finally, van der Kolk's, Shay's, and Herman's careful and realistic circumscribing of the therapy's limited ability to cure must be taken for what it is: the frank admission that there is no cure for these wounds; there are only degrees of healing. As Herman concludes *Trauma and Recovery*: “Resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete” (211). Shay holds that even while a “return to ‘normal’ is not possible” (*Achilles* 184), “recovery is possible in many areas of life, perhaps

in the most important ones for a fulfilling existence” (*Achilles* 186); but even in these cases, by the *DSM* standards, “*they* [the victims] *remain highly symptomatic*” (*Achilles* 186). Van der Kolk writes that “The persistence of intrusive sensations related to the trauma, even after the construction of a narrative, contradicts the notion that learning to put the traumatic experience into words will reliably help abolish the occurrence of flashbacks” (“Dissociation” 519). The goals are limited. Not one of the practitioners makes the claim that being recovered, cured, healed, or however one wants to put it, implies that one is going to be forever free of PTSD symptoms, of which flashbacks are one of the most common. In another article speculating on the benefits of medicated treatment, van der Kolk says: “The goal of treatment of PTSD is to help people live in the present, without feeling or behaving according to irrelevant demands belonging to the past. Psychologically, this means that traumatic experiences need to be located in time and place and distinguished from current reality” (261). Notice that he is not claiming to be able to abolish or even diminish the occurrence of flashbacks. But the narrative therapy can at the very least allow the patient to be able to distinguish a flashback from present reality.

But these admissions should not be taken either as failures nor as justifications for undermining the whole enterprise. Leys takes van der Kolk’s circumscribing of the goals of therapy to be part of a what she sees as a paradox in van der Kolk’s writing of the uncured patient condemned to relive flashbacks will have contagious effects on the therapist. Leys writes that van der Kolk uses the therapists’ fear of contagion to justify lack of progress in the field, while at the same time, conflating van der Kolk and Caruth’s position into one, Leys points out the contradiction in Caruth’s desire for the victim to experience flashbacks and contaminate others “ensures that the truth of the past as dislocation and failed witnessing – the truth of history as trauma – will be transmitted to others” (254). There is a paradox only if the arguments are juxtaposed in the way that Leys does it. Van der Kolk is simply

stating that flashbacks may continue to recur. Caruth is advocating for historical recognition of trauma. But Leys puts their statements, which are on distinct subjects, together and points out the paradox as part of her argument to discredit both.

These theorists, however, do not exhaust the whole larger question of trauma and experience. Traumatic stories are also *stories* – narratives of autobiography or fiction (sometimes both) that shape the Self. As stories, as literature, they have special qualities of representation which privilege them as discourses when it comes to articulating traumatic memory. I will cover these qualities in the next section.

## 2.2 Why Fiction?

In this section I will examine the arguments on some theorists as to why literature can claim a privileged place among the discourses that attempt to represent traumatic memory. First, I will outline some arguments on how fictional representations of trauma stories, as opposed to testimonial or autobiographical representations, possess special qualities that are psychologically therapeutic to the sufferer of PTSD, and then I will outline how this will play out in the novels I analyze in the following chapters. Second, I will examine formal aspects of literature to briefly illustrate the advantages of it as a discourse to represent traumatic memory.

The very reason why I selected the texts that I did for a project that utilized this particular theoretical model of combat trauma and recovery is because, in each novel, the characters' success or failure at constructing a coherent narrative of their traumatic past determines the degree to which they manage their own psychological recovery from the trauma. They clearly move beyond the combat narratives that have been the focus of most interest to this point. In Vallejo's *Our Lady of the Assassins*, his protagonist is a spectacular failure at constructing a coherent narrative of his trauma, and

his psychic and physical states deteriorate throughout the novel. In Jaramillo Agudelo's *Cartas cruzadas*, the characters who achieve a coherent narrative thrive, while those who don't atrophy – one disappears completely. In Vásquez' novel *The Sound of Things Falling*, the narrator, Yammara, who, as I will demonstrate, can be seen as the author of the last two-thirds of the book, heals to a certain extent, while another character, Maya, remains fixated on the trauma. What is fascinating about using this interpretive model is that the degree to which the characters become the authors of their own memories, identities, and traumatic past is illuminated. What is even more fascinating to me are the notions, which I will develop below, that not only does the degree to which the content of the stories are true accounts of events carry little weight in terms of psychological healing – fiction, in other words, serves the same therapeutic purpose as autobiography or testimony – but also that fiction is a privileged form for representing trauma.

That fiction plays an essential role in trauma therapy is a claim that runs through the history of psychoanalysis, from Freud's notion that fantasy is the place where the subject forms the imaginary satisfaction of a sexual desire ("A Child is being Beaten") to Lacan's notion of fantasy as that which shields the subject from the anxiety produced by the desire of the Other ("Kant avec Sade"). As Leys puts it, challengingly, "psychoanalysis as Lacan and the Lacanians define it is committed to the project of formalizing memory by eliciting and analyzing narratives whose fidelity to individual experience is no longer of central importance" (117). She is referring to Lacan's discussion of Freud's 1934 article "Constructions in Analysis" in which he revisited his position that reconstruction of event was more important in terms of therapy than a literal reliving or remembering of them. Lacan paraphrases Freud's position "that the subject relives, comes to remember, in the intuitive sense of the word, the formative events of his existence, is not in itself so very important. What matters is what he reconstructs of it." (Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954* 13). Later, Lacan puts it more

forcefully: “I would say – when all is said and done, it is less a matter of remembering than of rewriting history” (14).

Over half a century later, Pennebaker’s findings from studies in which the change in participants’ mental states were compared before and after writing about trauma (1997; 2011) confirmed Lacan’s interpretation of Freud that narrative coherence trumped mimesis, that writing fiction had the similar psychologically therapeutic benefits as non-fiction: “researchers discovered that writing about an imaginary trauma was almost as therapeutic as writing about a real one. In reading the essays it is often impossible to know which ones were real and which ones were made up” (*The Secret Life of Pronouns* 143).

Since I adopt Shay’s theoretical model, I will start with an example from the epic about which he wrote his second book – Homer’s *Odyssey*. This example is particularly appropriate for my approach in the chapters that follow for a couple of reasons. The first is because it argues that a literary character undertakes his own psychological healing through constructing a fictional narrative. Two, I will argue in the fifth chapter that Juan Gabriel Vásquez in his novel *The Sound of Things Falling* sustains a tight but complex transtextual comparison between his protagonist’s return home with that of Odysseus.

In an article titled “Phaeacian Therapy in Homer’s *Odyssey*,” published last year in Meineck and Konstan’s collection *Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks*, William Race puts forth the novel argument that Odysseus’ entire sojourn on their island of Scheria served the purpose of recuperating him physically and psychologically to his return to society following the trauma he experienced in the war at Troy and during subsequent difficulties. Race writes of Scheria as a “sanitarium,” “rehab facility,” or “idealized halfway house,” (47) and casts the Phaeacian King Alcinous as an all-around healer; Race argues that every aspect of Alcinous’ treatment of Odysseus, such as the athletic



competition, bathing, feasting and, most importantly, storytelling was carefully orchestrated to recuperate Odysseus' mind and body: "Alcinous and Odysseus conduct themselves much like therapist and patient, that far from being a bungling host as he is sometimes portrayed, Alcinous is an insightful judge of character and a masterful host" (48). The part of the Phaeacians therapy I want to focus on here is the fascinating aspect of Odysseus' reconstruction of his identity, the story he tells about himself, and its fantastic fictionality – as Charles Segal calls it, "the world of fantasy" that is "perhaps a necessary psychological transition between Troy and Ithaca" (37).

The story he tells of himself to the Phaeacians is referred to by classicists as his *apologoi*. It makes up Books Nine through Twelve of the *Odyssey*, in which all of the most fantastic aspects of the *Odyssey* take place, such as the adventures of the Cyclops, Circe, and Odysseus' visit to the underworld. Scholars have long debated about this section of the epic. Not only are the adventures too fantastic to be believable, but, as Segal points out, they have no human testimony besides Odysseus himself, the sole survivor of the exploits,<sup>37</sup> to corroborate their veracity (24). In other words, as many scholars have claimed, it is just as likely as not that Odysseus, the master of cunning and invention as Homer repeatedly calls him, completely invented these stories.<sup>38</sup>

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37 Segal admits that the fact that gods refer elsewhere to Odysseus' adventures suggests that they are not *complete* fabrications ("The Phaeacians" 24); but the gods are the only other voices besides Odysseus who can testify to the veracity of his claims, and even their versions differ greatly from his versions.

38 Morrison (1992), Marnaghan (1987: 172-3), and Parry (1994) are some recent scholars who highlight the degree of fictiveness in Odysseus' *apologoi* (the account he gives of himself in Books 9-12). Glenn Most traces the intense fascination with the fantastic elements of the *apologoi* back to antiquity (15 n1); further, building on the observations of J.D. Niles, Most notes that Odysseus' *apologoi* is carefully structured to be symmetrical with the journey to Hades in the middle and a two-day storm in the beginning and the end (two-day storm-Cyclops-Laestrygonians-journey to Hades-Schylla-Charybdis two-day storm), and that that formal structuring, among other reasons, suggests the formal, fictive aspects of the *apologoi*. Luke Roman follows Most in holding that Odysseus' motive for telling the fantastic tales to the Phaeacians are to invent extreme examples of both good and bad hosting behavior in order to ensure that he would leave their care with sufficient gifts (354); others have said that Odysseus exaggerated his troubles simply to make a more convincing case that the Phaeacians should help him to a more speedy return home (Louden 101). Many argue that the inventions were an opportunity for Homer to display Odysseus' cunning and deceitfulness (Burrows; Stanford; M. Detienne and J.P. Vernant). Stanford and others argue that Homer emphasizes Odysseus' powers of inventiveness to highlight the blind poet's own talent, as Odysseus occupies the bard's position in the discourse – Homer is thus singing his own praises ("Astute Hero and Ingenious Poet: Odysseus and Homer" 7; Dougherty; Louden 101). There is a long tradition of evaluating the various degrees to which Odysseus is an unreliable narrator (Rimmon-

Highlighting the *apologoi* as fictive performance, Bruce Loudon writes that Alcinous, who comments on Odysseus “powers of narration as do no other characters in the poem” (96), compares Odysseus’ storytelling ability to that of a singer: “You have a grace upon your words and there is sound sense within them, / and expertly, as a singer would do, you have told the story” (11.367-368). Further, Loudon points out that Odysseus’ opening comments before both the *apologoi* to the Phaeacians and his fabricated tales to Eumaeus in Ithaca mimic the introductory comments of a performance (102). Arguing that Odysseus’ misdirections to the Phaeacians mimic Homer’s misdirections to his audience, subjecting them to the same uncertainties that Odysseus himself faced, Scott Richardson stresses the inventiveness of the *apologoi* (338). He notes that Homer lauds Odysseus’ performance by describing its effect on the audience: “Thus did he speak, and they all held their peace throughout the covered cloister, enthralled by the charm of his story” (13.1-2).

Segal’s explanation for the fantastic content of Odysseus’ *apologoi* is in line with the theory of narrative trauma therapy: “What Odysseus tells us, then, is remembered experience, inwardly formed and transmuted” (23); the stories are “a voyage of the soul [...] a formed and crystallized whole which cannot be communicated literally or objectively, but only in the strangeness of its own terms” (24). And in language that shares the same vocabulary of contemporary trauma discourse, he notes of the Books Nine through Twelve that “their interruption of the forward-moving time-scheme of the poem, their function as a flashback, contributes further to their ‘unreality.’” (24). Segal maintains that Odysseus isn’t merely lying, but “trying to bridge the gap between two worlds, between the past accumulation of private experience (or the private aspect of all experience) and his present and future relations with the public [...]. These adventures are ‘true’ as the inner side of his outward experiences”

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Kenan; de Jong; Rinon). In sum, these are just some of the scholars in the debate of whether the *apologoi* is Odysseus’ own fabrication; all of them hold that at the least a good deal of it is exaggeration, fiction, symbolic, allegorical (most classical commentaries interpret it as allegorical), or a combination of those elements.

(24). In sum, Segal and Race argue that the fantastic and formal elements of Odysseus' apologoi attest to the fact that the story is a reconstruction of his traumatic past in an attempt at self-therapy for his PTSD symptoms: he tells the story of himself to a sympathetic audience in a communal setting. The coherency of the story and the degree to which it mimicked his traumatic memories were more important in this context than the degree to which the story reflected the actual facts of what happened. As Lacan said, "it is less a matter of remembering than of rewriting history" (14).

To jump far ahead chronologically, I turn to Tim O'Brien, himself a Vietnam War veteran, PTSD victim and author of various novels that continually stride the divide between autobiography and fiction, all of which he claimed at various times were therapeutic for him.<sup>39</sup> He nails his colors to the mast on the side of fiction over non-fiction: "That's what fiction is for. It's for getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for the truth" ("President's Address" 1999). O'Brien, incidentally, still suffers from PTSD symptoms to this day: he is still, "three decades later" haunted by flashbacks of a Vietnamese soldier he thinks he killed ("President's Address"). In *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*, Mark Heberle holds that an O'Brien's entire oeuvre "suggests a personal working out of trauma through refabrication" (7). O'Brien's many comments, in both his fiction and in interviews about his writing, on his position regarding the truth of fiction are all variations on fiction's providing something for the human psyche that the truth itself can't provide.

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39 See O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973), *Going After Cacciato* (1978), *The Things They Carried* (1990), for fictional representations of narrator/protagonists, all of whom are to various degree shadows of O'Brien himself, (in *The Things They Carried* the narrator is named Tim O'Brien) with PTSD related to the war; *Tomcat in Love* 1998 for a protagonist's trauma in the wake of a failing marriage; the narrative structure in all of the works is non-linear, with frequent resorts to flashbacks. For interviews and speeches, among many others, see his "President's Lecture, Brown University" (1999) and the PBS Newshour interview "Looking Back at the Vietnam War with Author, Veteran Tim O'Brien" (2010), during which he articulates: "I was a soldier in Vietnam. But the stories in the book are, for the most part, invented. Yet, they're launched out of a world I once knew." Palaima choose the following quotation from *The Things They Carried* to capture O'Brien's unswerving commitment to fictional forms to represent trauma: "This book is essentially different from any other that has been published concerning the 'late war' or any of its incidents. Those who have had any such experience as the author will see its truthfulness at once, and to all other readers it is commended as a statement of actual things by one who experienced them to the fullest" (no page number, after table of contents qtd. in Palaima 274).

Another advantage of fiction is the psychological distancing that it provides between the writer, the reader, and the characters in the narrative. Since Shay's theories are the basis of my theoretical model, I will use for an example a theatre company that turns to him for inspiration as well – the Theatre of War. The company produces various interactive stagings of segments of creative director Brian Doerries' own translations of Greek tragedies. According to Doerries, the imaginative safe space that fiction offers to the audience was of primary importance in their choice of material. Performances consist of professional screen actors reading excerpts from Athenian tragedy to an audience of active-duty soldiers on military bases; then individual responses are solicited from the audience in an open forum. The whole spectacle might be seen as the contemporary best approximation to what Shay had in mind in his appeal for the "modern equivalent of Athenian tragedy" (*Achilles* 194). Doerries does in fact credit Shay as the inspiration for the project, as well as providing the underlying theory of theatre as communal narrative therapy (Brown). The comparison is not perfect because, as I wrote about in the Foreword, Athenian theater gave each participant a role in the creation of the art form. The soldiers were not merely spectators, but in turns actors, writers, directors and critics. Doerries' Theater of War attempts to approximate this interactive phenomenon by opening up the floor to audience participation, soliciting personal reactions to the content, for the last half of the performance. Thus the audience participates almost as much as the actors in the creation of the art object do.

On the benefits of fiction for trauma therapy, Doerries points out that in none of the ancient Greek theatre festivals were Athenian soldiers attending, writing, or acting in plays about atrocities committed during recent or contemporaneous military conflicts such as the Battle of Marathon. Instead, they were listening to stories of characters taken from their mythic past, far enough removed from them to allow for the consciousness of the artifice of fiction to create the psychic space in which to safely contemplate their own relation to it. Similarly, the Theatre of War reaches back to the same

mythic past that we Westerners share with the Greeks, allowing today's soldiers to focus on the stories of myth and archetype that are far removed from their own selves. Just as Sophocles eschewed the Battle of Marathon as material for his plays, the Theatre of War does not stage plays about Vietnam, nor Iraq nor Afghanistan, which would potentially politicize and particularize the experience. As Doerries explains: "We are performing poetry about myth and archetype that connects to a warrior tradition that allows people at a distance to say "I related to that because I have seen it" or to step out from behind the metaphor or the myth or the poetry and say "I am that." But the key is by way of the reading and by way of the distance of the performance to give people a space" (Brown).

Thus Doerries claims above, seemingly paradoxically, that the very fictionality of the content is what facilitates identification with it – audience members can "step out from behind the metaphor or the myth of the poetry and say 'I am that'"; but the paradox vanishes when one grants that his stress is on the psychological distance from self that fiction provides. The distance between their memories and a fictional representation of others having gone through similarly traumatic experiences provides them a conceptual space in which to contemplate their own trauma.

While Doerries, O'Brien, Segal, Race and others all come at the idea of the fictiveness of trauma discourse from different angles, they all admit that the distance fiction places between the subject's specific experience in some ways helps along the psychic therapy.

To extend this point now, I will briefly mention some formal and structural aspects of literature as a discourse that make it privileged to represent trauma and traumatic memory. The freedom to experiment with mood, tone and point of view of course offers many avenues of expression that are not available in other discourses. Here, I will narrow that focus down to the radical shifts in time and perspective that have been around since Homer, but have become almost commonplace in the Western novel following the Modernist period, and are what some consider to be the trademark of the postmodern

novel (Smethurst 9-11). Roger Luckhurst writes of literature as a privileged discourse to represent trauma:

Discourses requiring logical causation (such as legal proofs of causes and post-traumatic effects) cannot recognize the strange temporality. Literature can, registering it in the disarticulation of linear narration, and theorists detail a *Nachträglich* [a term used in psychoanalysis to mean delayed or deferred] body of literature ‘in which anachronism is the principle feature’.” (Luckhurst 81 quoting Nicholls 56)

Luckhurst writes on different content that I do: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, W.G. Sebald’s novels, and Lanzmann’s documentary *Shoah*, for example, are some of the trauma narratives he analyzes. But the way he generalizes the formal aspects of each could just as well be applied not only to the some of the Colombian texts that I analyze, but to the most famous Colombian novel of all-time, too: “The aesthetic is uncompromisingly avant-garde: experimental, fragmented, refusing the consolations of beautiful form, and suspicious of familiar representational and narrative conventions. Ultimately, fractured Modernist form mimics narrative possibility disarmed by trauma” (81).

A change of one word in his last sentence would articulate my view on the narrative possibilities of the Modernist aesthetic: that fractured Modernist form mimics narrative possibility *determined* by trauma. As Alan Friedman and Mia Carter write of Modernism’s break with realism and naturalism, the Modernists “considered it the task of artists to become their own contemporaries by representing the new reality – as they perceived it – as honestly and faithfully as they could” (441). Virginia Woolf advocated for a new aesthetic that represented subject’s inner realities in contrast with the materialism of the Edwardian novelists. In her view the task of Georgian novelists like herself and James Joyce as “to record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident

scores upon the consciousness” (“Modern Fiction,” *The Virginia Woolf Reader* 288). The Modernists in this view were dedicated to the new realism of the mimesis of perception, not reality, as disorienting, fragmented and chaotic as that perception might be. As Woolf puts it earlier in the same essay: “Is it not the task of the novelists to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?” (288); and finally, the “point of interest” for the modernists “lies very likely in the dark places of psychology” (290).

If the fragmented, non-linear, stream-of-consciousness Modernist aesthetic describes the reality as perceived by the human consciousness, a similar aesthetic is privileged to render the posttraumatic consciousness. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Tim O’Brien’s entire oeuvre, and of course Juan Gabriel Vásquez *The Sound of Things Falling* and Fernando Vallejo’s *Our Lady of the Assassins* are just a few of the novels whose form might be considered to derive from an attempt at mimesis of traumatic memory – novels of PTSD, and culturally-induced PTSD in addition to combat-induced, if you will. The attempt at sketching reality’s impression on the consciousness is firmly in the Modernist tradition, but the shape of the impression, exemplified in the most violent disruptions of temporal and spatial order that of PTSD flashbacks and symptoms of dissociation, call for an even more fragmented and pastiche form, one that many critics have labeled postmodern.

My objective here in this excursus on narrative itself is to suggest that the freedoms offered by experimental fiction can privilege it as a discourse for representing traumatic memory. In my chapter below on *The Sound of Things Falling*, in consequence, I include an extended discussion of Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, arguing that Vásquez through allusions creates a strong transtextual bridge between his novel and Vonnegut’s, making the case stronger that they both are attempts at representing

the form and structure of traumatic memory. Further, Vásquez protagonist Yammara's therapy through narrative construction chooses for its subject someone who is far removed from Yammara himself to allow for psychological distancing, but at that same time identification through similarities in their life situation – which is the dynamic that Doerries refers to in the Greek tragedian's choice of topic of a mythical past instead of contemporaneous events.

In sum, there is a large body of evidence suggesting that construction of narrative has psychologically therapeutic benefits, and a number of theorists have written on both the formal and psychological aspects of fictional narrative in particular. The borders between narratives produced by PTSD states and those purporting to represent those states (sometimes with both alternatives combined in a single text, as in the case of combat autobiographies) need to be considered as fluid and as providing complementary perspectives on the etiology of PTSD.

The novels that I will analyze in the following chapters all contain characters who have been traumatized in some way, and the characters' ability or inability to construct a narrative of their past that integrates their traumatic memories with their present sense of self will determine the degree to which they recuperate psychologically. Jaramillo Agudelo's *Cartas cruzadas*, the epistolary novel that I analyze in the fourth chapter, is less formally experimental than the other two novels, but I will demonstrate how the epistolary novel allows a profoundness of introspection about trauma states that others forms do not. Thus I argue that it, too, is an attempt at representing traumatic memory and at outlining a roadmap for recovery from trauma through narrative.



### Chapter Three: *La virgen de los Sicarios* 'Our Lady of the Assassins'<sup>40</sup>

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40 A note to the readers on my terminology and citation conventions. First, to facilitate locating textual references for non-Spanish speaking readers who might want to read the novel in translation, for the most part I work from Paul Hammond's *Our Lady of the Assassins* (2001), the English translation of Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los Sicarios* (1994). Parenthetical citations that contain only page numbers refer to Hammond's translation. There are instances, however, particularly those in which the syntax of Vallejo's original convey an ambiguity essential to emphasize because it underlines one of the themes at work in the novel, when I feel that Hammond's translation failed to preserve this complexity; in these cases I translate the Spanish myself and reference parenthetically Vallejo's original instead of Hammond's translation. Parenthetical citations in these cases look will like this, with the title of the book written in Spanish, not English, to highlight the difference: (*La virgen* ##).

Second, Vallejo's text is a complex mix of narrative voices and focalizations. The narrator, Fernando, who shares the same first name as the author, jumps between first, second and third person point of view in a narrative that is delivered at times to a reader of the text who is outside of the discourse and at other times claims to be delivered orally to an implied listener who is inside the discourse. To make matters even more confusing, Fernando sometimes speaks as if he were responding to a question that the extra-discursive reader might have posed, or to a statement that the intra-discursive implied listener has just made. To avoid confusion, as a convention for this chapter I refer to the real author of *La virgen de los Sicarios*, whose real name is Fernando Vallejo, as simply "Vallejo," and the narrator of the discourse as "Fernando." There are times when the narrator Fernando's syntax reveals something about him; these need to be carefully distinguished from times when the author Vallejo's choice of syntax reveals something else in the novel. I will try to clearly mark the times that I think Fernando is addressing the extra-discursive reader, and I will simply use the term "reader" in these cases. When I think he is addressing the intra-discursive implied listener, I will write "implied listener" or simply "listener."

The disorienting shifts in narrative stance in this novel are legion. To keep things straight in my head and write about them with any degree of rigor, I find it helpful from time to time to adopt the terms coined by Gerard Genette in his seminal books on narratology, *Narrative Discourse* (1983) and *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1988). Thus Fernando, the narrator/protagonist, for most of the novel at least, would be in Genette's terminology as extradiegetic, internally focalized, homodiegetic narrator. He is extradiegetic as opposed to intradiegetic because his story is not placed within the frame of another story; his is the primary frame. He is internally focalized (first person) as opposed to zero focalized (omniscient) or externally focalized (third person) because the story is told from his point of view and the reader is privy to his thoughts. He is homodiegetic as opposed to heterodiegetic because he is a subject present in the story that he narrates, as opposed to a case where he could be telling the story of another. These characterizations are not rigid throughout the novel. Sometimes he tells a story within this narrative and so switches to intradiegetic; at another very significant moment in the discourse he switches to external focalization, but this switch is pronounced and obviously for effect. Genette's insights lead to a more precise methodology than the pre-narratological terms of first-person, second-person, and third-person narrative point of view. This terminology is necessary to adopt in my reading of this novel because I see Vallejo at constant play with blurring the boundaries between the author, text and reader, between written and oral discourse, between fiction and reality. In the second chapter I will cover this disorientation in more detail as well as speculate on Vallejo's objectives for writing in this way.

## 1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on Fernando Vallejo's novel *La virgen de los Sicarios* (1998[1994]) from the insights offered by trauma theory as outlined by Jonathan Shay. I believe that *La virgen de los Sicarios* can be read as Shay and Nagy read Homer, which is as the tragedy of the protagonist because of damage done to his character by posttraumatic symptoms in reaction to traumatic events that he undergoes. Shay's work focused on combat veterans, whose trauma was suffered in war: an environment both of extreme violence and one that radically destabilizes the way in which its participants perceive reality. I will argue that the Medellín of Vallejo's novel is as violent and as radically phenomenologically destabilizing to its inhabitants, consisting of hitmen, narco-traffickers and innocent bystanders alike, as war is to combat veterans. As I have covered in Chapter Two, Shay's theories on combat PTSD add phases and nuances of symptoms that other trauma theorists do not consider, allowing me to make this extension. To differentiate from what he calls the "simple-PTSD" found in the *DSM-5*, he employs the terms "complex-PTSD," which he defines as "simple-PTSD *plus the destruction of the capacity for social trust*" (*Odysseus 4*).

The other important aspect of his combat trauma model is the "berserk" state, which he found to occur in warriors in the context of the violent trauma of war, but I will show in this section that Vallejo's protagonist/narrator's actions and discourse suggest that he has entered this state, as well. I will show how Vallejo's character Fernando is subject to circumstances that would not only easily meet the APA criteria for causing simple-PTSD, but also that his trauma occurs in a context that undermines his faith in his perceptions of reality, his own memory, social institutions, discourses, and ultimately his sense of Self. This radical epistemological and phenomenological destabilization is what exacerbates simple-PTSD and turns it into complex-PTSD. A subject who experiences complex-PTSD symptoms in the context of extreme violence can descend into another more dangerous state, the "berserk state,"

from which full recovery is impossible, and during which the subject often becomes homicidal, like Achilles' in his rage against Hector. I will show how Vallejo's narrator/protagonist Fernando goes “berserk,” and slips into an altered, degenerate mental state that results in both psychological damage to the character as well as many deaths of innocents bystanders who fall victim to his rampage. At the same time, this will allow me to characterize his Medellín as a PTSD-producing site, in which it would be difficult for any subject to avoid destabilization of their inherited identities.

Moreover, while mine is a psychological approach that focuses on the damage that constant exposure to violence and trauma can do to an individual's mental state, it does not purport to privilege the trauma of one particular individual or classes over others. The danger of my approach is that it could lead to such a misconception, but if one remembers that the *site* of trauma production is critical in the evolution of PTSD, the case of Fernando also diagnoses the breakdown in the social order.

The following section will outline the more detailed work that will be taken up in subsequent sections of this chapter: first, tracing how critics' work on Vallejo enable my reading, and then justifying the use of Shay's model to build on their contributions.

In the next major section of this chapter, “Traumatized and with PTSD,” I draw from Fernando's discourse to show how he presents himself as traumatized both in the past, during his childhood, and during the discourse of the narrative. The events he narrates from his childhood are marked by an abject failure to construct a coherent narrative of an encounter with the sublime as well as a profound disillusionment in the institution of the Catholic church. Here, I break down the traumatic events he suffers during the discourse into categories of physical assaults (the extremely violent circumstances he lives through in the story), sound assaults (figurative “assaults” on the integrity of his body by sound waves, with parallels, following María Amalia Barchiesi (2012), of the sounds assaults in to Job and John of Revelations of the Bible), and disorientation in space and time

(the trauma of his perception of reality in terms of time and place not matching up with his encounters with it). These examples of the traumas that Fernando undergoes are not comprehensive – he undergoes many other traumatic experiences in the narrative – but are chosen because of the circumstances of the trauma in each case can lead to more profoundly disturbing psychological damage PTSD, complex-PTSD, and entry into the berserk state.

The following major section, “Fernando's PTSD Symptoms,” shows the ways in which I see that Fernando manifests the symptoms of PTSD as defined not only by the *DSM-5* but by Shay and Herman as well. The first sub-section deals with the “simple-PTSD,” or the PTSD according to the strict definitions laid out in the *DSM-5*. The next sub-section I call “Jargon Invasion” because it traces the way that Fernando loses authority over his own language, an authority that is so important to his sense of identity as a grammarian. While much of his adoption of the street-slang, or *parlache*, is ironic, as self-conscious parody of the language to satirize the speakers of it, I will argue that Fernando loses control of this ironic tone in the end; he becomes the kind of speaker of a what he sees as “degenerate” Spanish that he was satirizing earlier. This “Jargon” sub-section straddles the “simple-PTSD” and the “complex-PTSD” aspects of his symptoms. In the deterioration of Fernando's language I focus in particular on how Vallejo makes use of a certain slang term, and in my analysis we can begin to see his loss of capacity for social trust that can exacerbate simple-PTSD and turn it into complex-PTSD. At first it seems like the term is arbitrarily chosen to show how Fernando's lexicon begins to be “infected” by the local street dialect, but on closer examination we realize that the term derives from meanings which call to question both Fernando's identity and the ability of other discourses (social, political, literary) to give him the tools to construct a narrative.

The next sub-section, entitled “Failure to Construct a Coherent Narrative,” analyzes the way that Fernando's discourse reflects the discourse of memory of someone suffering from complex-PTSD,

and perhaps points the way toward the "cure," if such a thing be possible, for the character and the Colombian culture that created his tragedy and by the mid-nineteen-nineties has moved even further into chaos and nonsense. Psychiatrists Shay, Herman, psychologist James Pennebaker, and literary critic Pablo Restrepo-Gautier, argue that the act of constructing a narrative is essential to traumatic recovery; my reading will show why Fernando explicitly fails at this at many junctures in the story. His failure is in large part owing to the inadequacy of all available modes of discourse to allow him to construct such a narrative.

Finally, in the last section, "The Berserk State," I show how incidents in Fernando's discourse show him to be suffering from not only the simple-PTSD of the *DSM-5*, and the complex-PTSD of Shay and Herman, but also to have entered into a more damaging psychological state that is usually reserved for combat warriors – the berserk state.

I diagnose Fernando as a berserker because he has delusions of himself as having god-like powers, he sees himself as having "died" a figurative death in that the rest of his time in the world is lived in a "death-in-life" trance, his identity is irreparably shattered and unable to be reconstituted through language or narration, and he, along with his sicario lovers, embarks on a killing rampage that claims over fifty lives. Shay holds that once warriors have entered this berserk state of PTSD, their brain's chemistry is irrevocably altered, barring any return to a pre-traumatized, normal psychological state. There is no going back. And this is how Fernando depicts himself for much of the novel. Somehow the traumatic incidents and the context of violence in which they befell him have led him to this point of irrevocable psychological damage. Fernando, the "victim" of certain traumatic experiences, because very much the perpetrator of others. This "trauma to the perpetrator" is the aspect that Shay's theory adds to the trauma discourse, which is usually focused on the trauma of the victim.

In addition, my objective in this chapter is to factor in the historical and social traumatogenic

site of this victim's traumas – to trace how the available narratives of Vallejo's Medellín necessarily predispose even the perpetrators of evil to trauma.

### 1.1 Approaching Vallejo: Social Trauma and Trauma Theory

At first glance, the character of Fernando is so despicable, his views so indefensible, and his actions so reprehensible, that mustering any sympathy for his trauma might be out of reach. But that is precisely why Shay's models are apropos, given that they focus on the trauma suffered by the perpetrator of a crime as well as the trauma suffered by the victim. Fernando is both. The ways in which Vallejo depicts the traumatization of his character Fernando also illuminates *La virgen's* trenchant social critique, well documented by many critics, including Gastón Alzate, María Mercedes Jaramillo, Miguel Cabañas, Lidia Santos, María Fernanda Lander, and María Helena Rueda.

Gastón Alzate reads *La virgen* as an artistic rendering of the impossibility of achieving the bourgeois project in Colombia (3) and notes that Vallejo, by depicting the degree to which language's ability to signify has atrophied, uses a literary genre to illuminate the high degree of corruption and dysfunction in the Colombian institutions of religion, politics, law and literature (5). María Mercedes Jaramillo argues that Vallejo is constantly at pains to hold up the mirror to both a corrupt society and to the readership of his works to make them recognize their collective guilt in letting it get as bad as it got and their collective responsibility to speak and act out against the injustice (415-416). Miguel Cabañas argues that Vallejo uses the figure of the *sicario*, the most notorious symptom of the Colombia's social problems, on which to project the contradictions, hypocrisies, and faults of the country's moral codes (8). Lidia Santos points out the explicitness of the metaphor in this novel of the elites (Fernando) in bed with the assassins; Fernando is a victim (he repeatedly claims that they are going to kill him eventually) and of course a perpetrator as well, one who manipulates the killers to do his bidding; she

argues that Vallejo's depiction of sexual intimacy between the civilized elite and barbaric assassin reflects Walter Benjamin's notion of the barbarism contained within civilization (*On the Concept of History* 392). María Fernanda Lander's work, which I cited in the last chapter on the individual trauma of "sound" assaults on Fernando, is useful for a cultural critique as well because it sees the country of Colombia, as opposed to the narrator/protagonist Fernando, as the protagonist of Vallejo's novel. And Fernando, as the symbol of the elites, is too blind to see the criminality in their exclusionary policies based on race, ethnicity and class in their project of creating a national community (79). María Helena Rueda reads the text as a radically new way of understanding the problem of displaced peoples – by foregrounding violence, it "calls attention to the need to situate it at the center of reflection concerning displacement" (391). By sustaining focus on the violence done to and done by Fernando and the sicarios, showing them as both victims and perpetrators, displaced from their own homes but displacing others as well, Vallejo is destabilizing the conventional notions of describing reality and opening up the eyes of the educated elite to a new way of conceptualizing the country peasants who have been displaced to the *comunas*, the shanty-towns that have sprung up around Medellín.

Other critics take a more purely aesthetic approach to the novel rather than highlighting its social relevance. Restrepo-Gautier argues that Vallejo, by demonstrating Fernando's failure to construct a coherent narrative of his encounters with the sublime, constructs a grotesque and fantastic version of Medellín that represents the disintegration of modernity. José Manuel Camacho Delgado shows how Vallejo is at pains to paint a picture of a romanticized, innocent childhood from which the narrator later falls away (Camacho Delgado 237). Jose Cardona López and Juan Fernando Taborda Sánchez highlights Vallejo's emphasis on the orality of the discourse and its quality of continually calling attention to itself (Cardona López 392; Taborda Sánchez 54).

Both lines of approach are essential to grappling with Vallejo's text in the terms that I have been

pursuing here. Individual trauma in the narrator will be exaggerated at times of social disintegration because of his inability to construct a coherent narrative of the events that befell him. This inability, while deriving in large part from the nature of traumatic memory as fragmented and distorted, owes its existence as well to the dearth of suitable discourses from which to choose in constructing a narrative that conforms both to his experience and the discourses available to him to grasp it. No form of discourse, whether it be political, sociological, psychoanalytical, Marxist, or literary, can provide the narrator Fernando what he needs to construct a narrative of his past and therefore to construct his identity, his sense of Self. This failure in identity construction is part of his tragedy because it severely aggravates his traumatic symptoms. But this individual tragedy, I argue, rests on the social problems that Vallejo's critics have identified (Montoya 2008; Polit 2013; Rueda 2004; Manzoni 2004), who have shown how the available discourses are inadequate to understand the tragic disruptions of this society. To set up my more detailed analysis of these points, let me now turn first to sketch Vallejo's work itself and then amplify what my approach to it *as a narrative* will be.

In brief, the plot consists of the peregrinations of the narrator Fernando, an old man returned after a long absence to spend his last days in the neighborhoods of Medellín, which at that time is in a state of general chaos marked by rampant violence, assassinations and shoot-outs in the streets. He takes up with a teenage lover, Alexis, a *sicario*,<sup>41</sup> or paid assassin, who accompanies Fernando on walks throughout the city. A cold-blooded killer with over 250 deaths already under his belt, Alexis continues to commit indiscriminate murder while he is with Fernando, often at Fernando's bidding, claiming another forty-eight victims before Alexis himself falls victim to an assassination by another *sicario* who

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41 “Sicario” was the name given to a particular breed of assassin that flourished in Colombia in the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties. In general, they were pistol-wielding adolescent boys from the lower classes who pioneered the motorcycle-mounted tandem assassination tactic, one driving and the other shooting. They were hired guns, although it is widely held that their chief source of income was the drug cartels. The term was vaulted to international recognition after their assassination of the Minister of Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1984, on orders from Pablo Escobar, leader of the Medellín cartel (Polit 2013; Montoya 2008; Salazar 1990).



had been hired to avenge one of Alexis' earlier killings. After a brief mourning period for Alexis, Fernando takes up with another *sicario*, Wilmar, whom, as he later finds out, happens to be the very same *sicario* who murdered Alexis. Before Wilmar is assassinated, by whom else but another *sicario* (should it be a surprise at this point?), Wilmar claims six more lives in same indiscriminate, psychopathic manner that Alexis used. Fernando's culpability and role in all of these murderers is continually interrogated by Vallejo's prose – while he does not pull the trigger in any of the deaths, he moves through varying degrees of culpability because he instigates many of them. According to my reading, he even plans the last one – the murder of Wilmar. In the end, Fernando abandons the city, bidding the reader adieu in the same detached, glib and facetious tone that he had sustained throughout the narrative.

But as this book does not operate on the level of a conventional narrative, plot is not the most useful way to engage with it. José Cardona López writes that *La virgen de los Sicarios* ought not even be classified as a novel (or at least according to his understanding of Schlegel's criteria for a novel), because *La Virgen* “only tells a history, a succession of events ordered along a temporal axis” without an “emphasis on causality, a fundamental element in plot development” (396 – my translation). However, if one shifts analytical focus to the character of Fernando as opposed to the succession of events in the narrative, one can indeed see the events are laid out in a way that causes Fernando's undoing; this shift puts the book firmly in the genre category of the novel, even according to Hegel's criteria.

In this vein, María Mercedes Jaramillo argues that the novel is an inverse of a *Bildungsroman* because the protagonist is gradually undone, as opposed to developed, throughout the novel. This undoing can be read as the plot: *La virgen* is the inverse of a *Bildungsroman*, not only because the hero is undone, but because the hero can never find his place in the discourses of his nation that would allow

him to become psychologically whole. Even if he were prone to develop, to build himself, the task would be impossible because there is no ground on which to build. Vallejo's sustained critique throughout the failure of all current forms of discourse to represent the trauma of his Colombia highlights this absence of ground for building subjectivity. In the classical *Bildungsroman*, the hero gradually grows up and finds his way into his place in his society; here, there are no places left that can give him a sense of identity – every attempt to assimilate simply increases his potential for trauma.

The novel may indeed be read as the *undoing* of a social type. The innocent child that Fernando remembers himself as in the beginning of the novel is very far from the monster he becomes at the end. Lydia Santos goes as far as to see him as becoming the incarnation of Hades, an invisible and malevolent presence viewing his handiwork in the Medellín morgue (562). And, in the way of a *Bildungsroman*, Fernando's experiences to bring him from where he was at the beginning of his life to where he is at the end of the discourse. While the comparison of *La virgen* with a *Bildungsroman* suffers from an imperfect correlation – the narrative skips over Fernando's adulthood, for instance, jumping from adolescence to old age – it does show a steep fall in character from the beginning to end. There is a fall away from the innocent childhood as well as from what the narrator is at the beginning of the narrative discourse to what he becomes at the end.

Here again, Shay's trauma theory helps to draw out his downward trajectory: Fernando is subject to events, both physically and psychologically violent, that cause him to suffer from symptoms of PTSD. That he is traumatized in the context of a world that has ceased to operate in an intelligible way, and that there are no available discourses for him to use in the reconstruction of an identity shattered by trauma, are factors which contribute to his descent into a posttraumatic state that Shay calls berserk, from which full psychological recovery is impossible. In this state, he becomes as much the perpetrator as he is the victim. Fernando the character is undone, as opposed to reconstructed.

## 1.2 Trauma, PTSD, and Berserk

Throughout the text, Fernando depicts himself as continually subject to various forms of physical and psychological assaults, all of which contribute to severe psychological trauma. At the start, he claims to be a famous grammarian and member of the educated elite, but by the end of the text he will have been reduced to a street thug. The assaults which turn him into this kind of a thug are presented individually, as parallels to what PTSD models define as trigger experiences in modern warfare. In addition to highlighting the threats of physical violence to which Fernando is subject in the text, which are explicit, there are other kinds of traumatic assaults that are not so explicit, especially those against Fernando's integrity of body and consciousness. The various forms of physiological and psychological assaults to which Fernando is subject contribute to the PTSD symptoms that he will begin to manifest.

Particularly helpful in elucidating these experiences are the works of María Amalia Barchiesi and Maria Fernanda Lander, which show that Fernando is unceasingly assaulted by various forms of disconcerting sound waves, sound waves that literally penetrate the body, vibrating the bones within Fernando's head despite the ear plugs that he wears to keep them out, disorienting him by causing vertigo. Spatial disorientation is another traumatic experience that Fernando undergoes, when his conception or memory of reality doesn't match up to the reality that he perceives in the present. The work of critics such as Celina Manzoni, Pablo Restrepo-Gautier and Maria Helena Rueda help me to show this aspect of trauma.

Let us now turn specifically to the un-building of the narratives on which Fernando's life was to be built, in order to read the characters as traumatized. The various forms of physiological and psychological assaults to which Fernando is subject contribute to the posttraumatic stress disorder

symptoms that he will begin to manifest.

## **2. Traumatized and with PTSD Symptoms**

The following long section contains sub-sections discussing the specifics of my argument on how I see Fernando, the homicidal perpetrator, as also the victim of psychological trauma. I start with the story of his childhood, then move to the social and environmental factors in his Medellín that are presented in the text as traumatogenic, then finish with a long discussion of the PTSD symptoms he exhibits that are in accordance with both Shay's and the APA's conception of the disorder.

### **2.1 Childhood trauma**

Fernando's narrating scenes from his idyllic childhood opens the book. He tells the reader that he was born in a "quiet and peaceful village" on the outskirts of Medellín, blessed by a local priest under the statue of Jesus in his family's living room (2). The book's first few pages are filled with his childhood wonder at watching a balloon he built with his cousins rise up in the skies after they had released it. Much later, he returns to this village with his lover Alexis, who at that time is at least two generations his junior and whom he pities because Alexis will "never live the happiness that I have lived" (9). They pass by a bar he remembers from his youth, which is described with nostalgia as "the most magical place in the universe" (8). He recalls a time of walking along the same local village road with his family, ("the happiest day" (9)), and looking through the windows of a house to see "the most beautiful Nativities ever created by man since the custom was established" (8). His family stared at it in unbelieving awe that, "here below, on a simply back road, such happiness could exist" (10).

But there are cracks in the childhood bliss as early as these happy scenes. On viewing the

Nativity scenes, Fernando's narrative discourse calls attention to a moment that I hold to be of critical importance in my theory that his character has been traumatized in many ways. Vallejo sets off the moment in the discourse with a direct phatic<sup>42</sup> address to Alexis, which happens seldom in the novel; for the most part of the discourse, the narrator maintains a detached third-person stance, extradiegetic, internally focalized, homodiegetic in Genette's terms, telling the story to a posited inter-discourse "listener" or "reader," who may or may not be the person holding the book.<sup>43</sup>

See here, Alexis: I was eight years old at the time and standing on the front porch of that little house, in front of the barred windows, seeing the Nativity, I saw myself as an old man, saw my whole life before me. And me terror was such that I shook my head and off I went. Suddenly, all at once, I couldn't cope with falling into the abyss. (10)

Then in the very next line, the narrative lens is immediately pulled back, and the "listener" is once again addressed: "But enough of this, let's go back to that night of walking towards Sabaneta" (10).

That is a break that can be read as a crack in the conventional narrative about village childhoods – after all, these narratives in their traditional forms have to be full of golden memories of Christmas and balloons. Yet this tableau is very carefully written to cast doubt on these conventions: the house has a *barred window* which both signals that it needs to be protected from an unnamed something and that it might be a cage or jail.

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42 Linguist Roman Jakobson, following anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's terms of "phatic communion" in a 1923 essay that appeared in I.A. Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning* (Cuddon 663), explained phatic utterances as "the endeavor to start and sustain communication" (Leitch 1150), and as "any element in the Code/Message system that serves primarily to establish, prolong or interrupt the communication of a message rather than to impart information" (Macey 297). An example of a phatic statement is one that is made during a telephone conversation, such as "Hello, are you still there," which serves to establish or sustain communication between two parties. Fernando's phatic phrase in this text is "See here, Alexis" (10), which calls attention to the event of communication between the two, as opposed to imparting information.

43 Gérard Genette termed this type of shift a "metalepsis," which is where the narrator switches between narrative levels, usually for surreal or vertiginous effect (*Narrative Discourse* 236). Here, suddenly, the subject of the pronoun "you," changes from the implied reader/listener of the discourse to Alexis, the implied listener of an interdiegetic discourse (story within a story). But the tone remains constant throughout, giving the unsettling effect to the reader of not really knowing who "you," refers to, or even forcing the reader into the place of Alexis in the discourse.

Pablo Restrepo-Gautier viewed this scene as presenting Fernando's inability to conceptualize and articulate his encounter with the sublime, which Restrepo-Gautier defines as “an overwhelming or traumatic experience” (6): “the subject feels himself utterly perplexed by the grandeur of an external agent that he is incapable of either representing or imagining” (6 - my translation). Restrepo-Gautier’s understanding of the sublime stems from the Romantic tradition, starting with Edmund Burke's conception of it in the religious context (when the subject, confronted with the sublime, feels himself “annihilated” before a transcendent being, an “almighty power” under whose arm the encounter occurs and who can aid the subject in achieving understanding and transcendence (Burke 68)), followed by Immanuel Kant's conception of it in a secular context (the “I’ sublime appears when the mind is incapable of crystallizing and deciphering the ‘I’ infinite” (Restrepo-Gautier 2)). Citing critics such as Jorge Luis Castillo and Catherine Walsh, Restrepo-Gautier extends such claims in arguing that the English Romantics' aesthetics of the sublime influenced Spanish and Latin America letters (2), and that Vallejo is writing against this tradition. By inverting the sublime experience in the English Gothic novel, Vallejo shows Fernando’s failure to represent or derive any transcendence from his encounter with the sublime.

Later, I will take up Restrepo-Gautier's notion of Fernando's failure to represent his encounter with the sublime in my discussion of his failure to reconstruct his identity after a traumatic experience because all available forms of discourse fail him. For now, I use Restrepo-Gautier's argument to highlight the extremely traumatic nature of this scene, presenting one of the two childhood memories that Fernando narrates. The other is just as traumatic.

Fernando tells that, when he was eight years old, during a religious procession, he was nearly decapitated by a falling statue of Juan Bosco, the patron saint of his childhood church and school that belongs to the Salesian religious order. Instead of killing him, the statue itself was decapitated when it

hit the ground. So as not to allow the procession to go on without a patron saint, Fernando was forced to sit atop the float as a substitute: “I played the Salesian missionary. Can you imagine me, eight years old, lying in that way? So much time has gone by, yet I still can’t forget that far-off morning when Juan Bosco tried to kill me, the reprobate” (115). Fernando's ironic tone here is not designed to temper his anti-clericalism, which is a sustained, vitriolic tirade throughout the work.

But so much for trauma during his childhood. Much more, and worse, comes to befall throughout his narrative discourse.

### **3. Trauma and the Discourse of *La virgen de los Sicarios*: Fernando as Victim**

As was explained in the second chapter, one of the chief contributors to complex-PTSD symptoms is the continuous exposure to situations in which the integrity of the body can be violated – constant vulnerability to violence. Once they are primed, that is, once their state of mental stability is compromised by prolonged exposure to violence or the threat of violence, they are much more likely to develop PTSD symptoms from a subsequent event of violent trauma. Fernando's exposure to the violence of the drug war and its killings places him in this vulnerable position many times throughout the narrative.

In this section I will show how Fernando is subject to many different types of assaults on the integrity of his Self. The first set of assaults is comprised by the physical dangers he encounters throughout the novel: murders, shoot outs, car accidents, street crime, and the like, all of which characterize his Medellín as quite naturally predisposing its inhabitants to traumatic systems of experience. As he says, merely walking through Medellín is an exercise in “defying death” (32). He is also subject to figurative assaults, sound “assaults,” such as a deluge of disorienting noise that can be more traumatic than exposure to real physical danger (Barchiesi 174).

In the last sub-section, I will show how even Fernando's sense of place and time is undermined in ways fostering trauma. The way Fernando sees the world is radically changed and he loses other forms of orientation within his world: Fernando's memory of the geography of Medellín doesn't match with the modern Medellín, the sections of which has been radically transformed due to the *comunas* (shanty-town slums around the city's periphery) that have sprouted up to accommodate the immense influx of immigrants, and so his mental map does not conform to his experiences, either.<sup>44</sup> In addition, his sense of time's continuity is undermined by events from the past somehow merging with the present. The reality that confronts him is so radically different from he expects to encounter it based on his memories and reason. This loss of faith in one's perceptions of reality, as I discussed as well in the second chapter, is highlighted by Shay as a contributing factor to developing PTSD.

### 3.1 Physical Assaults

The physical attacks are the most obvious structure represented in the novel as providing traumatic grounds for experience. Not surprisingly, the text is filled with comments on the danger of everyday life in the Medellín of the late nineteen eighties to 1993. The novel is set at some time after the death of Pablo Escobar, which ended a decade-long war against the government, but did not at all lead to an abatement of violence in the *comunas*. On the contrary, for a number of complicated reasons, the *sicarios'* loss of their main source of income among the first, it led to an explosion of violence there.<sup>45</sup>

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44 On the trauma of disorientation, both Lander and Restrepo-Gautier draw on Walter Benjamin's insights in his *Arcades Project* to show the traumatizing effect that urban architecture and design can have on individuals.

45 On the narcotics front, the collapse of the Escobar's Medellín cartel left a power vacuum that was first filled by a rival Cali cartel and then spread throughout a decentralized network when Cali was dismantled after an election bribery scandal. Area under production tripled from the early nineties and over ninety percent of the cocaine imported in the US was from Colombia (Hylton, *Evil Hour* 85). Escobar's demise came about through a collaboration between the Colombian state, various US agencies, and a some of Esobar's enemies and rivals who formed a group called "los Pepes" (Perseguides por Pablo Escobar – People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar). Los Pepes, ostensibly to avenge themselves of his "persecution," but also to wrench control of his portion of the narcotrafficking business, carried out a



Here are a couple examples of Fernando's description of life in Medellín when the story was set: "In Medellín not one oasis of peace remains to us. They say they attack baptisms, weddings, wakes, burials. That they kill in the middle of a crowd or on arrival at the cemetery all the living who accompany the dead.... That if a car knocks you down, kind hands lift your wallet..." (18). On the next page he claims that "there was a day in Medellín when they killed a hundred and seventy plus, and three hundred the next weekend" (19). As for other examples, in the Introduction I have included a discussion of many of the high-profile assassinations that were taking place during this period.

Assaults on the integrity of the body come in forms other than literal violence, as well. For instance, there is a scene in which Fernando and Alexis pass out after getting drunk on a bottle of moonshine, "me drinking from his mouth, he from mine" (26). They come to the next morning "in a pool of vomit: it was the demons of Medellín, the accursed city, which we'd swallowed while walking through its streets and they'd got inside of through the eyes, through the ears, through the nose, through

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program of urban terror against Escobar's family and associates.

On the *sicario* front, a powerful and influential member of los Pepes, Diego Murillo Bejarano, "Don Berna," began to control a group of *sicarios* called *Oficina de Embigado*, which had ambitions to fill in the power vacuum for control of the *sicarios* in the comunas. The subsequent struggle for control led to the killings of thousands of people, unrelated to the narcotics and killing business but who stood in their way, such as grass roots organizers, community and Union leaders, and *milicianos* (urban guerillas) (Polit, Interview).

On the paramilitary front, Carlos Castaño, another founder of Los Pepes, formed another paramilitary group called the ACCU (Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá – Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá). It launched a series of attacks in both urban and rural settings throughout the nineteen-nineties. These attacks were ostensibly to combat against the FARC, but they were also used to displace thousands of innocent people who happened to live in land that was desirable for its resources or its strategic geography. Paramilitary abuses and massacres increased to 286 in 1997 and to 403 in 1999, quadrupling in total in the nineteen-nineties (Hylton 90-93). In 1997 the ACCU merged with right-wing militias to form the AUC (Autodefensa Unidas de Colombia – United Self-Defense Forces), which continued its standard tactics of forced displacement, government bribery and violence, solidifying its control over cocaine production and distribution.

I give this broad overview of some of the complicated causes behind the worst violence in the nineteen-nineties Colombia to show how living there was the same as living in conditions of a war. But in this case the violence was more disorienting than that of conventional warfare because there were many competing groups for power (narcotraffickers, state police and army, paramilitary, guerillas), and they all had the ability to exercise violence. Many of the dead were innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire or forcibly displaced from their homes. Understanding this atmosphere might give the reader some insight into what Fernando means when he says that merely walking through Medellín is an exercise in "defying death" (32). Violence was out of control in many parts of the city and even the country, but the violence in the comunas was even more dangerous and arbitrary because of the competing factions.

the mouth” (26). The literal “poison” they had swallowed was alcohol, and the narrative discourse is constructed in a way to lead the reader to interpret that this was the cause of the sickness: they drank a bottle of liquor and then woke up in a pool of vomit. On the other hand, just because the two acts are juxtaposed doesn’t necessarily establish a causal relationship. Vallejo’s syntax is clear that the figurative demons they ingested while walking the streets of Medellín was what made them sick (this point is highlighted by Vallejo’s use of a colon to link the two clauses instead of a full stop: “woke in a pool of vomit: it was the demons”).

The ambiguity that Vallejo creates regarding the cause of the sickness – literally from the alcohol if one reasons according to the narrative discourse but figuratively from the demons if one reasons according to the syntax – suggests that in this scene there are multiple violations of, or assaults on, the integrity of Fernando’s body. More of these figurative “assaults” on the body will be discussed in the next section.

### **3.2 Sound Assaults**

Assaults on the integrity of Fernando’s body come in other forms, as well, such as sound waves. María Amalia Barchiesi, in her article tracing how the formula of “noise-destruction-death” (177) parallels the offending cacophony in *La virgen* with the trumpeted voice of an apocalyptic Christ in John’s *Revelation*, offers an excellent analysis of the many ways that sounds violate both the physical integrity of Fernando’s body and the psychological integrity of his mind. Here is Fernando on how Alexis’ music drives him to distraction: “Cotton-wool earplugs definitely don’t work. They let disco and heavy metal in. Or it’s not that they let it in, it’s that the bone, the temporal bone, vibrates and the vibrations drills into the brain” (18). Barchiesi points out how the physical sound assault (vibrations “drilling” into the brain) uproots Fernando from himself, displacing him from his own home and soul:

“Alexis’s television ended up driving me out onto the street.... Roaming through Medellín, through its streets, through the hell of my own empty limbo, seeking the open churches among souls in torment, I found myself in the middle of a shoot-out” (20).

Worse, the assault on Fernando’s ears from the television and radio isn’t limited to his own home. Every time he enters a taxi, he is accosted with a radio whose volume is turned up full-blast “transmitting soccer matches, *vallenata* [local folk music genre] accordion music or optimistic news bulletins about the thirty-five they killed yesterday, fifteen less than the record” (19). Fernando laments that he doesn’t dare ask the driver to turn down the volume for fear of a violent reprisal: “And if one opens one’s mouth to protest, goodbye cruel world!” (19). Despite that Fernando's tone is ironical, this example still illustrates the generalized state of fear that permeated life in those days due to the ubiquitous violence. Vallejo is not suggesting that taxicab passengers often feared for their lives, but rather that they might think twice about asking anyone to do anything because everyone lived in a psychological state of hyperreaction. Further, this example, like my earlier one, explicitly shows how sound “assaults” are rendered in the context of actual physical violence. Even the lyrics of the ubiquitous vallenato accordion music, “the one I hear everywhere since I got back, at breakfast, lunch dinnertime...” (67) contains violent imagery, even while it purports to invoke a folk tradition: “It says, ‘He pops me or I pop him and then the shootout’s over’” (67).

The noises that disturb the traumatized Fernando can be contrasted to the silence that characterize key moments in the narrative when we are granted a window into a Fernando who possesses a touch of humanity, such as the Fernando whose world is dominated by silence and peace as opposed to noise and violence. Silence is an essential characteristic of the village of his innocent childhood. The novel’s opening lines are: “There was on the outskirts of Medellín a quiet and peaceful village called Sabaneta” (1). In another scene that I will discuss later, Fernando takes pity on a

suffering dog and kills it out of mercy. This shot is the only pistol in the story that Fernando himself fires, and its sound is “muffled, cushioned by the body of the animal” (83), whose “mute, anguished, inescapable call” marked its dying (82).

As Barchiesi points out, sound is used as both a literal and a figurative “assault” on the integrity of Fernando's body: for instance, the sound is a figurative assault because the content of the songs bother him; but the sound waves *literally* push against his ear-drums, breaching his body's membrane, traumatizing him. The traumatized Fernando, assault by sounds, is often contrasted to the Fernando who still exhibits traces of humanity, during his childhood innocence, or at points in the narrative when he exhibits humane traits of pity and compassion. But even more trauma is in store for Fernando, as I will explain in the next section. In addition to the constant threat of physical danger to which he is constantly exposed (literal threats to the integrity of his body) and the figurative sound “assaults” to which he is constantly subject, Fernando is also subject to the acute mismatch between his perception of reality and the reality that confronts him.

### **3.3 Disorientation in Space and Time**

The shattering of a paradigm through which a victim previously viewed the world is another way that a subject's trauma can be exacerbated. This is another form of a radical reconceptualization of the Self – the world that one perceives is in violent mismatch with the world as one imagined it ought to be or what one was brought up learning it was. Above, I have outlined how Fernando, in addition to the obvious traumatizing exposure to physical violence, has been subject to other types of assaults on the Self as well, such as constant exposure to disorienting noise and the radical configuration of the space he lives in and his position within society. In this section I will show how his sense of a coherent identity is further destabilized by the vertiginous bending of the way he perceives reality in terms of

time and place traumatize him too.

Many critics have noted the trauma that Fernando experiences on returning to a place that has been rearranged violently from what it had been in his youth. Manzoni writes of Fernando's trauma from his returning to a city that is radically reconfigured from the city of his memory. He not only feels estranged from it, a stranger in his own home town, but through this spatial disorientation estranged from himself as well, which culminates in his realization "Yo ya no soy yo," "I am no longer I" (*La virgen* 32). For him, it is as if that part of his spatial memory has been forever altered. Fernando's claims, such as "I am the memory of Colombia and its conscience and after me comes nothing" (18), serve to highlight the degree to which the city and land constitute his sense of identity.

María Fernanda Lander goes so far as to claim that Colombia itself is personified as the novel's protagonist: the contrast between the city Fernando left behind as a child with "fierce and chaotic landscape" that he returns to is a trauma that plays out in his discourse that constantly analyzes and questions "Colombia's national reality" (77). María Helena Rueda, while not conceding Fernando's role as protagonist to the country of Colombia, reads the novel as a biting yet sophisticated critique of the tragedy of displaced peoples. In her reading, Fernando's feigned ignorance of his own complicity in the atrocities he commits and the contrast of his discourse with the events in the narration invite the reader to contemplate the contrast of the discourse of the neoliberal national project with the reality of its shortcomings – in this case the most conspicuous symptom of which is the out of control growth of shantytowns around the hills of Medellín. Pablo Restrepo-Gautier argues that Vallejo constructs an imaginary vision of Medellín, exaggerating the defects and omitting the virtues of the real city, that "presents a grotesque caricature that represents the disintegration of modernity" (1 – my translation).

I concur with these critics about the high degree to which a sense of space and place figure in

Fernando's conception of himself, but I would like to go even further to stress how place correlates with *trauma*. Vallejo uses careful syntax in the following example to make this correlation: "Sabaneta had long ceased to be a village and become just another Medellín *barrio*, the city had overtaken it, swallowed it up; and, in the meantime, Colombia had slipped from our hands too. We were, from afar, the most criminal country on earth, and Medellín the capital of hate" (5). The "quiet and peaceful village of Sabaneta" (1) of Fernando's memory had become swallowed up by the city, Medellín, the "capital of hate" (5). This is just one of many examples throughout Fernando's discourse of the change for the worse that has taken place with urban expansion, represented as dislocation.

Vallejo writes into the text this traumatogenic problem of identity formation based on place. For the present purpose, the more interesting phenomenon is not the critique, but rather the slippage of the subject to which the second-person pronoun refers in the text that immediately follows: "Colombia had slipped from *our* hands too" (my emphasis), and then "*We* were, from afar, the most criminal country on earth" (my emphasis). In the first quote, the subject of the possessive pronoun "our" cannot be completely encompassed by "Colombia," because Fernando says that "Colombia had slipped from our hands"; there has to be some posited body of people external to Colombia left over after Colombia slipped out of their hands. Therefore "our" must refer to a body of people who are in the silence, perhaps constituted by both those in Colombia and those external to it. Furthermore, Fernando has been at pains throughout the text to distance himself from Colombia and the average Colombian, as in the following example: "Colombia afterwards went all over the place as far as we were concerned, or rather...as far as 'they' were concerned, but not me, because I wasn't here, I came back later, years, decades later" (2).

Finally, another agenda emerges here in the text: "Buy why do I worry about Colombia if it's no longer mine, if it's alien to me?" (3). So both logical reasoning and context lead the reader to conclude

that “our” refers to some body of people not completely encompassed by the geographical entity Colombia. Yet, in the very next sentence, the subject of the second-person pronoun “we” cannot be anything other than a body of people completely encompassed by “Colombia,” because Fernando is suggesting that “we” are seen “from afar” as “the most criminal country on earth”; the country is Colombia and it is referred to with the second-person pronoun. So here, again, as in many other places in the text, Vallejo’s syntax writes an ambiguity into the core of the subject’s identity.

The profound confusion that this creates for identity is developed further in the text. At one point Fernando claims that he is the memory of Colombia, but he contradicts himself so much throughout the text that “we” know not to take at face value anything that he says – or maybe that’s the point. So, with all such contexts taken into account, the “we” might refer to he himself and other Colombians or to Colombia as a whole country, or both; it might refer to intellectuals in and outside of the country, or to identities in either place. Vallejo is careful to leave the answers to such questions indeterminable – and the questions unspoken, in the growing silences about what is actually happening as normal in a culture that is living a war. In addition to textual indications of a destabilizing identity, what is as well significant for my purposes is that there is some degree of identification of Fernando as subject with the country’s space, and that the violation of that space is seen as an assault of the Self of the narrator, a Self which begins to lose its sense of coherence as the national narratives and the conventional critiques of them disintegrate.

Fernando's sense of time is disrupted, as well. While there are many examples in the text, perhaps the most useful here for my purposes is his attendance of the funeral wake of a local character known as “Snout.”<sup>46</sup> Fernando goes to the wake to see the corpse first-hand because he remembers a

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46 Another poignant example is Fernando's comment on visiting Alexis' mother after Alexis had been murdered. Fernando was struck that Alexis' mother looked exactly like a maid who had worked in his childhood home. The resemblance disorients him; in addition, just as the Snout encounter does, it also comments on the cyclical nature of violence in Colombia – “Yet could it be that, rising above the abyss of time, people and destinies are repeated?” (93).

“Snout” from his youth, over thirty-years before, who died in similar circumstances and answered to the same description. At the wake, Fernando confirms that he indeed look like the same person, although he finds the phenomenon hard to reconcile: “But if he was not the Snout of my youth, how come he was the same? And why had they killed him in the same way, and at the same place and at the same time of day? Could reality in Medellín be going haywire and is repeating itself?” (119).

In addition to its allusion to cyclical nature of violence in Medellín and its disorienting effects on Fernando, the Snout scene is significant as well because it is another example of the sound “assault” as traumatic. Here silence is broken and then re-established in a scene of high comedy, which works on multiple registers much like the porter scene works in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*: on the surface, it offers comic relief from the gruesome events in the plot; but underneath, its language and imagery serve to highlight other themes at work in the piece:

[On] raising my head from the dead man and stepping back slightly from the coffin, [I noticed that] two parrots on their perch saw him. And they see [sic] him and let fly: ‘Sonofabitch!’ they were squawking, ‘Bastard! Faggot!’ and they hammered away at him in their foul language.<sup>47</sup> And out came a string of insults, a broadside of vulgarities, the like of which I cannot repeat here out of linguistic modesty. While all that was happening, one of the two ladies came up to the casket and discreetly lowered the lid. And the saints be praised, once the parrots couldn’t see him, the rain of insults ceased. (119)

The parrots “let fly” a “string (a rosary-string of beads in the original Spanish),” or “broadside”

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<sup>47</sup> I inserted the words in brackets to keep the verb tense consistent and to correct the grammar in Hammond's translation. Vallejo's original reads thus: “Al levantar mi cabeza del muerto y apartarme ligeramenta del ataúd, dos loras que había en una percha lo vieron. Y que lo ven y se sueltan [...]” (109). In Vallejo, the two parrots, not Fernando, are the subject of the first sentence; “on raising my head” introduces a dependent clause. Hammond switched this relationship without providing any extra words to preserve correct grammar. Next, puts the verb “to see,” which was in the past tense in the previous sentence, back into the present tense. But Vallejo's Spanish “Y que lo ven” isn't necessarily a switch to the present tense for the verb “ver,” “to see.” “Y que lo ven y se sueltan” might be better understood as still in the past, but conveying the sense that “as soon as they saw him they let out.” Hammond's translation is rife with these kinds of oversights.



of insults, “hammering” away: that makes four martial metaphors in two lines. Thus victims of the narratives of everyday life are “assaulted” by sound throughout their life as well as up to and even after their death. In poor Snout’s case the trauma is tragicomic because the implication is that the parrots were repeating oft-uttered foul insults of Snout's live-in two sisters, a pair of “very ancient” and “very dignified” (118) old spinsters. One can imagine that Snout, throughout his life, was greeted with this “broadside” of vulgarity every time his sisters saw him as he opened the door to enter his own house – or that his greeting taught the parrots this (in)appropriate greeting. Further, according to Fernando, Snout had been a vociferous homophobe. The sister's accusations are for Fernando a confirmation that Snout himself was a closet homosexual, but confronted with the truth in a very disagreeable way every time that he opened his front door – “Bastard! Faggot!.” Vallejo, himself a very public, unabashed homosexual who grew up in a very religiously and socially conservative Medellín, is clearly having a good time here on the level of making a private joke. Snout was a real-life figure who had achieved local notoriety (Polit, interview). But the tragic aspects of the scene are nonetheless present: Fernando lives in a society in which violence seems to be repeating itself, and memories of its past vertiginously intrude into his consciousness of the present.

The Snout scene is significant because it not only disrupts time for Fernando in a context that draws attention to the cyclical violence that plagues Medellín, but it also ties together the sound as assault metaphor that has been sustained throughout the story. Violence permeates his environment to the extent that it seems like it is repeating itself, the subject's ability to distinguish past from present is eroded, and the subject is beset by many different forms of assault – physical, physiological, and psychological

In the subsections of this section I have touched on some of the kinds of potentially traumatizing situations with which Fernando was confronted: a constant exposure to the danger of

literal physical assaults on the integrity of his body, a constant exposure to figurative assaults in the form of sound “assaults,” and a vertigo-inducing disorientation, in terms of space and time, between his perception of reality and the reality that confronts him. Constant exposure to violence alone is enough to induce posttraumatic symptoms in subjects (Shay; Herman; *DSM-5*); but trauma to a subject while his way of understanding and perceiving the world is at the same time destabilized can lead to more psychologically deleterious forms of posttraumatic symptoms. The next section deals with these.

#### **4. Fernando's PTSD Symptoms**

The assaults on Fernando start to take their toll. As the narrative develops, he begins to exhibit many of PTSD symptoms (as I have outlined in the introduction). The first sub-section to follow, “Derealization, Depersonalization, and Dissociative Amnesia,” details the symptoms he exhibits that are associated with simple-PTSD, according to the strict definitions of the *DSM-5*. The second sub-section, entitled “The Shattering of Identity,” of which the formerly mentioned dissociative amnesia is one example, deals with the damage that traumatic memory, fragmented and unreliable, can do to the victim's sense of identity. The next sub-section, “Jargon Invasion,” straddles simple and complex-PTSD through the vehicle of language. Fernando's traumatic symptoms are reflected in the corruption of his formerly “pure” Spanish with the jargon of the *comunas*. More significantly, the particular term of jargon that Vallejo uses with the most frequency, *parcero*, meaning “dude,” shows a deeper questioning of other discourses, particularly social, political and religious, in which Fernando loses faith. This loss of faith in social institutions is examined in the next sub-section, “A Loss of Capacity for Social Trust: From Simple to complex-PTSD”. The last sub-section, “Failure to Construct a Narrative,” outlines the inadequacies of the discourses available to Fernando to enable him to construct

a coherent narrative of the events that have befallen and are befalling him. Combat trauma theory holds that constructing a narrative is essential for both regaining authority over traumatic memory, which is fragmented and follows its own logic, and for regaining authority of one's own identity, which is composed in part of one's memories. Fernando's sharp-tongued critique of all the discourses available to him, those of politics, social science, psychoanalysis, and literature, reveals that he is bereft of this avenue of psychological therapy for his trauma.

Fernando serves as a poignant example of how trauma is exacerbated when it occurs in the context of violence where the subject is deprived of any way of coming to terms with it. Shay has shown that victims of trauma who can somehow integrate their experience back into their memory and sense of self are able to ameliorate most of the more serious symptoms that accompany complex-PTSD. But when all available forms of identity construction are inadequate, or when the subject distrusts the very ground on which they stand, then there is little hope for any therapy; simple-PTSD will be in danger of becoming complex-PTSD. The forms of identity construction that Fernando rails against are the discourses in his Colombia that are inadequate to represent the particular trauma of his situation: political discourse cannot be trusted because the neoliberal project of nation building masks the grave injustices and violence done to the lower classes (Lander 2003; Rueda 2004); discourses of social science cannot be trusted for a number of reasons, the most important of which are, one, their tenuous and unexamined assumption that their methodology has allowed them to understand the criminals' point of view, and two, their claims that their discourse is privileged over others to represented reality in general (Montoya 2008); literary discourse cannot be trusted because even the most experimental of the nation's literary forms have fallen short of representing his reality; religious discourse cannot be trusted because it is uttered by members of a corrupt church, whom Fernando satirizes with a sustained anti-clerical discourse throughout. The tragedy of Fernando's trauma is made

worse by the absence of any recourse to methods of therapy— there is no "talking cure" about any of these problematic discourses.

#### 4.1 Derealization, Depersonalization and Dissociative Amnesia

Some symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder are the loss of ability to recurrent and intrusive memories of the event such as flashbacks; dissociative amnesia, or a difficulty in remembering an important aspect of the traumatic event; and especially derealization, which is to say a persistent perception that one is living in a dream world and one's reality is distorted and unreal (*DSM-5*; Shay 1994, 2002; Herman 1992). In this sub-section I will show how Fernando exhibits all of them.

Recall that the *DSM-5* defines the term "derealization" as "a persistent perception that one is living in a dream world and one's reality is distorted and unreal." (*DSM-5* PTSD section). The first passage that is essential to understanding the dream-like nature of the discourse in *La virgen* occurs five pages into the book during the Nativity scene that I mentioned earlier. Fernando is recalling an immense Nativity scene in one of the houses along the road to Sabaneta, a village near where he grew up. At first, he notes the similarity between the houses in the scene with the houses along the Sabaneta road. Then he revises his statement in ways that clarify that the older Fernando who is remembering the scene is not sure what he himself is remembering:

Or rather, it was [as] if the reality inside contained the reality outside and not the other way round, as if on the road to Sabaneta there was a little house with a Nativity scene which contained another road to Sabaneta. To pass from one reality to the other was infinitely more mind-blowing than any *basuco* [low-grade cocaine, usually diluted with some other drug like tobacco or marjiuna] dream. (10)

This instance is just one of the many in which Fernando gives the reader a conspicuous clue that his

discourse is the product of an unresolvable mix between dream and reality, between “one reality and another.”

In another such passage, Fernando meets Alexis in Fernando’s friend José Antonio’s apartment that served as a gathering place for young homosexual sicarios and older pedophiles. José Antonio is described as a “distant” friend, a “survivor of that antediluvian Medellín” (5), a “character and not a person or human being because that’s what he is, a character, like something from a novel, something not encountered in real life” (7). On meeting each other, Fernando and Alexis retire to a room that Fernando says he is going to describe “without Balzacian embellishments,” but then immediately describes it as “a room embellished, more than Balzac could ever have imagined [...] with old clocks; clocks, more clocks, old and dead old clocks, on the wall, on the table, by the dozen, by the ton, all stopped at different moments, scoffing at eternity, negating time” (6) – in this scene Fernando is in a dream as well as in another vertiginous time warp.

Fernando's most explicit departure from reality occurs at the end of the story at the morgue, when he sees the body of an eviscerated baby at the feet of a disemboweled corpse, he begins conspicuously to refer to himself in the third-person as the “invisible man,” when he “thought of those combinations of unwonted magic objects the Surrealists used to imagine, like an umbrella on a dissecting-table, for instance. Stupid Surrealists! [...] Faced with the reality of Colombia, a wretched Surrealism shatters into smithereens” (130). Here, even experimental art fails to provide a basis for a new identity.

In such passages, Fernando’s claim to being faced with the “reality of Colombia” is undermined by the fact that this discourse is uttered from the vertigo of a narrator who is claiming to have moved outside of his own body, seeing himself walk through the morgue as the “invisible man.” This mental state is exactly in line with the APA definition of “depersonalization” as a mental state in which one

feels like one is an outside observer of one's own consciousness or body.

Another symptom that the traumatized subject suffers is a vertiginous sense of time; in this instance Fernando perceives that he is caught in an eternal present, with internal clocks all stopped at different moments. Recall that traumatic memory, according to the APA, can be accompanied by the perception that time is moving slowly. Shay and Herman both show how the fragmented and intrusive nature of traumatic memories disrupt the cohesion of narrative time, creating the perception of an "eternal present" in the consciousness of the victim: they describe how flashbacks of traumatic experiences tend to invade the victims' present consciousness. In turn, the experience of a flashback is often accompanied by the somatic symptoms associated with the events, as well as by a perception that the victim is re-experiencing the event first-hand, or re-living the event. Thus a flashback victim's present consciousness is a mix of his perception of reality and the traumatic memory, which is re-experienced as if it were real, as if the past had collapsed and the victim were stuck in an "eternal present" in which reality is perceived as traumatic memory is inextricably mixed with external reality. That is, as if one's internal clocks were "stopped at different moments, scoffing at eternity, negating time" (6). Vallejo's narrative structure, therefore, is not a simple recapitulation of the past in the present, a structure that would lead the reader into understanding what Fernando has become. It is also much more than a metaphor suggesting the cyclical violent history of Colombia, as in the Snout funeral instance I mentioned above. It is, in addition, further evidence of the disjunctive state in which Fernando is left, when his memories of Colombia are irreconcilable with his present experiences, and when the moral and legal narrative he grew up with no longer sufficiently occlude his real experiences of exclusion.

This parallel between narrative form and PTSD experience has another issue: as the disjunction increases, the narrator loses his authority over his own narrative, and of his sense of identity as well.

Intrusive traumatic memories, in PTSD theory, can lead the loss of control over one's memory altogether. Not only is one's perception of the present distorted, but one's perception of the past is shuffled and reconstituted as well. The APA refers to this as "Dissociative Amnesia," and Shay and Herman refer to it as the loss of authority over one's own memory. Fernando's memories keep forcing Fernando into confrontations with his present in the form of intrusive flashbacks into his consciousness of cracks in the field of experience that Colombia provided him in the past.

Both the accuracy of Fernando's recollections and his authority over them are questioned constantly throughout his discourse, as in the following examples: "No, it wasn't my grandpa's Hudson, it was in my pa's old jalopy. Yeah, it was the Hudson for sure. I don't remember now" (2); in this overworked memory of mine the dead are beginning to get all mixed up (48); "let's backtrack a moment because, while getting out of the taxi, two victims slipped my mind" (69); "Ah, what a memory mine is! I'm forgetting one more hit" (70); "I said to Alexis, sorry, to Wilmar, that we should go in (100); "my grandpa had a house I knew well, but about which I remember nothing. Oh yes, one thing I'd erased from my memory" (121).

Those examples are merely the explicit commentary that Fernando himself makes on his faulty memory, but a comparison of the overlapping, slightly modified details, and self-contradictions in his discourse reveal a memory of a much higher degree of unreliability than one that merely forgets a few details, as in the comments above. In the case of his two lovers, for example, it is as if the same story is being told only with different names. He even calls one by the name of the other, as above. They visit the same churches on the same days, meet through the same panderer, go a similar killing spree, have fights over the sicarios' need for television, radio, and consumer brand products; Fernando even says that he and Wilmar "repeated the story of Alexis" (107). He sees these individuals without differentiation, in their roles in this society with its own rules, not as individual persons.

Fernando's stories of his youth that he tells to Wilmar are almost identical to the stories he told Alexis, except that some of the details changed and modified. He tells Wilmar more details about his childhood church than he tells Alexis. The Bombay bar is depicted in a different way. For instance, he is chasing the balloon on foot when going by it when he tells the story to Wilmar, but he is chasing the balloon in a car when he tells the story at the beginning of the book.

In sum, Fernando's discourse shows him exhibiting many of the symptoms that characterize PTSD: derealization, depersonalization, and dissociative amnesia. These symptoms work together in Fernando to exacerbate his symptoms, leading to a more radical undermining of the sense of Self that I will examine in the next section.

## **4.2 The Shattering of Identity**

Traumatic memory does not conform to a seamless timeline. It is fragmented, and a complex mix of involuntary past intrusion into the present, or flashbacks. In Shay's words, the fragmented nature of the severe traumatic memory "explodes the cohesion of consciousness" (*Achilles* 183). Such memories are structured differently than non-traumatic memories in that they defy narrative time, occur as image flashbacks or as full-sensory flashbacks. Not only do the flashbacks intrude upon consciousness of their own volition, but they also are often inaccessible to conscious retrieval (Caruth, *Trauma* 151). It might be said that they dissociate the victim from himself. Fernando displays many of these symptoms throughout the narrative – his identity is either fragmented or dissociated from itself. His comments regarding his fragmented identity are spread as evenly throughout the text as are references to his being dead, and his dissociation from his Self gets progressively worse toward the end of the story, particularly after the death of Alexis, his love for whom he had earlier described thus: "That little angel had the power to set all my inner demons off, which are like my personalities: there's



a thousand or more of ‘em” (23). That the later Fernando is one whose psyche has been irreparably damaged is an interpretation bolstered by one of Fernando’s prayers later in the novel. One night as he overlooks a Medellín *comuna* illuminated by the lights in the residences that to him represent “souls,” Fernando supplicates the Virgin María Auxiliadora, who was his favorite patron saint as a youth and who is now the patron saint of the *sicarios* as well, to grant him a spiritual restoration: “And I have just the one soul, but all in bits. ‘Little Virgin child of Sabaneta, let me be again the child I once was, unique and individual.... I’m no longer myself, little Virgin child, my soul is riven’” (30) (“Yo ya no soy yo” - “I am no longer I” in Vallejo’s original (32)). In this early example the sense of the fragmented Self and the sense of the dissociated Self are juxtaposed: “I am no longer I” is the dissociation and the “my soul is riven” is the fragmentation.

Fernando twice mentions that the church room in which he was baptized has been walled off by cement, although every other aspect of the church has been preserved perfectly, and looks as it did when he was a child. This is a profound physical statement that no one can join this church any more. Fernando goes back first to recant his Catholicism because he claims that he had been baptized without his permission. He recants “so that although I might go on being me, I don’t have a name any more. Nothing, nothing at all.... Everything to do with me, that [the baptistery] included, was over and done with” (71). He is looking for a narrative of being not attached to this church and the society that fostered it. The second time he goes back to the church, it is with Wilmar, when Fernando repeats the same story about the sealed off baptistery in a tone that suggests he had forgotten about the first time he mentioned it in before in his discourse. Here again, this is a kind of repetition compulsion that seems to control him: Fernando omits such discursive commentary as “as I have said before,” or “as I have already mentioned,” or “I say it again” that would usually accompany parts of the story that are repeated (114).

Toward the end of the novel, Fernando's dissociation from himself is described explicitly, and it gets progressively worse as he moves to scenes that cause him more direct, current psychological trauma. The first time it happens is on his visit to Snout's funeral, who was the corrupt police officer whom Fernando says was assassinated two times: the first was thirty years prior to events in the story (at the end of *La violencia*), and the second was two days before Fernando goes to his funeral wake. While Fernando is there, Snout's relations speculate about his identity among one another, and he answers them as if he were dissociated from his own body, as an outside observer looking on at himself: "I. It was I. And he who said 'I' spoke" (118). But in this scene his dissociation only lasts for those two lines that join his two grammatical frames of reference.

When it happens again on his visit to the morgue to identify the body of Wilmar, however, that grammatical splice is sustained for a number of pages. Not only that, but the narrative's whole focalization shifts in metalepsis between first and third persons (internally focalized homodiegetic intradiegetic and externally focalized heterodiegetic extradiegetic), as if Fernando were slipping out of himself and back into himself, his identity in flux and uncertain, his mental state progressively more fragile. As he enters the morgue, he says that he is restored to his true essence, that of "the invisible man" (128). Later, his identity seems to merge with his "invisible man" persona when he uses the possessive pronoun in this phrase: "My invisible man's eyes" (128). But a paragraph later, the two entities are separate again when he describes going through a door as: "the invisible man went through" (128). The focalization stays in the third person for two pages until he sees Wilmar's body, at which time it slips back into the first person: "And then I saw him on one of those tables" (130). "The invisible man" makes one more appearance on Fernando's exit of the building, and then Fernando returns back to himself, with the narrative discourse back in the first person, as well.

This sense of a Self that is fragmented, divided, dissociated, or somehow split is a common

aspect traumatic memory since Freud and is part of the contemporary PTSD criteria. But things get even worse when one's faith in one's ability to understand and make sense out of the world is undermined. In the next section by focusing on his use of one particular term, I will show how the grammarian Fernando's mastery over language, which constitutes a large part of his identity, erodes as the narrative progresses.

### 4.3 Jargon Invasion: From Simple-PTSD to Complex-PTSD

In this section I will look at how the deterioration of Fernando's character can be traced through the gradual corruption of his language – its gradual divergence from the “pure” form that he perceives as superior. That “norm,” however, is itself anything but neutral, the text is at pains to indicate. Fernando, a famous grammarian from a “land which centuries ago was a land of grammarians” (16), begins the discourse by translating for the reader the jargon spoken in the *comunas*. Following the assumptions of the colonizing European powers, this philologist is empowered by his intellectual roots to master and categorize the local vernacular. Fernando contrasts the vulgar dialect of Spanish spoken in the *comunas* with the gold-standard of Colombia Spanish that was standardized “more than a hundred years ago” by “my old friend Don Rufino José Cuervo, the grammarian, whose company I frequented in my youth” (17).<sup>48</sup>

Such are the grammatical heights (there are none higher in Colombia – Cuervo is the authority) from which Fernando begins the discourse. But as the narrative progresses, the jargon begins to insinuate itself, by gradual degrees, into Fernando's speech. The new terms – “new” only to a speaker of book Spanish–, previously separated from the discourse by brackets, begin to be offset by quotation

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48 Don Rufino José Cuervo refers to the actual linguist (1844-1911) who compiled an important survey of Colombian dialects, *Apuntaciones críticas sobre lenguaje bogotano* (Critical Notes About Bogotan Language, 1867), advocated for a unified form of Spanish, and became a member of Spain's Royal Academy (<http://www.biografiasyvidas.com/biografia/c/cuervo.htm> accessed 17 Nov 2014).

marks, then sometimes by commas, in a gradual descent in a carefully structured hierarchy of punctuation for parenthetical asides. In addition, when he first slips into jargon, Fernando makes explicit commentary to the reader with comments such as “I later told Alexis, speaking in jargon with my polyglot mania” (21). But by the end of the book, the jargon terms are neither offset by punctuation nor by commentary; they have insinuated themselves seamlessly into Fernando’s speech. By the end, Fernando talks like a *sicario*, which also marks him as guilty for their kind of violence.

Take his use of the term *gonorrea*. When he first uses it to insult local government officials, it is followed by a parenthetical aside offset by brackets: “(*Gonorrea* is the biggest insult in the slums of the *comunas*, and I’ll explain what the *comunas* [sic] are later on.)” (8). Later, the term has worked its way into Fernando’s lexicon to such a degree that he describes a murder thus: “Un solo tiro...que mandó a la gonorrea esa con su ruido a la profundidad de los infiernos” (26) (A single shot...that sent that gonorrea and his noise to all hells’ depths” [my translation]). Again, after the central scene of his killing the dog to end its suffering, Fernando rails: “Dios no existe y si existe es la gran gonorrea” - “God doesn’t exist, and if he does he’s the big gonorrea” (*La virgen* 78, my translation). The street jargon here has worked its way into his lexicon – a lexicon that he formerly regarded as superior and uninfected by dialect jargon.

A similar shift takes place in his use of the term *parcero*, which is contemporary Colombia street slang for “dude,” “friend,” or “brother” and serves as a term of informal address. María Mercedes Jaramillo notes how Fernando’s forms of addresses to the reader go from strictly formal in the beginning to exceedingly familiar in the end: first, the formal second-person pronoun “le” is used instead of “tu,” then a less formal “hombre” is used, later an informal “bobito,” which translates as “ninny” or “silly,” then finally “parcero” in places throughout, but most significantly on the novel’s

final pages (435).<sup>49</sup> He first uses it when he is playing the role of cultural and linguistic translator for the reader, writing as if he were giving a local language lesson to a foreign tourist: “Un ejemplo: “¿Entonces qué, parce, vientos o maletas?” ¿Qué dijo? Dijo: “Hola hijo de puta”. Es un saludo de rufianes.” (23) - “An example: ‘What then, *parcero*, concrete boots or a wooden overcoat?’ And what did he say? He said: ‘Hi, you sonofabitch.’ It’s a greeting between thugs” (20).

As Fernando's discourse progresses, however, *parcero*, in all of its many forms (*parce*, *parcerito*) goes from being a term that needs translating to Fernando’s preferred epithet for whomever he is addressing (in this text one can never be quite sure if Fernando is addressing the reader, the implied listener within the discourse, or other characters within the narrative). In the following example it starts to slip from one category to another: “Nada somos, parcerito, nada semos.... ¿Y “parcerito” qué es? Es aquel a quien uno quiere aunque uno no se lo diga aunque él bien que lo sabe. Sutilezas de las *comunas*, pues” (39) - “We’re nothing, *parcerito*, we’re nuttin’. And “*parcerito*,” what is it? It is that which one loves even though one does not say so even though he knows it very well – subtleties of the *comunas*” (my translation).

I rejected Hammond’s translation of this selection because he neglected to put the set of quotation marks around the second instance of “parcerito.” These marks are essential to the maintaining the ambiguity of Vallejo’s original and therefore the process of the word's transformation in Fernando’s usage. Notice that in the beginning of the passage when Fernando says “nada somos, parcerito, nada semos,” he seems to be addressing the reader and calling the reader “dude.” Also notice Vallejo’s misspelling of the word “somos” - “we are,” which likely indicates a shift in its correct

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49 Many blogs on Urbandictionary.com suggested that “nigga” was the best translation of “parcero,” although this assessment generated significant controversy due to its racist etymology; but in the sense of a term that is an exclusionary shibboleth, the very use and pronunciation of which serves as a means of identification and greeting between members of a socio-economically repressed class but not by members of the oppressing class, it seems a fitting translation.

pronunciation to how it is pronounced in the *comunas* – a subtlety I tried to convey when I changed “nothing” to “nuttin.’

But when, in the lines that follow, Fernando defines “parcerito,” he defines it thus: the boy whom one loves but doesn’t tell him he loves him; in this story, this likely refers to Alexis. If that is the case, then it would mean, according to what can be adduced from the syntax, that the first *parcerito* must have been addressed to Alexis, and not to the reader. So, while Vallejo’s syntax is artfully ambiguous to the extent that the object of Fernando’s address is often left indetermined, the fascinating process at work in this selection is the slippage of “parcerito” from a “greeting between thugs” that needs translating to a term that slips seamlessly into Fernando’s speech as an address the reader, or characters, or both.

As already noted, in the early stages of the novel, *parcero* is used self-consciously in relation to “proper” usage, as here to highlight the difference in social class between Fernando and his interlocutor: “Shit, if there’s one thing I suspect at this stage of the game, *parcero*, it’s that I’m more unwhackable than you” (43). But by the end of the book, it loses its sardonic edge and is used by Fernando, who is addressing the reader in the same manner that it is used in the *comunas*, as a familiar form of address between thugs:

Bueno parcero, aquí nos separamos, hasta aquí me acompaña usted. Muchas gracias por su compañía y tome usted, por su lado, su camino que yo me sigo en cualquiera de estos buses para donde vaya, para donde sea. Y que te vaya bien / que te pise un carro / o que te estripe un tren”

“Well then, dude, this is where we part ways. Many thanks for your company; but here you go your way and I’ll go mine, which is wherever direction one of these buses might be headed.

Until we meet again / hope you get hit by a car / or smashed by train.” (121 my translation)

The ditty at the end seems at first glance to be nothing more than a refrain from a popular *vallenato*, which is a genre of popular folk music that Fernando has spoken of with derision and annoyance throughout the text. However, the violent imagery recalls Fernando's earlier translation of the *sicarios'* slang greeting "concrete boots or a wooden overcoat," the "greeting between thugs." When he first used it, Fernando had to translate it for the reader. But by the end of the book, it has become part of his lexicon, and he is using as a direct address from one thug (Fernando) to another (the reader), "colonizing" what supposedly had been an intellectual audience (one who understood philology) and making them join street life. For Fernando, this represents a fall from the social identity he had conceived for himself earlier in the book, and it is traced through his use of language. The famous grammarian Fernando, who in the beginning of the book associated himself with the very man who wrote the book on the standardization of the Spanish language in Colombia, is by the end of his discourse speaking exactly as a sicario thug from the slums would speak. To be clear, I am not arguing the "pure" Spanish has inherent qualities that make it superior to any dialect, but rather that Fernando holds this view and prides himself on his mastery over language. We this starts to erode, as I have shown when his attempts at irony begin to overreach themselves, grounds for his own sense of Self are undermined.

#### **4.4 A Loss of Capacity for Social Trust: From Simple-PTSD to Complex-PTSD**

The loss of capacity for social trust can come in many forms, and there is not a social institution against which Fernando does not rail in his discourse. But above all others, his vituperative anti-clericalism suggests that he holds a special place in hell for the hypocritical Catholic church and all of its agents. Due to historical circumstances stemming from Spanish colonization of South American, the Catholic church's influence cultural influence there is deep; in terms of architecture and culture,

Medellín is a very Catholic city even by Latin American standards. Fernando's anti-clericalism first emerges in the incidents of his childhood trauma, first when he recoils from the nativity scene and later when he is almost “assassinated” by the statue of Juan Bosco during a religious procession (115). And he sustains his loss of faith with the church in many sardonic attacks dispersed throughout his discourse. But again, by focusing in on his choice and use of the *parcero* slang term that I used in the section above to show the deterioration of his language, I can show how in this section the same term works to show his disillusionment with the church and religion. Fernando's is a profound loss of faith in religion's basic trustworthiness and therefore ability, as a discourse and institution, to play a role in identity formation. “The Parcero” metonymically connects the process of deterioration in language with the disillusionment in the institution of the church. Possessing no shortage of credentials when it comes to grammar, Vallejo is the author of *Logoi: una gramática del lenguaje literario* (1983), a study of rhetorical devices in literature as well as *El cuervo blanco* (2012), a biography of Don Rufino José Cuervo; I submit that Vallejo's choice of this particular term of street slang from among many others was careful and apt. Vallejo would likely have been familiar with other definitions of “parce” the derivative of “parcero” that he used in above, that again tie these passages into more domains of usage, according to the most recent Royal Academy’s Dictionary of the Spanish language.<sup>50</sup> Most significant for the present purposes are: (1) a certificate given as an award by grammar teachers to their students that served to absolve them of a future mistake; and (2) the first words of the first of the selections from the Book of Job that were sung during religious services for the dead.

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50 The following is the entry for “parcero” in the Royal Spanish Academy's dictionary, the *Diccionario de la lengua española (DRAE)*, 23<sup>rd</sup> edition (2014) (<http://www.rae.es/recursos/diccionarios/drae2014>; accessed 6 November 2014).  
Parce. (Del lat. *parce*, 2.<sup>a</sup> pers. de sing. del imper. de *parcere*, perdonar).  
1. m. p. us. Cédula que por premio daban los maestros de gramática a sus discípulos y les servía de absolución para alguna falta ulterior.  
2. m. p. us. Primera palabra de la primera de las Lecciones de Job, que se cantaban en el oficio de difuntos y designaba esta oración ritual. *Entré en la iglesia al acabarse el parce.*



Regarding the first definition, the fact that Fernando himself is a famous grammarian needs to be reconciled with the fact that his most-used piece of *parlache* refers to something awarded by *grammar* teachers. The likelihood of a coincidence in this case is small. I submit that Vallejo chose his character/narrator's profession and most-used term very carefully, with this tight connection in mind. Regarding the second definition of “*parce*,” it is a term used to designate a part of the Catholic funeral service (the office for the dead) as in: “I entered into the church as soon as the *parce* was finished” (my translation). The use of the word in either of the two senses is archaic. But it is for that reason that Vallejo’s choice of it is apt in this context: as I showed in the sub-section above, it goes from its former state of being a pardon in the control of the grammarians to a crude form of address, foreign to the grammarian, and highlights the degree to which his “pure” Spanish has become infected with the *parlache*; and then it moves to a term that shows Fernando's loss of faith in the institution of religion, as I will show in the sub-section below.

The lines from the Book of Job that make up the “*parce*” in the Catholic funeral service are usually 19:1-2, 23-27.<sup>51</sup> They are part of a longer passage that includes Job’s plea that the story of his plight be written in a book: “Oh that my words were now written! / Oh that they were printed in a book” (Book of Job 19:23). And, of course, a book is exactly what the reader of Fernando’s story has in his hands. Job refers to his “Avenger”: “For I know that my avenger liveth” (Book of Job 19:25). His “avenging angels” or “exterminating angels,” as already noted, are the terms Fernando uses to refer to his Alexis and Wilmar.

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51 19:1-2: Then Job answered and said, How long will ye vex my soul, and break me in pieces with words?  
23-27: Oh that my words were now written! / oh that they were printed in a book! / That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever! / For I know that my avenger liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: / And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: / Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me. / But ye should say, Why persecute we him, seeing the root of the matter is found in me? / Be ye afraid of the sword: for wrath bringeth the punishments of the sword, that ye may know there is judgment. (*The Holy Bible: King James Version*)  
the Latin is **Parce mihi, Domine, nihil enim sunt dies mei** ((Job, 7:16).

In the second place, the theological problem becomes more formal and more complex that this passage refers to. The God railed against in the Book of Job is a God who cannot be counted on to set things right in the world where evil reigns. Job's famous lines, uttered when Satan finally breaks him, are echoed in many of Fernando's denunciations of God. Here is Job: "Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a manchild conceived. / Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it" (Job 3:3-4). "Let that day be darkness" is a direct rebuke of God's first words during the seven days of when he created the world as told in *Genesis*: "Let there be light." By way of comparison, here is Fernando: "Mire parcerero: no somos nada. Somos una pesadilla de Dios, que es loco" - "Look here, dude: we are nothing. We are a nightmare of a crazed God" (*La virgen* 40 – my translation). Later, and much more significantly because this example combines both the anti-clerical loss of faith in the church with another instance of parlache invading Fernando's vocabulary: "God doesn't exist and if he does he's the big gonorrhea" (78).

In addition, the narratives of Fernando's and Job's persecutions are framed in similar ways. The sound metaphor in *La virgen*, the figurative sound "assaults" that I mentioned in the previous section, find their parallel in the sounds that torment Job throughout his story that come from the three acquaintances who question Job about his plight and tempt to rebuke God. While these questions are answered with reasoning and patience, Job is also at times driven to distraction: "Then Job answered and said, How long will ye vex my soul, and break me in pieces with words?" (19:1-2). It can be argued that the instigator of Job's torments is in fact Satan, who manipulates God into the cruel and prolonged torture of one of his most loyal servants to test his loyalty. Thus the binary of God/Satan is flipped in that book as well, with Satan pulling the strings and God inflicting pain. In *La virgen*, the god whom Fernando turns to is as often Satan as it is God, as in the following diatribe: "May you be blessed, Satan, you who, in the absence of God, who can't be bothered, have come to right the wrongs

of this world” (108). Fernando's “exterminating angels” are angels of the devil, not of God, as he says here of Wilmar: “My baby boy was the special envoy of Satan who'd come to create order in a world with which God couldn't cope” (108). God has indeed forsaken him, as the reference to Job underscores.

To cite another example of the nexus in the deterioration of language with the deterioration of social institutions, I turn briefly to the work of Celina Manzoni. Her example, while it turns on a metonymical connection with a different word than *parcero*, analyzes the trauma along the same lines as I have above. I cite it here to illustrate Vallejo's very precise artistry when it comes to the terms he chooses for his protagonist's discourse. In the following example Vallejo's syntax juxtaposes a word that carries two different meanings depending on the context: “Y ni eso, vaya: vaya a la Catedral o Basílica Metropolitana para que vea rufianes fumando marihuana en las bancas de atrás” – “And not even that, by God: go to the Cathedral or Metropolitan Basilica so that you can see ruffians smoking marihuana on the pews in back” (*La virgen* 11 – my translation). The syntactical trick doesn't translate, unless I were to substitute the English archaic “go to” for the interjection “by God”; in which case it would have read: “And not even that, *go to*: *go to* the Cathedral or Basilica” (my emphasis). Vallejo, Manzoni argues, by juxtaposing the word “vaya,” first used as an interjection, and second as a verb conjugated in the imperative, is showing in Fernando's discourse a process of language destabilization that parallels the disintegration and fragmentation of Colombia society in the narrative (49). I would add that Vallejo's choice of the church as a setting to see the dregs of society smoking is as well suggestive of his loss of faith in that institution: language deteriorates, society disintegrates, and the church serves only as a place for drug abuse in the back pews.

Fernando's complete loss of faith in religion and the benevolence of God is traced out in *La virgen*, and in particular his use of *parcero* to double current slang with the Book of Job and the service

for the dead, which creates a nexus of the two forms of trauma for him that tend to exacerbate PTSD symptoms in most victims: deterioration of his facility with language and his loss of faith in institutions. In the following section I will address his lack of resource to a discourse that might allow him to construct a narrative, which according to Shay is an essential aspect of psychological healing after trauma. Victims who cannot construct a narrative are more likely to descend into complex-PTSD, or worse.

#### **4.5 Failure to Construct a Coherent Narrative: The Anti-Aesthetics of the PTSD Novel**

If the process of constructing a narrative is indeed an essential step in terms of recovery from trauma, then one needs access to discourse resources capable of providing the resources to construct it. In *La virgen*, Fernando's attempts at finding such discourses are continually stymied. The discourses of politics, social science, journalism, and literature all fall short in significant ways, and so, not surprisingly, none escape Fernando's frustrated vitriol. Social science is ironized thus:

And what was Alexis going to ask the Virgen for? Sociologists say that the hitmen ask María Auxiliadora to make sure they don't miss, that she guide their aim when they shoot and that the deal works out well for them. And how they do they [the sociologists] know this? Are they Dostoyevsky or God the Father maybe when it comes to getting inside other people's minds? A person doesn't even know what he's thinking himself, so how's he going to know what other people are thinking? (12)

As Oscar Montoya writes, the object of derision in this passage is sociological work such as that of reporter Alonso Salazar in his book *No nacimos pa' semilla* 'We Were not Born to Life' (1990) and later Salazar's and sociologist Ana María Jaramillo's collaboration *Medellín: las subculturas del*

*narcotráfico* 'Medellín: subcultures of narcotrafficking' (1992). Salazar in particular, in his *We Were not Born to Life*, made an in-depth study of the paradox of the *sicarios*' devout religiosity and dedication to ritual. According to Montoya, the reception of both books in both mass media and academia led to "the development of the industry of *testimonia* and biographical accounts of violence in the country" (32, my translation). Fernando attacks this whole discourse here for the "epistemological pretension at being able to give account of reality, and for that reason associates the discourses with nineteenth century realism and its mimetic aim" (Montoya 59, my translation).

Fernando lumps sociology in with psychiatry in another tirade: "When the sociologists start analysing a society, then by God it's fucked, just like a person who falls into the hands of a psychiatrist. We won't analyse anything, then, merely press on" (68). On Freudianism and Marxism: "But what the fuck does it matter, seeing as psychoanalysis is more bankrupt than Marx!" (44). On journalists: "In the death agony of this society, journalists are the heralds of the gravedigger" (45). On law and politics: "The first law of Colombia is impunity and our first unpunished offender is the President" (26); and later on the plight of the lower classes in the *comunas*: "Everybody in the *comunas* is sentenced to death. Did the law sentence them? What a stupid question: in Colombia there are laws but there's no law" (89).

I follow Montoya as far as Fernando's critique of discourses that purport to mimesis as an inadequate discourse to give an account of the violence. However, when Montoya asserts that Fernando's aesthetics are based on "the superior value he assigns to the artistic representation of reality" (60), I demur, because Fernando finds artistic discourses wanting in many instances as well. Here is Fernando's fulmination against Surrealism: Fernando "thought of those combinations of unwonted magic objects the Surrealists used to imagine [...]. Stupid Surrealists! [...] Faced with the reality of Colombia, a wretched Surrealism shatters into smithereens" (130). Here is Vallejo's ultimate

critique of the inadequacies of literary discourse to give account of the violence. Surrealism, one of the most experimental of artistic movements in terms of form, is in this statement case as yet another form of representing reality that fails to articulate the experience – the Colombia that Fernando experiences is beyond the power of even that discourse to represent it.

Many critics take the line that Vallejo privileges imaginative literature over any form of realism, which is a category that he seems to impose on the social sciences (Polit 2013; Montoya 2008; María Mercedes Jaramillo 2000; Alzate 2008; Cabañas 2002). While I do not take issue with that assertion, what I want to stress here is that his distrust extends to imaginative literature, as well. Experimental fictional literature fails too. It joins this list of political, sociological, Marxist, psychoanalytic, biographical, and testimonial discourses that fail Fernando when trying to account for the reality of Colombia, and the reality of his trauma. Below I will discuss the trauma that Fernando suffers from his repeated failures in using the aesthetic of the literary sublime to account for reality.

Earlier in the “Childhood Trauma” section above, I pointed to Pablo Restrepo-Gautier's analysis of how that Fernando first fails to assimilate an encounter with the sublime as a source of childhood trauma. Restrepo-Gautier points to a later scene in *La virgen* to show another failure at comprehending the sublime, arguing that Vallejo inverts the sublime experience as the English Gothic novel to show Fernando's failure to represent or derive any transcendence from his encounter with it. For example, while alone in his apartment mourning the death of Alexis, Fernando slips into a half-dream state. He sees himself walking with Alexis toward the heart of Medellín, following the San Antonio church dome that appeared to float “above the sea of beguiling mist that shrouded the center” (96): “We entered the church and it transpired it was a graveyard. Tomb after tomb after tomb, all moss-covered” (96). Restrepo-Gautier notes that, in English Gothic novels and Romantic poetry, the cemetery is one of the preferred places to experience the sublime in a religious context. By contrast, in *La virgen*, Fernando,

instead of experiencing any sort of transcendence or articulating the experience, is “summoned” by the sun back to reality when he awakes and goes out into the street. The conventions of the European Gothic have no meaning in a context where death already exists in life.

Restrepo-Gautier doesn't cite the very next lines that follow: “tomb and tomb, all moss covered” (96), yet I include them here because they strongly support my reading of the content of his experience, the imminence of a post-apocalyptic Colombia rather than the transcendences of an absent god: “And me on my own dying, without a friendly soul to bring me a coffee or a novelist to bear witness in the third person, to take note with paper and pen and indelible ink for ecstatic posterity of what I did or didn't say. One morning I was woken by the sun [...]” (96). These lines draw attention to the absence of any articulation of some imminence that could constitute the narrative of the dream-encounter with the sublime. Fernando seems to have had no trouble in ensuring that the rest of the sordid details of his story be written in indelible ink for posterity; however, when it comes to articulating his reaction to the moment in the story when he is at his most emotionally intense, there is conspicuously no description and no explanation – he remains stuck in the ambivalence created by narratives that cannot encompass the reality of Colombia's negative transcendence into non-morality, non-legality, and non-being for individuals who are dead in life.

Vallejo's placement of this dream sequence precisely at the moment of Fernando's state of emotional vulnerability and personal trauma supports my reading. Only a few pages earlier, the text marks the murder of Alexis, the moment that Fernando says he “became one of the living dead,” (96) a state characteristic of the berserk stage of complex-PTSD symptoms that I will cover later, and the complete inversion of the Burkean sublime. At this point in the discourse Fernando has made the momentous decision that he is going to murder Wilmar, Alexis' killer, which is an action that will complete the process of deterioration of Fernando's character and social status, from a detached

narrator and grammarian to a street-slang speaking *sicario*, or, worse, a boss of *sicarios*, which is even more despicable, according to a Fernando caught up in the cycle of violence. He moves into the sphere of direct, inevitable culpability that finishes any narrative illusion of innocence, conventional justice, or morality.

The absence of anyone to bear witness and articulate Fernando's trauma at the end of his period of mourning might help make sense of what seems at first glance to be a glaring incongruity in the discourse leading up to the key moment of Fernando's tragedy. Just prior to the trauma of the dog mercy killing and Alexis' death, the following lines are inserted when Fernando becomes one of the "living dead": "I didn't invent this reality, this reality's inventing me" (82). On the one hand, these lines seem strikingly out of sync with the discourse that both precedes and follows them. It is as if there by mistake, as if Vallejo had hit "paste" at the wrong time on his keyboard and inserted them in the wrong place. They are neither necessary to advance the line of reasoning in the immediate discourse, nor to comment on the events related in the plot on the mercy killing of the dog. The whole citation reads: "living in Medellín is like ricocheting through this life as a corpse. *I didn't invent this reality, this reality's inventing me* [my emphasis]. And so we, the living dead, wander its streets speaking of robberies [...]" (82).

On the other hand, if the lines are read in the context of Fernando's inability to articulate his encounters with the sublime, or traumatic, and Vallejo's rejection of the Burkean notion of a benevolent Being who could help the subject achieve some sort of transcendence, then the lines do in fact make a coherent connection between Fernando's experiences *as they make sense in mid-nineteen-nineties Medellín*, where conventional sense may have reached its boundary. The "reality" that is inventing Fernando is the echo of the Destiny that is writing the book from the earlier example of the book that has been already written on Fernando, the one whose pages he is merely filling in by sketching in his



relation to Medellín. It is the absence of someone to articulate Fernando's dream encounter with the sublime – an experience cut off by another external power that yanks him back to reality and away from any possibility of transcendence: the sun “summoned” him, and he “once again, obedient, obsequious, I took its summons seriously and let myself be seduced” (96). He can neither articulate it, nor “invent” it in an imaginative narrative version of events. It is inventing him, just as the narrative summons him back into a different idea of the land of the living.

Restrepo-Gautier finds another example of Vallejo's inversion of the sublime aesthetic in his image of the vultures that permeate the novel; vultures are ubiquitous in Fernando's Medellín because the vast number of dead bodies left to rot in the streets provide them with food – they fulfill their traditional symbolic roles as birds of the dead and of purification, as they clean the streets of bodies. Their function is here transformed to a sublime through death, rendered in religious language of “transmuting human carrion into soaring spirit” (48). They “fan the infinite azur with the black wing beats. That black which is the mourning of burials” (48); buzzards, “with their pure souls, fly over the valley and they are, as things go, the finest proof I have of the existence of God” (48). The sky, another essential element of the sublime, is described as the “infinite azur,” which is language alluding to the sublime aesthetic. Yet the God is a god who, in a perverse inversion of the Catholic rite of the Eucharist, eats his subjects rather than offering himself to be eaten by them. The vulture of pagan societies transcends the dove of Christianity.

Finally, Fernando's visit to the morgue is another encounter with the sublime that he fails to be able to articulate – a passage through real death, as sanitized by culture. Another detail that Fernando's discourse that Restrepo-Gautier doesn't mention is Fernando's comments on the reporters whose job it is to write an official account of that what transpires in the morgue – Vallejo's demonstration of how the agents of another official discourses do their work. Fernando sees them as part of Colombia's

inexorable bureaucracy, “drawing up official reports of autopsies, of entrances and exits, solicitous, industrious, diligent, with its unredeemed penpusher’s soul” (128). He admires the language of one of the reports, “the precision of the words, the conviction of the style [...]. The best writers in Colombia are judges and their clerks, and there’s no better novel than a court summary” (128). They provide narratives that fiction cannot, while writing their own kind of socially sanctioned fiction.

Here, Vallejo's artistry comes to the fore, as he crafts something beyond the novel, something beyond what prior generations of engaged intellectuals have seen necessary – not a neoliberal case, but rather a narrative encompassing the experiences of a generation whose reality is structured completely differently than that of earlier generations of readers and writers. As a genre, the novel’s traditional territory covers artistic use of language and the examination of the human spirit. As Vallejo shows these readers, circumstances are bleak indeed when the best novelists who address the reality of Colombia are pen-pushers of unredeemed souls who merely transcribe the violence that they see while observing the autopsies and the entrances and exits of murder victims – there is no transcendence here in Vallejo's story, no ability of this form of novel to transform experience into exemplary stories of self-formation or otherwise. And in the morgue, the border place between life and death, there is hardly a lack of opportunity for encountering terrifying and shocking experiences of the sublime, as Fernando himself will experience on the next page when he sees the vultures. Conversely, in the morgue that Fernando enters the only ones articulating their experiences are mere soulless transcribers, incapable of transcendence or of constructing their own narrative discourse of the story. The vultures, after all, are doing their proper job in creation: cleansing the earth from its smell.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

To a traditional intellectual like Fernando, nothing seems capable of articulating and coping

with a reality so overwhelmingly traumatic, so disruptive of traditional lives and understandings.

These lines recall those Fernando spoke just after describing his first encounter with the sublime when he was eight: “Humanity needs myths and falsehoods to keep on living. If someone sees the naked truth, he shoots himself” (11).

Fernando’s discourse, which is retrospective and therefore a discourse of memory, has all the characteristics of traumatic memory: derealization, depersonalization, dissociative amnesia, and a shattered sense of Self, a state in which the subject sees himself as a schizophrenic, shattered soul inhabiting a dream-world or moving between realities. In addition, he suffers from the more severe symptoms of complex-PTSD, such as the loss of faith in the systems of thought which had formerly allowed him to construct a sense of coherent identity, and a paucity of adequate discourses available to him to make sense out of what is happening. If recovery is possible from this mentally damaged state, Shay, Herman and Pennebaker argue that constructing a coherent narrative of the events is one extremely helpful step in the process, but Fernando fails to do this when it comes to describing his most traumatic experiences.

In consequence, the author shows how this process of identity reconstruction through narrative is repeatedly stymied for Fernando in all of his encounters with trauma. He can neither deal with his experience of reality nor articulate the encounter with it in the Nativity scene, nor in the dream-sequence church scene, nor in the scene when he is mourning for the death of Alexis and becoming one of the “living dead,” which is another PTSD symptom in severe trauma cases. Worse, if there is someone who is purportedly articulating it, or helping him articulate it, it isn’t in a tale told by a benign deity, nor by a friend who brings him coffee, nor by a novelist. Instead, the stories are brought to him by some malevolent force of fate, or by the soulless pen-pushers who represent the inexorable state bureaucracy, another agent of evil in the book – they are all simply bringing him examples of

discourses that will *not* enable him to overcome trauma. Fernando's psychological trauma is exacerbated by his inability to render it in a narrative adequate to its form. Vallejo has not found that form, but he has declared a decisive end to the purported power of the engaged intellectual author to offer an adequate social, legal, ethical or even literary critique – all the discourses fail when faced with the bleak, chaotic, senseless and traumatic reality of the Medellín depicted in Vallejo's prose.

## **5. The Berserk State**

The final step I need to make in understanding this novel moves decisively beyond that which other critics have taken regarding this novel. Vallejo's point is not just that Fernando's life is a tragedy, as an intellectual who cannot find "his" country, but also that he is not equipped to see and articulate what he experiences on his reentry to the country – the country itself does not have a narrative of itself to give him. Throughout the story, in consequence, Fernando simply becomes subject to events that, taken together, become severely psychologically traumatic to him. He becomes someone he does not know, and whom he cannot understand. To reiterate several points where he has lost the very ground for his identity: he is triply exiled (from country, from home, from soul). His social position is undermined if not completely lost; he is living under some sort of death sentence, which could be a literal chronic illness or a premonition of a violent death, as he says that he has come to Medellín to die. Once there, he is besieged by sounds that are so disconcerting to him that they are depicted as the voice of a Christ the destroyer from the Book of Revelations; his language, the faculty most important to him as a grammarian, deteriorates from flawless (he claims kinship with the standard of Colombian grammar) to a street jargon that he had always perceived as lesser. From the moment he enters the room of the clocks all frozen in time where he meets Alexis, he is consigned to an eternal present, which is the very state of soulless existence he laments that Alexis lives in, too. Finally, he lives under

the constant threat of violence and death in a city dominated by assassins – each time he leaves the house he claims that he is risking his life by simply walking the streets (32).

Fernando entertains exaggerated negative beliefs about himself, reckless or self-destructive behavior, persistent inability to experience positive emotions, a constant feeling of being threatened, and social withdrawal – all symptoms which should be self-evident at this point from the many examples I have already provided from *La virgen*. It is enough to say that he has given up on life, constantly rails at anything and everything in his world, feels himself besieged by real physical violence as well as sounds and spatial disorientation, attempts suicide twice, and speaks for the rest of his discourse as if he were already dead. These symptoms align perfectly with Shay’s conception of complex-PTSD, to the degree that no extended commentary is necessary to see the parallel. As I have demonstrated in the previous sections, Fernando exhibits symptoms of PTSD which, when they occur in an epistemologically unstable environment, can lead to complex-PTSD. His Medellín is such an unstable environment.

My argument is that, in place of a successful return to the self and place of his nostalgia, he experiences rather a process of psychological torment when he confronts his past with the present in Medellín. At some point along the way, Vallejo's Fernando “snaps” and enters into the berserk state of a warrior at the end of his resources, as characterized by Jonathan Shay and Kirby Farrell, as I have described in the Introduction. Subjects who suffer from complex-PTSD sometimes enter into a berserk state, depending on the context of the traumatization. Shay first noticed the phenomenon in his combat veterans because their trauma happened in the context of war violence and because they themselves were, often as not the perpetrators, of violent acts. This is not to diminish in any way the trauma of the victim, or to excuse the violence and illegality of the acts of a perpetrator. It only highlights that the psychological trauma to the perpetrator is an area of study in its own right. It is particularly apt in this

story, in which the narrator/protagonist is himself responsible for the many of the violent acts he tells of on its pages.

I hope that by this point I have made a convincing enough case that a mid-nineteen-nineties Medellín resembled a state of war in terms of a constant exposure to the threat of violence. My argument is that Fernando's trauma, stemming from events both in his childhood and that have taken place during his narrative discourse, has come over him in a radically destabilizing context (marked by deterioration in his language, vertiginous memory, loss of capacity for social trust) and was there exacerbated by his lack of ability to reconstruct a coherent sense of Self, due in large part to a dearth of adequate discourses. The result is that it could easily be characterized as complex-PTSD. To make matters worse, the violent context of the trauma sends him in further psychological descent into what Shay calls the berserk state, which is characterized by a delusional invulnerability, god-like strength, reckless regard for life because the subject believes himself to have already experienced a type of spiritual death, dissociation with the Self, a homicidal rampage, and complete lack of compassion or empathy (*Achilles* 84). Let me now demonstrate how in *La virgen* Fernando exhibits all these symptoms.

One of the events that sends him into an altered mental state occurs about halfway through the novel when he is confronted with two traumatic events that occur in rapid succession: first, he kills a dog out of mercy (which is traumatic for him because of the priority he gives to animals over humans because of their innocence); next, another *sicario* murders his lover Alexis, for whom Fernando throughout the narrative discourse continually reiterates his love. One of the more moving examples is a prayer he uttered on his and Alexis' pilgrimage to her shrine near his hometown: "O infant Virgin, María Auxiliadora (Help of Christians), thou whom I have known since my childhood...; grant me one favour: that this boy...be my last, my one and only true love, that I betray him not, that he betrays me

not. Amen” (11).

Regarding the first incident, Fernando comes across a street mutt that is too wounded to lift itself up out of a sewage gutter; he kills it out of mercy to end its suffering. Significantly, it is the only time in the novel that he takes a life with his own hand. All the other instances of murder, his two *sicario* lovers, Alexis and Wilmar, commit the crimes; although most of the killings are instigated by Fernando, either explicitly or implicitly. But in this case of the dog, it is the hardened killer Alexis, not Fernando, who cannot bring himself to shoot it. Fernando is the one who ends up pulling the trigger.

The dog’s passing is described with a pity and compassion that is the antithesis of what Fernando feels for the people whose murders he caused because the beast is part of a different order, one untouched by social notions of guilt and innocence. “The dog was looking at me. The imploring look of those gentle, innocent eyes will remain with me for as long as I live” (83). Fernando shoots the dog, whose “clean and pure soul went soaring up, soaring up to dogs’ heaven which is where I’ll never go because I’m a bit of human filth” (83). Then, suddenly, Fernando attempts to shoot himself in the chest with the revolver, claiming that he has lost the desire to live. But Alexis deflects the shot, saving Fernando, and they fall into the sewer gutter together in a struggle for the gun, “sinking into the shit, the shit we were up to our souls in” (84).

To make matters worse for Fernando, if he could conceivably sink any lower than rolling in a trough of shit after an attempted suicide, he loses his lover Alexis the very next day. And it is not completely clear from Fernando’s syntax whether the moment he became one of the “living dead” followed the dog’s death or the murder of Alexis. He claims, precisely, nothing more than the ability to fix the moment: he says that he “can pinpoint the exact moment” (82), but then goes on to relate the story of the dog mercy killing immediately followed the story of Alexis’ death *without* explicitly pinpointing the exact moment he became one of the living dead. Incidentally, this is another example

where it could be argued that Fernando is losing control of his own memory and powers of language. He says he is going to pinpoint a moment but then offers a long range of time that covers two events, either of which could have sent him into the “living dead” state. At the very least, it can be adduced from the discourse that either one of the two events or the combined trauma of both of them was the trigger for his entering into the world of the “living dead.” The events are syntactically connected, almost seamlessly, as if they carried the same tragic weight for him: “I seem to recall Alexis shedding a tear with me over the little body of the animal. The next day, during the afternoon, on the Avenida La Playa, they killed him” (84). Further, Vallejo's careful syntactical construction shrouds meaning in significant ambiguity at this key point in the narrative. It highlights either his inability or refusal to articulate the exact moment of severe trauma, which is another example of his failure to construct a narrative from his memories, as discussed above.

After killing the dog, Fernando abandons hope for future happiness: “la felicidad para mí sería en adelante un imposible, si es que acaso alguna vez antaño, en mi ayer remoto, fue una realidad, escurridiza, fugitiva” – “my future happiness would be impossible, even if, at one time in my remote past, it was a reality, however elusive and remote” (*La virgen* 78 – my translation). After this last trace of past happiness is shattered, we see no more compassion in him for any living thing; there are no more prayers to reconstruct his fragmented soul and regain the shred of happiness from his youth. To put the last nail in the coffin, he characterizes his spiritual life as being up to his soul in shit.

Considering all this, we might now safely describe Fernando as occupying, at the very least, an altered mental state. In the next section I will demonstrate other characteristics of the state that will allow me to classify it as berserk.



## 5.1 Berserkers Feel Godlike

The most explicit example of Fernando's delusional god-like state comes at the end of the book, when he sees himself as an incarnation of Hades, reflected in the eyes of the dead Wilmar as the “overweening evil of God.” He jumps the line in the morgue before any nobody notices because he says that he has been “restored to my essence, to what I am, the invisible man” (128). But well before that in his discourse, he dons the robes of Hades, dressed in resplendent black, the only color of the suits he has hanging in his closet (117), when he goes to Snout's funeral.

The effect of this masquerade is acknowledged in the narrative, as well. Fernando's comportment is so awe-inspiring (in the sense of “inspiring dread”) that a taxi-driver, who before would have either turned up the volume of his music or shot Fernando for even asking that he do so (this passage, like the book itself, is as well an inside joke on the annoyingly loud music in the Medellín cabs that passengers are forced to tolerate), instinctively turns his radio down as soon as Fernando gets in the car. He tells Alexis about the River Cauca that separates them from the place Fernando grew up as a child, the crossing of which requires a trip on “Charon's barque” (28), an explicit reference to the river that is crossed to enter Hades. When he flees to a Catholic church to avoid Alexis' music, he assures the reader not to “be surprised, then, to find me in the most unlikely places. Here and there and in the beyond. In fleeing that infernal noise I am becoming more ubiquitous than God on high” (32). In addition, if we go by other claims he makes in the text, he sees himself as possessing a longevity greater than that of mere mortals: “Five hundred years it's taken me to understand Luther, and that there is no greater filth on this earth than the Catholic religion” (*La virgen* 66 – my translation).

One of the most disturbing moments in the book, in what some critics sees as Fernando's apotheosis to Hades (Santos 2008), when he finds Wilmar's body and tries in vain to close his eyes: “I

peeped into those green eyes for an instant and saw reflected in them, there in their empty depths, the immense, incommensurable, overweening evil of God” (130). For this selection, Hammond’s translation may not do justice to the rich ambiguity of Vallejo’s original, as Hammond’s “I peeped,” does not convey the full sense of Vallejo’s “Me asomé.” Here is Vallejo’s original: “Me asomé un instante a esos ojos verdes y vi reflejada en ellos, allá en su fondo vacío, la inmensa, la inconmensurable, la sobrecogedora maldad de Dios” (*La virgen* 119). The verb “asomarse” in Spanish carries the connotation of movement, to lean out, or lean over, or move to let oneself be seen when one had previously been concealed behind some obstacle – to be revealed, which also has a theological overtone.

Thus, it is reasonable to interpret Vallejo’s prose as describing his narrator’s leaning his head over the body of Wilmar, not just “peeping” into his eyes (Vallejo could have used the verb “mirar,” which means “to look,” if all he had wanted were to convey the sense of “to peep”). When Fernando leans over and looks in Wilmar's eyes he sees, reflected in them, the “evil of God” (130). It is important to emphasize not only that he sees the evil of God in the depths of the eyes, but, more precisely, he sees the evil of God *reflected* in the depths of the eyes – and what is it that is reflected in the depths (pupils) of the eyes of someone whom one is looking closely into, their head placed directly opposite? It is that person’s own reflection. Fernando sees *himself* reflected; he, who is the “immense, incommensurable, overweening evil of God.” Fernando sees himself as having become the incarnation of evil. Incidentally, “overweening,” is in this context a meager translation of “sobrecogedora,” which connotes horrific, astonishing, and awe-inspiring, in addition to “excessive,” which is the *OED* definition of “overweening.” The biblical overtones of an Old Testament god are inevitable.

At this point in the text Fernando is undone on many registers: his control of the discourse is in constant flux as the point of view changes without warning, the narrator is either confronting the

murder of his former lover or possibly reviewing his own handiwork as the mastermind of a murder, his use of language has become corrupted as he slides in between his formerly flawless grammar and the street slang of the ruffians, and all the while he fades in and out of material existence, becoming an invisible man but then quickly regaining substance.

While I am not quite prepared to follow Lydia Santos so far as to view Fernando's apotheosis to become the god of the underworld, I do share her view that Vallejo's text can support that interpretation: Fernando is the invisible God at the death's door (the morgue) counting his new arrivals; he is the God of death on an inexorable walk forward, descending in the hell of the Medellín *comunas*, dispatching his "exterminating Angels" (a phrase that Fernando uses throughout to describe both Alexis and Wilmar) to claim his victims (562-563).

For my purposes, it is enough that Fernando sees himself as consigned to Hades – in some place different from the Christian Hell. Hades is the abode of the dead (the no longer fruitful), not the place of eternal damnation and punishment. I read the text as the tragedy of Fernando, whose character progressively deteriorates from the innocent, happy youth in Sabaneta looking at Nativity scenes with his family, surprised that so much happiness could exist in the world, to the "invisible man" at the end of the book, arguably responsible for fifty-four deaths, a man who came to Medellín to die and even failed at that, and takes his leave of the listener/reader with the following nihilistic nod to *Macbeth*: Fernando is one of the "Poor innocent humans, plucked for no reason from the void and cast into the maelstrom of time. For a few idiotic, crazed moments, nothing more..." (132).

In other places throughout the text, Fernando's identity fragments in ways that implicate several god-identities, not merely Hades. Befitting the metaphor of Colombia being at war, he also identifies with Ares, god of war: "But I'm getting ahead of myself, interrupting the chronological order and sowing disorder" (29). There are also references to Greek heroes: on lamenting the murder of Alexis,

Fernando prophesies that “they killed him, just as they’re going to kill us all. Our ashes are all headed for the same cemetery, the same Elysian Fields” (4), which is the final resting place granted by the Greek gods to either demi-gods or to worthy heroes. He refers to his baptism as the day he was *entronizado* - “enthroned” by a local priest. *Entronizar*, in addition to the literal meaning of conferring the status of a monarch on someone by putting him on the throne, carries the secondary meaning of conceding a superior value or importance on a person compared to his peers, suggesting his canonization, as well.

Fernando inhabits the Judaic as well as the Greek cosmos, alluding to both Testaments of the Bible, as Miguel Cabañas notes: Fernando references the Old Testament in referring to Alexis and Wilmar as his “exterminating angels” (“avenging angels”) sent down to the world of Sodom and Gomorrah to set things right again (Cabañas 20); Fernando references the New Testament in casting himself as Christ, as here when Fernando identifies the local dialect of Antioquia as “the one I spoke when all excited (as Christ did Aramaic)” (qtd. in Cabañas 20). If we accept Lander’s reading, which I will cover in detail below, of Fernando as the real *autor intelectual* of the crimes that the *sicarios* commit, then Fernando also casts himself as an apocalyptic Christ figure, controlling and dispatching his angels. “Death is my errand-boy, kid” (21), Fernando brags to Alexis. “Death belongs to me, you jerks, she’s my paramour and goes wherever I go” (21). Near the end of the narrative, he is referring to himself in a particularly perverse apostasy as “Death’s godson” (118).

In addition to his self-identification with actual gods, in many instances Fernando also expresses delusions of god-like invulnerability in the face of danger, which is another characteristic of people who have entered into the berserk state (*Achilles* 84). For instance, when Fernando finds himself by chance in the middle of a Medellín shoot-out between gangs, he refuses to dive for cover like all the other bystanders. Instead, he walks upright at a stately pace through the bullets, to the

surprise of Alexis, who is an experienced killer and by no means a coward in the face of danger: “they were screaming. Get down. Who? Me? Never! My dignity prevents me. I carried on through bullets that were whistling around my ears like cut-throat razors” (21). Or later, when the “Dead Man” warns Fernando to be careful because there is likely a hit announced on his and Alexis’ heads, Fernando dismisses the threat: ““Shit, if there’s one thing I suspect at this stage of the game, *parcero*, it’s that I’m more unwhackable than you” (43). And later, “no sooner do the consecrated bullets touch my sacred tunic, my holy raiment, than they disintegrate” (66).

While other critics’ interpretations of Vallejo’s Fernando as some incarnation of an evil god is undergirded by ample examples throughout the text, I argue that these examples, in addition to adding a layer of complexity because of their literary allusive quality, can also allow the text to be read as a psychological breakdown of the narrator/protagonist: the tragedy of a berserk Fernando deluding himself into thinking that he is either god-like or possessing god-like attributes such as eternal life and invincibility. Whether he sees himself as Hades, a demigod, Christ the avenger, Satan, or a Greek hero allowed into Elysium, Fernando’s deluded apotheosis makes him lose his humanity, which is crucial characteristic for those warriors who have entered the berserk state and see themselves as god-like, according to Shay. And in seeing themselves as possessing god-like powers, they lose touch with that which makes them human during their normal mental state, and many times the trauma is irreparable. What Vallejo shows us, then, is not simply the tragedy of an intellectual but rather a dissociation that calls his possibility of identity formation as a human into question.

## **5.2 The Berserk Death-in-Life**

Even the framing of Fernando as being dead corresponds to today's analyses of PTSD as correlating with a berserk state. The trigger event or events that sent him into it both involve violent

deaths – the mercy-killing of the dog, followed immediately by the murder of Alexis. Recall that Shay identifies this “death-in-life” mental state as one of the key indicators that a person has entered into the berserk stage of posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms. Achilles entered his berserk attack on the Trojan army, the River Scamander, and Hector after performing a ritual funeral for himself after the death of Patroclus. To declare himself dead, Achilles befouled his face, tore his hair, stretched his long frame along the ground, and covered himself in ashes (*Achilles* 52). Homer used the same language for the wailing of his servant women around him he used to in other places in the poem to describe funeral lamentations. Shay’s Vietnam veterans who testified about having entered into a berserk state talk about it in the same terms, emphasizing their loss of a will to live, or their perception that they had died a ritual death and what remained of their lives was some kind of zombie existence. “I died in Vietnam,” or “that part of me died in Vietnam” is a refrain heard over and over again from these men.

Fernando leads into the dog anecdote with a metaphor loaded with death imagery: “*Hombre*, believe you me, living in Medellín is like ricocheting through this life as a corpse” (82). But in the lines that follow, the metaphor drops away, and Fernando speaks as if he were literally “living dead.” After the loss of Alexis, one of the first things that Fernando does is to enter a church “to ask God to remember me and send me death” (87), in a futile attempt to encompass his experiences in a narrative from his childhood. Unsuccessful in this bargain with a Christian god who does not necessarily offer solutions for these problems, Fernando leaves the institutional space and wanders about the streets aimlessly, ending up, without consciously willing, it at the same gutter at which the above dog scene occurred, connecting the two deaths metonymically (and suggesting that the gutter is the key for his entry into the living dead, his embrace of his own past and his present experience). He then goes into an extended period of mourning during which he is for the better part shuttered up in his apartment where he engages in an extended semi-delirious contemplation of destiny, justice, *La violencia*, and the

repetitive cycle of death in Colombia.

Out of this contemplative period, Fernando begins to recollect and inventory various phrases offering loaded, often conventional, interpretations of his “death-in-life” state, such as “he who hangs out with a marked man is a dead man, he goes down with him” (89), as both Alexis and Wilmar are marked men, marked by for a revenge killing for a blood feud. Later he says: “you can’t witness a killing around here and stay alive because then they know you and later the dead man *is* you” (94), by which, on the surface, Fernando means that the murderers tend to kill off any witnesses; underneath such statements is the truth that the act of witnessing a murder in Colombia condemns the witness to a life, or what remains of it, as “living dead,” as if the only choice for a people surrounded with violence is between willful ignorance of murder or a death sentence imposed when the death receives conscious testimony.

Next, Fernando relates a dream he had while delirious, although he doesn’t give any indication in the discourse when he enters the surreality of the berserk, crossing the boundary between the dream and the reality. At one moment he enters his story using the discourse marker for his moments of dissociation, oscillating between first and second person, and addressing either reader of the book or some listener posited as the recipient for his oral tale (this, again, is Genette's metalepsis, a disorienting slide between narrative levels and implied listeners/readers): “Does it seem improper to you, an old man killing a young one?” (95), as he is contemplating killing the *sicario* who murdered Alexis.

Then without warning, he slips into a discourse that tells of a dream, a fugue state of discourse beyond ordinary language: “I was sinking into the somber blue lagoon. It was blue in name but with treacherous green waters” (95). The reader doesn’t have the information yet, but the metonymical relationship established between Fernando’s homicidal plan and the “somber blue lagoon” of his dream that immediately follows it foreshadows, by the planting of an almost imperceptible metaphorical seed,

that the subject of homicide will be Wilmar, whose street nickname is “Blue Lagoon.” However, this detail is not revealed until thirty pages have gone by, at which point the reader may have some distant memory of the term “blue lagoon” as merely Fernando's metaphor for a delirious dream as opposed to the pseudonym of his new lover. The two spheres are fatally conflated.

Then Fernando, here firmly in waking-dream discourse, says that he was “dying” in his apartment. In the vision he relates, he says that he was walking with Alexis, who by this point in the story had already died. Together they entered a church that turned out to be a graveyard: “Tomb after tomb after tomb, all moss-covered” (96). But in the very next sentence, it seems that he has slipped out of the dream discourse and is back to relating the story of his mourning, because he says: “And me on my own, dying, without a friendly soul to bring me coffee” (96). So here Fernando in his half delirious state has made two direct references to being in a state of “dying,” conflating the living and the dead in a dream filled with images of death and dying such as a graveyard, moss covered tombs, drowning in a lagoon, and plotting murder.

He comes out of hibernation “woken by the sun flooding in through the terraces and balconies, summoning me” (96) and embarks on an adventure that is disconcertingly similar to the one he had just finished. As indicated earlier, he meets another *sicario*, Wilmar, who becomes both his lover and “exterminating angel.” Together they will claim six more souls before Wilmar himself is killed by another *sicario* – a recapitulation of Fernando's relation with Alexis, whom Wilmar resembles, as Fernando notes: “I’d have done better not to have gone out, not to have been born, because we repeated the story of Alexis” (107).

Suicide preoccupies his thoughts, running another direct connection between this present and the past where he tried to murder himself. He mentions it a number of times and attempts it at least twice. At the start of the novel he refuses even to pick up Alexis’ revolver because he says “If I pick it



up, I will point it at my heart and pull the trigger” (11). On musing that the plot of his life is “that of an absurd book,” he says that “I dream of writing the last page at least, with a bullet, by my own hand” (13). Later, on one afternoon when he had “no goddamn wish to live” (35), he asked to borrow Alexis’ gun: ““lend me your revolver, I can’t take any more. I’m gonna kill myself”” (35). Out of a disproportionate sense of pity for the dead dog, Fernando tries to kill himself again, pointing the revolver at his heart and firing. Near the end of the discourse, Fernando shows Wilmar the house he was born in, “against my will” (112); Fernando expresses a wish not only to die there someday by his own hand, but to “die right there to round off the epitaph” he was thinking about (113). There are more occasions where he claims that he would have been better off “not to have been born” (107).

When Fernando is not actively planning his own demise, he is, for much of the narrative, shuffling through life half-heartedly: “Roaming through Medellín, through its streets, through the hell of my own empty limbo, seeking the open churches among souls in torment” (20). “We were born to die,” he says as he looks on at one of Alexis’ acts of murder (38). Later, “We’re nothing, we’re God’s nightmare, and he’s off his rocker” (40); and “I know more about Medellín than Balzac ever did about Paris, and I invent nothing: I’m dying along with it” (42).

On seeing the carnage in the morgue when he goes to find the body of Wilmar, he finds and acknowledges his role as one of the dead. Fernando says he is “restored to my essence, to what I am, the invisible man” (128), as if he were only a shadow moving in the world of living bodies; and the narrative voice slips from the first person to the third person, making the distancing more pronounced. He leaves the morgue and walks out “between the living dead, walking without going anywhere in particular, thinking without really thinking, I strolled along the motorway” (131).

There is one point in the text when Fernando claims to have actually died, if his words are followed to the letter, and if one judges by the legal criteria for death. When he learns the true identity

of Wilmar as the very assassin who killed Alexis, Fernando says: “For a few seconds my heart stood still. When it started up again I knew I had to kill him [Wilmar]” (123). With the exception of this scene, which can be interpreted as a literal death, Fernando lives throughout the narrative at times as if he had already died a figurative death, and, at other times, as if he were on the point of killing himself. Between these two extremes, he muddles through the story with a half-hearted will to live, as if he were one more of the “living dead” in Medellín living “life as a corpse.”

Thus Fernando maintains a “living dead” state from the beginning of the novel, even if he does not admit it explicitly until halfway through, but he moves closer to the dead than to the living as the novel progresses, and the process of decline is subtly traced through his discourse. While there are many examples, I turn once again to his careful choice of *parce*, and *parcero* as the node point for discourse and trauma. Significantly, the second definition (see my footnote 18) for *parce* specifies that it is the part of the Book of Job read during an oration uttered at a funeral – a mass for the dead. The ritual is for a deceased, and while Fernando has not stopped referring to himself and to the implied listener as either deceased or “living dead” since the beginning of the narrative, the term has crept into his vocabulary in gradual steps until it has become a natural part of it, and these steps follow the trajectory of his gradually seeing himself as having already died.

### **5.3 The Berserk State’s Absence of Compassion or Empathy: Beyond Morality**

While for the most part, Fernando appears in the story as a berserk killing machine devoid of compassion, there is evidence in his discourse that he hasn’t always been like that. The nostalgic memories of his happy and innocent youth, his compassion for the mortally injured street dog, and his many affirmations of love for Alexis and Wilmar suggest that the potential for human kindness exists, or at least had existed, in him. Later in the story, his visit to Alexis’ mother to pay his respects after

Alexis was murdered shows Fernando at his most empathetic (which is not saying all that much, as his empathy is relative, but still in parts like this, where he is not behaving like a berserk misanthrope, there is some degree of empathy): “I felt an immense compassion for her, for her children, for stray dogs, for myself, for those of us who go on dodging life’s blows. I gave her a bit of money, said goodbye and left” (94).

Before Alexis’ death, to be sure, Fernando was no paragon of compassion. Comments such as “we killed him for being *chichipato*, scum, shit, just for existing” (26) show him at his most sociopathic. On the other hand, there were still moments of compassion interspersed in his discourse of cruelty. However, after Alexis’ death, he became a creature devoid of all compassion and empathy, a creature in the throws of a berserk rage.

A comparison of the killings Fernando ordered through Alexis with those he ordered through Wilmar illustrates this complete loss of empathy, his transition beyond ordinary PTSD into the berserk state. The resulting homicidal acts were reactions far out of proportion with the offense.

On the literal level of concrete experience, there was in each case an initial offense against Fernando's personal and political space: someone playing music too loud; a mime mocking an old man in front of a crowd; someone calling them “faggots”; another *sicario* murdering a pregnant woman; soldiers who were going to search them for weapons and would have found the illegal revolver on Alexis. In these killings, it is easy for the reader to find a motive, regardless of how out of proportion it was with the act, because the cause and effect relation between them seems explicable in the terms inherent in Christianity and contemporary bourgeois motives.

Now contrast the killings I just mentioned, those which took place with Alexis, to those committed with Wilmar. Wilmar and Fernando kill a man for whistling too loud (a far cry from the punk rocker blasting music and bothering the whole street), a beggar who offends no more than to ask

for money, the bus driver who was too slow at opening the door, and a mother of two on a bus whose crime was to offend Fernando's aesthetics and sense of propriety by nursing her children in public. The killings done with Wilmar are thus several degrees more advanced in terms of mercilessness and cruelty than are the killings done with Alexis. This is another example of the "shrinkage of the moral horizon" that Shay includes as part of the complex-PTSD affecting combat veterans. Fernando's moral horizon has narrowed to only him and Wilmar to the point that anyone else upsetting his tranquility is seen by him as reprehensible – even a crying baby and her nursing mother.

What happens to women in these two sets of killing provides the most telling contrast of killings done with Alexis and those done with Wilmar. As an act of vengeance, Alexis killed the hitmen who killed a pregnant woman. Yet Alexis himself did in fact indirectly also cause another pregnant woman to die, but only because she was struck by the out-of-control taxi whose driver Alexis had just murdered – he is thus "not responsible" in any direct way. Wilmar, by contrast, himself shoots the mother and her children while she is nursing one of them.

When Fernando renounces his nostalgic memories of youth for good in the second section, the point of this moral question emerges more clearly. His cries of "To hell with the Bombay pump and all those memories! [...] Let's have none of your nostalgia. Let there come what may, whatever it is, even if it's the current carnage" (106) stand in marked contrast to the sweet memories of the same place as was related at the beginning of the book, in which the Bombay bar was "one of the most magical places in the universe" (8). The magic is gone; the power of the narrative to paper over violence has disappeared. In terms of results, there is no actual difference between Alexis' and Wilmar's guilt because both killed women. What differs is the reasons for the death: one is a deed based on omission (being careful who'd be hurt by an out of control car), and the other, on commission (actual murder).

And as that moral language slips away, Fernando begins to use other languages of the twentieth

century, in this case what German critic Dolf Sternberger called the "lexicon of the inhuman" (Steiner 1947). The progression of the logic parallels that which he used to think about murder. In the first section, his comments railing against a corrupt society usually have as their targets corrupt politicians, criminals, drug lords or other murderers – a plausible political critique for most parties. In the second section, however, the rhetoric against all human life accelerates, to the point of sustained arguments for socio-economic cleansing, in a manifesto that is a perverse inversion of Marx: “for genetic reasons the poor have no right to reproduce themselves. Rich people of the world, unite” (113). Echoing the eugenics of the twentieth century, he comments on the Colombian race in general: “Bad blood, bad race, bad character, bad reputation, there’s no worse mix than that of the Spanish with the Indian and the black: they produce throwbacks, that’s to say monkeys [...]” (97). Here Fernando exemplifies the most contemptible of racist and classist reasoning to the point where he seems to be advocating some type of Nazi-like “final solution:” wipe out the unwanted, genetically inferior poor and racially impure to make room for the “good” race. Here, again, the question arises: what is the difference between these state-approved forms of removing "undesirables?" The question of eugenics is totally unacceptable public rhetoric – but the "criminal element" in many states is also assumed to be genetically inferior, or claimed to be so.

Thus it is interesting when Vallejo picks up another publicly critical rhetoric of the twentieth century. Fernando’s “final solution” may have another avenue than that of racial or socio-economic cleansing: that of gender cleansing. Throughout the text, Fernando advocates for a world void of women, or at least purified of carnal relationship with women, either of which cases would prevent reproduction of the human race altogether. Fernando tells Alexis that one of the reasons for Fernando’s own homosexuality is that he was influenced as a young boy by the Salesian monks at his school: “Through them I learnt that a carnal relationship with women is tantamount to the sin of bestiality,

which is when one member of one species is crossed with a member of another species, like for instance a donkey with a cow” (15). He admires the pure homosexuality of Alexis, who had never slept with a woman nor ever intended to do so. When Fernando asked him if he liked women, Alexis replied “with a ‘no’ so emphatic, so unexpected, that it left me speechless. It was a ‘no’ for all time: for the present, for the past, for the future and for all God’s eternity” (15).

As the narrative progresses, and as his actions place him more firmly in the berserk state, Vallejo adds the decisively negative version of such arguments, as Fernando’s animosity toward women and reproduction in general takes on a more serious and sinister turn. For instance, on seeing a dead body in the morgue, his thoughts immediately drift to the reproduction organs: “the stupid, immodest, useless penis, now incapable of begetting children, of doing any more evil” (129), a parody of sexual hysterics and religious fanatics. To connect these issues of sexuality decisively to the Church, this scene ends with the truly horrific display of a dead, eviscerated baby placed at the feet of an adult cadaver, “at ninety degrees to it like the arms of a cross” (129). That the adult cadaver’s belly had been cut open as well leads Fernando to think that it had been a woman who died in Cesarean birth, but then he realized that it, too, was a male cadaver. That baby had been placed at its feet only because the morgue staff had run out of empty slabs; the number of dead bodies had exceeded the morgue’s capacity.

Adding to this discussion an image of machismo, this is one of the last images in the novel, with a complete absence of the feminine, offering a ghastly death displacing a possible birth, death outpacing the ability of humans to deal with it. The protagonist is not only emptied of human compassion but openly advocating the propagation of the human race through any means necessary: killing the poor and racially impure, or at least preventing them from reproducing, and imagining a utopia clean of heterosexual contact and therefore an entire race prevented from reproducing. Fernando has become

inhumane in every sense of the word: devoid of compassion as well as an advocate of the end of the species – the objects of his rampage having multiplied from individual victims to the whole race.

#### **5.4 Berserk Rampage: From Discourse to Action**

The most striking part of the berserk state is the killing. The warriors who enter into this stage of complex-PTSD often leave a trail of bodies in their wake. Achilles entered into his fury that ended with the death of Hector, the best of the Trojan warriors, but not until entering into a homicidal rampage that left so many dead Trojans the river god Scamander's ire was provoked – he complained that the immense number of Trojan dead felled by Achilles' hand during his berserk rage was choking his waters. Such was Achilles' rage that he even took on the god himself – taking arms against the sea, to paraphrase Hamlet. The Vietnam War veterans who have gone berserk speak of decorating poles with the heads of the many enemy soldiers they have killed. They endangered themselves and their comrades in order to be able to get a better opportunity at killing more enemy soldiers: a sniper speaks of letting a few soldiers pass by in order to maintain the element of surprise, which would enable him to get more shots at a bigger group. The berserk stage would send soldiers into episodes of explosive rage that would often recur even years after coming out of the berserk stage; many of them testify to physically abusing their family members in an unprovoked rage, all the while experiencing flashbacks of battle.

Fernando displays all of these symptoms at various times throughout the narrative, although they are much more pronounced in the second half following Alexis' death. In terms of killing, for the most part, he doesn't get his hands dirty in the way that the Greek heroes or the Vietnam veterans did, but the fact that he doesn't actually pull the trigger doesn't diminish his culpability for the homicides. Fernando wants his chosen victims murdered and rejoices in their deaths, just as much as Alexis and

Wilmar do, and he never ceases to say so.

In terms of numbers of homicides, Fernando is indirectly responsible for the forty-eight murders that Alexis committed since their meeting (Alexis has 250 or so total under his belt), most of whom were innocent of any offense. Among Alexis's victims were mimes, cops, tussling children, a waitress who was a bit rude, a cab driver who was playing his music louder than Fernando's liking and whose car careened off the road, killing a pregnant woman and her two children – all normal citizens who somehow "deserved to die" for offending someone's sensibilities. Wilmar killed six, all of which can be attributed directly to the influence and desire of Fernando. Then there is the homicide of Wilmar himself, which I will argue was orchestrated by Fernando. So that makes fifty-five victims who fell while Fernando was on a rampage. These acts, from the point of view of Fernando's identity, are classic berserk rampages.

Again, this logic reveals itself in two phases, one more conventional, and then the other much further down the explanatory continuum: in this case, the question of legal responsibility as well as moral culpability. No matter how difficult it might be to convict Fernando of these crimes in courts of law, responsibility for the murders can be attributed to him, for two reasons. One, he supplies Alexis with ammunition, using his social status as a grammarian of advanced years as a ruse to convince the police that selling him bullets will only result in his using them for self-defense. Two, he explicitly instigates Alexis and Wilmar to kill most of the victims, although his sophisticated semantics are precise enough to ensure that his culpability is unlikely to be firmly established.

An example of Fernando's convoluted but self-exculpatory reasoning can be found in his sophistry when talking to the priest who listens to the *sicarios'* confessions – a telling juxtaposition asking who is more guilty, the *sicarios* or the priests who shrive them. Fernando sees no reason for them to confess, because, as he sees it, they were not acting as anything more than tools: "Let the man



who ordered all the killings do the confessing. The sin was that man's, not the guy's who was just doing a job, a mere 'facilitator'" (31). By this logic, Fernando reasons to absolve the *sicario*, his love, who pulled the trigger. Fernando presses the priest still further, although the voice responding to the questions is unmistakably Fernando's own. The priest is in scene to give the illusion of oral dialogue – to represent yet another discourse that Fernando has in his head and that he can attempt to use to construct his identity, or his new anti-identity, before he turns berserk, beyond good and evil. The priest is another "implied listener" within the discourse. Fernando asks:

Whose sin is the killing of the freak, then? Alexis's? Mine? Alexis's, no, because he didn't hate him even though he thought he might have looked into his eyes. Mine, then? Not mine either. But did I order him to be killed? No way! Never in a month of Sundays. I never once said to Alexis, 'Waste this guy for me.' What I said, and you are my witnesses, was 'I'd like to kill him,' and anyway I was shooting the breeze; my sin, if any, resided in what I wanted. And in the midst [of] all this butchery is a person going to go to hell for a mere 'what I would like'? (31-32)

By this reasoning, Fernando could straightforwardly absolve himself, as well, as if no one ought to be held responsible for the murders. Later, while describing a particularly disturbing sacrilegious habit the *sicarios* have of consecrating bullets with holy water, Fernando asserts, "And nobody, but nobody, have ever seen me fire one" (67).

This second reason for his actual guilt in his role as instigator, however, is the more damning, judging both by his own stated ethics and by cultural and legal criteria. The limits to these conventional ethics (and the conventional dodges used to get around them in confessionals and courts of law) are laid out in his diatribe against God, whom he blames for the death of the street dog, quoted above: God, "the most monstrous and cowardly Being there is, who kills and maims by using the hand

of another, the hand of man, his plaything, his hitman” (83). That these lines could be applied to himself as well as to God is a realization unlikely to be lost on someone as intelligent and manipulative as Fernando. Fernando wanted all forty-eight of those persons dead as badly as Alexis did; Fernando just didn’t want to get his hands dirty. And his attempts to absolve himself of guilt are undone by his own logic.

What drives Fernando over the edge into the berserk state is the moment when he faces the experiential truth of killing forty-eight persons while, according to acceptable discourses of the day, being responsible for none of them - a position he knows is a dodge. The cultural and legal criteria that impugn Fernando stem from the Roman legal tradition, the basis for Hispanic law, which holds the “intellectual author” of a crime as culpable as the material actor of a crime. María Fernanda Lander, in her article “The Intellectual’s Criminal Discourse in ‘Our Lady of the Assassins,’” argues that in *La virgen Vallejo* implicates the Colombia ruling class as criminal and responsible for the atrocities committed in the name of nation building. She accomplishes this by demonstrating the etymological connection between “author” and “instigator.” The Spanish word “autor” is derived from the Latin term *auctor*, which in the cultural context means “creator” of a work of art or literature; but in the legal context “autor” is used to refer to the “instigator” or “promoter” behind an act. Further, the term *intelectual*, with its origin in France to designate those members of the educated class with access to political power through the force of their words, became incorporated in to the Spanish language sometime in the 19th century (78).

Fernando is pushed into complex-PTSD in part because he has reached the point where such definitions of *legal* culpability (not just the moral ones addressed earlier) have led him into utterly contradictory evaluations of his own social and legal roles as a responsible individual. Fernando presents himself as an intellectual, a famous grammarian, and therefore a member of the educated and

elite class in Colombia. Lander points out, as well, that “intellectual author” implies a role as a social critic, following Antonio Gramsci’s definition of the organic intellectual (79) that is conventionally used by critics today to define the roles and social responsibilities of such an intellectual.

Fernando fits all these aspects of the definition: each page of the novel is filled with scathing criticism of a different aspect of Colombia society. He is also the creator of the discourse that the reader reads, or the listener hears, and he is the instigator behind the many crimes of the *sicarios* whom he takes as lovers. Lander’s article argues that Vallejo uses this complex strategy to jar Colombia’s elite, who are themselves intellectuals, into a self-realization of their own complicity for the violent crimes occurring in their society. While I agree whole-heartedly with this reading, I build on her reasoning here to both illustrate the depth of Fernando’s depravity in his killing and to support my claim that responsibility be laid as much on his shoulders as on those of the *sicarios*. He has become as bad as the malevolent God whom he himself has called monstrous and cowardly, who uses others to do his dirty work; and Fernando the intellectual knows full well that, legally, he, the author, is as culpable as the *sicarios* themselves are, despite his prevarications to acquit himself – he has reached a tipping point in showing us what the discourses of “normal” society actually achieve.

Yet Vallejo always arranges that the readers see those limits. His narrator Fernando’s craftsmanship in manipulating language sometimes overreaches itself, lifting the veil over the process and revealing the artifices of society on which his identity is built. This overreach is evident in the following instance, when Fernando claims to be giving a lesson in how to communicate a meaning while shielding agency, purported a “grammar lesson” on the subtleties of the different meanings conveyed by the Spanish verb *deber* when followed by the preposition *de* as in *deber de*. The first connotes obligation and the second suggests doubt. He uses the second form in the following sentence, translated with the word “must”: ““Since his bretheren grow rich on public contracts and he permits

this, the President [of Colombia] too must be a thief.’ That is, I am not affirming a thing, whatever it is, although it appears I believe it” (17). That Fernando believes the President and every other Colombian politician to be corrupt thieves is evident from his rants throughout the entire novel. That Vallejo himself believes this to be so as well is supported by much of his public discourse.<sup>52</sup> Thus, this example is an instance of Fernando showing too much of his hand in trying to impress the reader with his brilliance; it lifts the veil a bit on his process of rhetoric to show what lies beneath. Here, Fernando wants to call the President a crook, without opening himself up to the liability of a libel suit – it is, after all, only an example of a claim that could be made, not one that he was making. But there it lies in

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52 Here is an example of one of Vallejo's public rants against injustice and political corruption. I choose it here over others because is one of the more famous, having been given during Vallejo his inaugural address for the First Congress of Colombian writers on September 30th, 1998. It is also evidence that Vallejo is both keenly aware and sensitive to the injustices done to Colombia's poor and lower classes, which is an awareness that he is often attacked as lacking. I am convinced that any interpretation of *Our Lady of the Assassins* must be conducted with this kind of rhetoric from Vallejo in mind (my translation follows):

Y para que no digan que soy un calumniador y que les estoy poniendo a quienes no debo los calificativos que no debo, y que en un congreso de escritores, y justamente el primero que se celebra en Colombia, estoy usando mal las palabras, les voy a recordar unos nombres: El Dovio, Fresno, Irra, Salento, Armero, La Línea, Letras, Icononzo, Supía, Anserma, Cajamarca, El Águila, Falan. [...] ¿Qué? ¿Nunca ocurrieron? Centenares de campesinos decapitados, extendidos en fila por el suelo con las cabezas asignadas por manos caritativas a los cuerpos a la buena de Dios. ¡Qué! ¿Colombia ya los olvidó? ¿Es que con tanto muerto le entró el mal de la desmemoria y se le borró la historia? A mí no. Pues esos genocidios se cometieron en nombre de los principios irrenunciables del gran partido conservador o de los principios irrenunciables del gran partido liberal, según fuera la filiación de los asesinos y del pueblo de los muertos. Poquito después los dos partidos se pusieron de acuerdo, crearon el Frente Nacional y se repartieron los puestos. ¿Y los muertos qué? ¿Y los principios qué? ¿No dizque eran irrenunciables? Si eso no es infamia, entonces yo no sé qué quieren decir aquí las palabras. (qtd. in Alzate 3)

And so that no one can say that I am calumniating and that I am classifying those whom I shouldn't, and that at the First Congress of Writers celebrated in Colombia, I am abusing language, I am going to remind you all of some names: El Dovio, Fresno, Irra, Salento, Armero, La Línea, Letras, Icononzo, Supía, Anserma, Cajamarco, El Águila, Falan. [...] Sorry? How's that? These never occurred? Hundreds upon hundreds of peasants beheaded, extended in line on the ground with their heads replaced and reassigned by charitable hands to the bodies. What?! Colombia has already forgotten them? Is it that with so much death evil has taken over oblivion and erased the incident from historic memory? Not for me. These genocides were committed in the name of the unalienable principles of the great conservative Party or of the unalienable principles of the great Liberal Party, depending on the assassins' affiliation in the towns where the murders took place. Not long after the two parties came to an agreement, created the National Front and divided the seats. And what of the dead? And what of the principles? Wasn't it said that they were unalienable? If this isn't infamy then I don't know the meaning of the word.

print, palpably made.

Here again, Vallejo calls attention to the continuities among such discourses – where, again, is the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable uses of such social sophisms to preserve identities? Elsewhere, Fernando has also already used such rhetoric himself, when he wants to instigate the murders of his foes by the assassins, all the while avoiding any technical legal responsibility for the murders: “But did I order him to be killed? No way” (31). He admits that he wanted the people killed, of course, but then he is careful to point out the nice difference, in terms of legal and moral culpability, between wanting to do something and actually doing it.

Vallejo's juxtaposition of these two “grammar lessons” makes the agency behind the murders clear, however, as the two verbal performances of “innocence” illuminate each other. In the first example, Fernando believes the President to be a thief and is only searching for a way to call him one without making himself legally liable. In the second example, Fernando both wants the victims murdered and arranges for their murder, but does so in a way that will shield him from legal blame. Yet if we accept Lander’s argument regarding the culpability of the “intellectual author,” then Fernando is guilty of the murders in legal as well as moral terms. Again, Vallejo uses the text's grammar to key the breakdown of identity that is in process as such identity narratives begin to break down: the author allows Fernando even claims responsibility for the murder a few pages earlier, without his customary equivocation: “*We* killed him” (26 – my emphasis).

I subject the reader to this long discourse on the nature of blame and legal responsibility to make the case that Vallejo is using this image of Fernando as both morally and ethically guilty, perhaps even legally guilty, for the fifty-five or fifty-six murders committed while he was on his berserk rage, despite Fernando’s prevarications that establish his plausible deniability and purported “good character.” The brute facts tell a more direct tale of behavior beyond the pale: he bought the bullets; he

told the killers whom to kill; he enabled, orchestrated, and planned almost all of the murders – he is a berserker, without an identity of the living that would tie him to any culpability.

As Vallejo shows Fernando's identity loss escalating, then, he is doing more than simply showing the tragedy of an individual. He is again staging confrontations with identity-sponsoring discourses from within Colombia that suggest that anyone in the country, like Fernando, will be forced to draw the kinds of artificial lines between innocence and culpability that I have outlined here. When that individual makes the step, he will not only move into the death-in-life of the PTSD state beyond the social narratives that allow for identity construction, he will in a certain sense also move beyond the human, as well.

## **6. Conclusion**

Shay's model of combat PTSD symptoms offers a new way of interpreting how Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los Sicarios* complicates subject identity construction. Fernando's ironic, self-conscious discourse is at once a pungent cultural critique of the shortcomings of the neoliberal master narrative in contemporary Colombian national project, as many critics have noted, as well as a profound tragedy of the undoing of an individual subject, which is the tragedy on which I have focused most of my attention because the models I draw from are those of individual psychological trauma. But, in addition, the undoing at the individual level of a narrator/protagonist adds a new level of perfidy and nihilism to the tragedy. The subject living in the violence and instability of nineteen-nineties Medellín is bereft of any system within which to construct a coherent narrative of identity and by which they might become psychologically whole. This story's protagonist is subject to many forms of traumatic experience, displays characteristics of both simple and complex-PTSD, and even goes berserk, a state from which full psychological recovery is unlikely. Such a victim only fades away or

disintegrates. This is what happens to Fernando, who says he becomes the invisible man, even Hades, or at least one of the living-dead, a mere shade of a human. He is certainly no longer himself.

And here a literary allusion shows what is at stake in addressing politics in a novel. That phrase, rendered in Spanish, “Yo ya no soy yo,” is only one word away from the famous poem by the Spanish modernist poet Juan Ramón Jiménez, “Yo no soy yo.” In the Jiménez poem the speaker seems at first to be referring to a part of himself that walks invisibly at his side: “I am that / which walks at my side without my seeing it” (my translation). By the second stanza of the poem, however, when the speaker gives immortal attributes to the thing or person he is addressing, as “he who will be remaining when I pass away.” The thing that the speaker addresses could be interpreted as poetry or literature itself – that part of him that will remain, once the poet has died. Jiménez’ use of the relative pronoun *que* (that, which) as opposed to the personal pronoun *quien* (who) in the first stanza clouds the identity or nature of the poem’s addressee and reinforces this second interpretation that it could be something other than a person – precisely the kind of confusion that Vallejo creates between his dead lover and a dead dog, and between a victim of trauma and a berserker who plays both sides of the law and morality to become someone, or something, rather, bereft of humanity. This story is the tragedy Fernando, whose character deteriorated due to the trauma that he suffered, and the trauma that he caused, which in turn caused him to suffer more. It is Vallejo’s shot across the bow of all Colombians – we live in a society that makes these monsters out of humans. Behold, if you can stomach it.

## Chapter Four: *Cartas cruzadas* ‘Crossed Letters’

### 1. Introduction

Kurt Spang writes that “the true space of the epistolary novel is the human soul” because it “reflects internal conflicts, passions, moods; the sensibility and the emotions; the palpable and material realities occupy a position of secondary importance although they are indispensable to the form of the conflict” (652). This is certainly the case in Darío Jaramillo Agudelo’s epistolary novel *Cartas cruzadas* ‘Crossed Letters’ (1995). The “palpable and material realities” of the novel are its content that have earned it the classification as “narcoliterature” by many critics (Dexemple 2014; Blanco Puentes 2011; Polit 2013). Through the letters in this novel the reader learns the story of the moral degradation and disappearance of Luis Jaramillo, a literature professor turned money-launderer for the narcos, the dissolution of his friendship with blood-brother Juan Esteban, and the collapse of Luis’ near-perfect romantic union with his lover Raquel Uribe. But this story is merely the “palpable and material realities” of the novel. While they are indispensable to the form of the conflict, the plot thread that is at first glance the most conspicuous, they “occupy a position of secondary importance” to the “internal conflicts, passions, moods,” and “the human soul” that occupy a position of primary



importance.

Gabriela Polit writes that *Cartas cruzadas*, while about “the impact of narco-trafficking in Colombia,” is “also a love story, a story about friendship, and above all a story about poetry” (135). A mere modification of one word, the last in her phrase, from “poetry” to “writing,” will lead to my thesis. For “the scene of writing,” (139) to borrow philosopher Jacques Derrida’s phrase, to which I will return many times in this chapter, occupies the position of primary importance in *Cartas cruzadas*. The scene of writing letters, poetry, diary entries, which are all forms of literature, is the scene of the dramatic tension that I see at the center of *Cartas cruzadas*. If this novel is “about” the traumas of the influence of drug trafficking, the dissolution of relationships, and moral failures on an individual and culture level, then it is also “about” the writing of the discourse of those traumas. Most importantly, I will demonstrate how in the text the characters’ written discourse is a method of trauma therapy for each of them, just as Jaramillo Agudelo claims in other texts that writing prose and poetry helps him heal psychologically.

The novel’s title itself draws attention to the scene of writing: *Crossed Letters* is “about” the letters as much as it is “about” the story. If the letters were not primary, then Jaramillo Agudelo might have chosen another title that would have shifted focus to the story that the letters told, such as other writers have done in famous epistolary novels. The titles of Richardson’s *Clarissa*, Stoker’s *Dracula*, Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and Choderlos de Laclos’ *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* leave room for little ambiguity as to the subject matter of the novel. For that matter, it must be admitted that neither does Jaramillo Agudelo’s *Cartas cruzadas* (it is not about *Clarissa* or *Dracula*, but about the letters themselves). But I will demonstrate how the author has written the book with such subtle genius that this focal point is easy to miss, as most of its critics have done.

Jaramillo Agudelo’s allusion to Edgar Allan Poe’s short-story “The Purloined Letter” at a

critical juncture in *Cartas cruzadas* clues the reader in to the human tendency to sometimes overlook that which is hidden in plain sight. Polit draws on two famous pieces of literary criticism the Poe story gave rise to, Jacques Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" (1972[1956])<sup>53</sup> and Jacques Derrida's "The Purveyor of Truth" (1975),<sup>54</sup> to illuminate aspects of the novel: she draws on Lacan's insight to show how letters structure the plot and the characters' subjectivities of the characters (146), and Derrida's critique of Lacan's myopic focus on the narrated content to the detriment of the narration itself (146). I will build on her reading to show how certain key concepts in Lacan's and Derrida's writing can illuminate other aspects of *Cartas cruzadas*. Further, I will use Derrida's critique of Lacan's "Seminar" to illuminate an aspect of *Cartas cruzadas* that she and many other critics have overlooked.

In this chapter's first section "Money, Desire, and Faith" I will use Lacan's insights to help illustrate the role that each of these concepts plays in the novel, and thereby open up a new space in which to read the book. *Cartas cruzadas* invites a Lacanian reading because it is a story of trauma and loss, of characters blind to their own desires, desires that force them to define their identities in terms of certain predetermined roles in whatever system they enter (the drug mafia, language, the global economy, what Lacan called the Symbolic<sup>55</sup> order, or what have you). As in "The Purloined Letter,"

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53 Derrida's critique of Lacan's Seminar was published in French as "Le facteur de la vérité" in the journal *Poétique* (1975). It was translated to English that same year by Willis Domingo and others for publication in *Yale French Studies* under the title "The Purveyor of Truth." Choosing to translate "facteur" as "purveyor," while gaining some play in the connection between "purloin" and "purveyor," comes with significant loss of the connotation of agency that the word "facteur" carries in French, and thus dulls the bite of Derrida's critique.

54 "The Seminar on the 'Purloined Letter'" was first published in French under the title "Le séminaire sur 'La lettre volée'" in 1956 in the journal *Le Psychanalyse*. Lacan moved it to the front of the 1966 publication of *Écrits*, his collected writings. The version I work from is Jeffrey Mehlman's translation to English, published in *Yale French Studies* (1972).

55 The Symbolic order is one of the three pillars of Lacan's philosophy, which are the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. The Symbolic owes its origin to a nexus of Lévi-Strauss' anthropology, Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics, and Lacan's interpretation and expansion of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. The Symbolic is the realm of the unconscious and of the Other, and could be defined as "the big other, that is, the other of language, the Names-of-the-Father, signifiers or words [which]..are public, communal property" (Hill 160; 73). As Lacan has it, the unconscious is the discourse of the Other that works on the order of the Symbolic, and is one of the factors in identity construction: "The unconscious is the sum of the effects of speech on a subject, at the level at which the subject constitutes himself out of the effects of the signifier...we depend on the field of the Other, which was there long before we came into the world,

money sets the plot in motion in *Cartas cruzadas* just as it does in the Poe story. But more importantly, Lacan draws our attention to the materiality of money as a letter, as a blank signifier upon which a subject inscribes his desire. Lacan's insights complicating the nature of desire help illuminate that, in *Cartas cruzadas*, Jaramillo Agudelo focuses not just on the deleterious influence of money on a society and on individuals in it, but also on the injurious effects of greed and obsession on the part of the subject. The novel suggests that the sickness at the heart of Colombian society is an undamped greed for money without a clear idea of what to do with the money; a desire that, never satiated because its object is elusive, only increases; desire for desire. Further, Lacan also teaches us that the element of faith or trust is essential to the working of any system, whether a system of language, capitalism, or personal relationships. When the faith in the system is undermined, such as in Colombia when money was essentially devalued because of the insertion of staggering amounts of it into their system due to narco-trafficking, the integrity of the whole system tends to destabilize. Likewise, when faith between two individuals is breached, the relationship may fall apart. In the novel, the breach of faith between the characters parallels the general loss of faith in society.

In the next section, "The Gaze, Blindness and Misrecognition," I straddle Lacan and Derrida. Lacan's insights into the blindness of each of the characters in "The Purloined Letter," regarding not only the letter hidden in plain sight, but as to their own vulnerability in the Symbolic circuit that they entered when they stole the letter, is extremely helpful when applied to *Cartas cruzadas*; for all of the

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and whose circulating structures determine us as subjects" (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 126; 246). The big Other is a sort of center to the Symbolic order, which is comprised of the rules that subjects must master in order to both constitute themselves as subjects and interact with others. Slavoj Žižek, who is to me the most accessible of Lacan's explicators, uses the metaphor of a chess game to explain Lacan's three orders. According to him, the Imaginary might be thought of as the identity of the pieces based on what they are called: knight, king, as so forth. The Symbolic order is made up of the rules that the pieces must conform to in order to play the game: for instance, the king can move in any direction, but only one square. The Real is "the entire set of contingent circumstances that affect the course of the game: the intelligence of the players, the unpredictable intrusions that may disconcert one player or directly cut the game short" (*How to Read Lacan* 8-9). My concern here in this paper is with the Symbolic order, but it is difficult to describe it without recourse to the context in which it is used in Lacan's thought; hence the broad overview of the three concepts, and my dwelling on the concept of the big Other, who is the overseer of the Symbolic order.

characters are to some degree blind to things that materially affect their well-being. But Derrida's critique of Lacan pointed out something to which Lacan himself was blind – the scene of writing, the narrator's narration. Derrida shows how Lacan in his Seminar ignores, willfully or not, a few things that turn out to be of material importance to both the story as literature and to Lacan's analysis: one, the role that Dupin's companion, the unnamed narrator, and the act of his narration, plays in the structure of the story; two, the other texts, and there are many, with which "The Purloined Letter" is in conversation; three, at least one, but probably many more narrative frames that exist around "The Purloined Letter." In short, I agree with Derrida in his claim that Lacan does "violence" (25) to the Poe story when he reduces it to a vehicle that will serve as an example illustrative of the "truth" of his psychoanalytic theories.

It is on these literary aspects to which Lacan was blind that I will focus my attention in the subsequent section entitled "The Scene of Writing," for just as Lacan was blind to the role that the unnamed narrator played in Poe, and just as the characters in Poe were blind to the letter that was hidden right in front of them, critics have been blind to the centrality of one particular narrator, and her letter, and what the writing of that letter can do for her, in *Cartas cruzadas*. That narrator is Luis' lover, Raquel. This critical oversight is due for the most part to the author's craft, which temporarily veils Raquel and her letter's *centrality* in order to move to the foreground what had been held in the background of other narco-narratives: the injuries suffered not by those directly involved in narco-trafficking but rather by those indirectly involved, such as Esteban, Raquel, and of course Jaramillo Agudelo himself.

As Derrida would have had Lacan do, I will bring in texts with which *Cartas cruzadas* is in conversation, principally the prose and poetry of Jaramillo Agudelo himself but also other literary works to which he alludes in *Cartas cruzadas*. An examination of these texts will show the degree to

which the themes of romantic love and literary creation dominate Jaramillo Agudelo's oeuvre, and will substantiate my argument that the characters' attitudes toward those themes determines their fate in *Cartas cruzadas* – that they are subjects deeply implicated in that Symbolic order. For instance, Raquel represents near-perfect love. Esteban represents literary creativity; Luis rejects both in search of money, which, in light of Jaramillo Agudelo's treatment of both in his writing, is likely to him an unpardonable sin. This sin against literature is the subject of the chapter's next section "The Importance of Literature."

If Luis' substitution of money for literature is his ruin, then Raquel's and Esteban's writing is their salvation. In the last section, "Writing as Therapy," I will bring the focus back to the scenes of writing that occupy as much of *Cartas cruzadas*' center ground as Luis' letters do: these are Esteban's diary entries and Raquel's extended letter. I will compare Jaramillo Agudelo's own views on how writing has always been therapeutic and cathartic for him in the times of greatest crisis with how Raquel's writing of her letter and Esteban's composition of poetry reveal themselves as cathartic for both of them. They both claim it explicitly in their writings on many occasions. Esteban's case is particularly intriguing, because a close reading of the form and content of his poetry, which can be found inserted at various points in his diary, allows me to trace a trajectory from trauma to recovery in the poems themselves. Polit writes of how Jaramillo Agudelo unfolds himself into Luis and Esteban, which is most certainly the case. My contribution to the conversation is to show the ways in which he unfolds himself into Raquel, as well.

Which brings us back to Spang, through Polit, Derrida, Lacan and Poe. For if the "true space of the epistolary novel is the human soul," and if "The Purloined Letter" and all the lessons Poe can teach us through Lacan and Derrida play an axial role in *Cartas cruzadas*, then Jaramillo Agudelo, in compliance with the conventions of the detective novel Poe inaugurated, has hidden right in front of

our eyes the things that are of primary importance: the scenes of writing of Raquel's letter and Esteban's poetry, and the degree to which they both serve as therapy and catharsis.

## 2. Story Overview

To introduce my sections, let me give a brief overview of the story. In *Cartas cruzadas* the letters cross paths between Medellín, Bogotá, Miami, and New York over a period starting in 1971 and ending in 1983. Those four cities were the major hubs of the international cocaine trade in the late nineteen-seventies through the early nineteen-eighties, and the chosen time period lines up with the exponential growth of Colombian cocaine production and distribution (Polit 139).

The bulk of the narrative discourse in *Cartas cruzadas* is made up of three types of correspondence. The first is the correspondence between Luis, a graduate student in literature and prospective university professor, and his best-friend and blood-brother Esteban, who is already independently wealthy from a family inheritance, but is by vocation a sometime poet and full-time soccer journalist. A letter from Luis to Esteban in late 1971 opens the book. The second type of correspondence is a one-way letter: a magnum opus from Raquel, Luis' estranged lover, to Juana, the lover of Raquel's sister, Claudia. Dated late 1983, this one letter, which runs for over a hundred pages, is Raquel's retrospective version of events. It is the last entry in *Cartas cruzadas* and serves structurally as a device, common to many epistolary novels, that ties all the other letters together. Raquel's letter is broken up into fragments, which are each inserted in the appropriate place in the discourse to maintain a coherent narrative. The third type of correspondence is entries in Esteban's diary, the pages of which are graced from time to time with Esteban's poetry that usually reflects and comments on themes in the overall narrative. The rest of the letters in *Cartas cruzadas*, far fewer and less extensive than those mentioned above, are correspondence between characters, such as Claudia's

letters to Raquel and Esteban and their responses.

One of the plot threads, continued throughout all of the modes of correspondence, is that of Luis' moral collapse. Avarice compels him to enter the business of drug trafficking. By the end of the novel, he will have lost everything that was formerly dear to him: his relationship with Raquel, which Jaramillo Agudelo represents as a near-perfect union; his friendship with Esteban; his vocation as a university professor of literature; and probably his life, although the reader is kept in the dark regarding the details because he disappears from the story shortly before the end.

Other plot threads traced in the discourse of the epistolary correspondence are the stories of Luis' best friend and blood-brother Esteban, and Raquel's version of her relationship with Luis. The dissolution of the friendship between the two men parallels the collapse of the romantic relationship between Luis and Raquel.

In the end, Luis, pursued by the narcotraffickers who have already killed his boss, disappears from the story. He has either gone into successful hiding or been killed. In keeping with the conventions that Poe established in "The Purloined Letter" (a text mentioned explicitly in the novel), Luis' possession of a letter that the narcos are searching for is what determines his fate (558). Just as in the Poe story, the reader is never privy to its contents. But according to Raquel's speculation, Luis' enemies' knowledge of his possession of it, and their awareness of his knowledge of its contents, is either the reason they are pursuing him, or the last hope he has that they will keep him alive (just as in Poe, the reason that the Minister can blackmail the Queen is because of her knowledge of his knowledge of the letter's contents, and what he can do with the knowledge, not merely the content itself). In any case, Luis is no longer present in the story. If he exists at all, he exists solely in the letters of his friends. Luis the man literally becomes the displaced, or purloined, letter. Lacan's analysis here is crucial – he points out Poe's careful choice of the adjective "purloin," when he could

easily have chosen “stolen” or another synonym, as Baudelaire did in his translation (he eschewed “purloined” for “voleé,” the literal translation for “stolen”), whose Anglo-French etymological roots show it to mean “put out of place” in addition to “stolen” (59). Poe chose the archaic word not because he wanted to be purposefully difficult, but because the etymology of the word gives the clue to unlocking the mystery – bringing back the reader’s focus on the texture of the language. The letter was never really “stolen,” in the strict sense of the word. The Minister never got a chance to use it, and Dupin had it returned quickly to the authorities. The letter was temporarily put out of place, dis-placed, pur-loined, just enough out of place so that no one could think to look where it was, which was right in front of their noses.

Raquel, through the cathartic act of writing the long letter to Juana, finds the fortitude to go on living without Luis, with whom she has fallen out of love when she realized the depth of his deception. Esteban goes on, as well, finding solace in his diary and his poetry, which goes from exceedingly dark at the beginning of the discourse to euphoric and ecstatic at the end. Poetry is what helps him endure the loss of his best friend.

But so much for the plot. After all, Spang tells us that it is of secondary importance in an epistolary novel, along with the other palpable and material realities. Now I will turn my attention to what is of primary importance – the letters themselves and what they reveal about the human soul.

### **3. Lacan and Derrida**

For the literary critic, the urge arises to apply Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to this text becomes almost irresistible when Jaramillo Agudelo makes a conspicuous allusion to Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter” at a crucial point in the book. His character Luis refers to “The Purloined Letter” to explain how he chooses his hideout to evade his pursuers – in a place so conspicuous that his



pursuers would likely overlook him there. Luis stays in the apartment he bought for his mother, easily traceable to him and located in the center of Medellín, “the mouth of the wolf,” as Esteban calls it (567).<sup>56</sup> Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” (1966[1956]) and philosopher Jacques Derrida’s “The Purveyor of Truth” (1975), a book-length essay responding to and critiquing Lacan’s reading, are two influential texts of literary criticism that are particularly helpful in fleshing out aspects of *Cartas cruzadas* that might be easily overlooked on first reading.

In her recent book *Narrating Narcos* (2013), Gabriela Polit writes that she was alerted to the possibilities of a Lacanian reading by Jaramillo Agudelo’s choice of words in an interview, during which he referred to an injury he sustained due to a drug related machine gun trap intended for someone else into which he had inadvertently stepped. His long and arduous recovery period consisted of multiple surgeries and concluded, disappointingly, with the amputation of his right foot. He wrote that he and his friends would joke about his “lack,” a concept that is an important aspect of Lacan’s theory of identity development.<sup>57</sup> Polit used Lacan’s reading of Poe to illuminate how desire drives the

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56 I work from *Cartas cruzadas* (1995) in the Spanish original. It has not been translated to English. All quotations from the novel in this paper are my own translations. I didn’t include the original Spanish for reasons of length, except for a few poems at the end when the argument required that the words be seen and pronounced in the original.

57 This concept of a lack has a long and convoluted history in Lacan’s thought, although throughout it is always related to desire and subject constitution. When he first introduced the term in 1955, it referred to a lack of being: “Desire is a relation of being to lack. The lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn’t the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists” (*Seminar. Book II* 223). He later refers to it in terms of the lack of an object, the partial-object, what he calls “object little-a,” where “a” stands for the first letter of “autre” ‘other,’ to distinguish it from his notion of the big Other. This notion works into his three orders (Imaginary, Symbolic, Real), and the object is different in each order: in the Imaginary, the object is the symbolic phallus, which is as he puts it at one time “the signifier of the desire of the Other” (Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* 290) and another time “that which appears in the place of the lack of the signifier of the Other” (Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Book VIII* 278-281); in the Symbolic, the object is the breast of the mother of which the baby is deprived during weaning – the babe, in turn, cries out, entering into the Symbolic order of language, to obtain the lost object; in the Real, the object is the imaginary phallus, which is what is perceived by the child during the pre-Oedipal phase as the object of the mother’s desire, that which she desires beyond the child (Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* 315).

If all of this seems a bit muddled, in my defense the source material, Lacan’s collected writings and seminars, have never been characterized as the paragon of clarity. His concept of the lack, while central to his philosophy, developed over time, as his philosophy developed. That flux, combined with his abstruse and rambling exposition, makes it difficult to define satisfactorily. But I think I have defined it well enough here to catch the humor that Jaramillo Agudelo and his friends intended. If Lacan’s “lack” points either to an ontological shortfall (*manque à être*) or to a dispossession of some partial object (phallus, gaze, mother’s desire, breast, feces, desire of another’s desire, always unattainable, whatever) that propels the subject to enter into the Symbolic order of language, then the joke is right on

characters in *Cartas cruzadas* to construct their identities through their attempts at fulfilling their own perceived needs (145-146).

Next, she used Derrida's critique of Lacan's Seminar to highlight the importance of the other texts with which *Cartas cruzadas* converses. She perceived that Derrida's reading was also essential to bring to bear on Jaramillo Agudelo's text because of its form: it is the story of texts interacting with texts as much as it is the story of the trauma and loss of its characters. In the next section, I will build on Polit's Lacanian/Derridian reading of Jaramillo Agudelo, further developing elements that she touches on and bringing up others that she doesn't.

### **Money, Desire and Faith**

In his book *Truth Games*, which seeks to explicate some aspects of Lacanian psychoanalysis, John Forrester writes: "Money, in its very nature, is potentially the yardstick of all other values; yet its very blankness reveals that it underpins everything else only because of its intricate relations with everything else" (35). It is these aspects of money as a master signifier in discourse that Lacan brings to light in his writing on which I will focus in the following section: that money "underpins everything else"; its "blankness" and quality of being "the yardstick of all other values"; and the degree to which its "intricate relations with everything else" is responsible for its position underpinning everything else.

First, in *Cartas cruzadas*, as in "The Purloined Letter," money "underpins everything else" because it drives the plot. It sets events in motion in both books: in Poe, the Queen's offer of reward for the letter spurs Dupin to action and eventually brings the letter back to her; in *Cartas cruzadas*, money is the reason that Luis makes the decision that leads to his downfall; according to most of the

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the mark for this novel. In fact, the joke is so on the mark that it is almost perverse. Jaramillo Agudelo's detached partial object was his foot, leaving him incomplete, and he was driven to fill that void with language, the language of the novel, one of whose themes was the nature of desire. The subjects in the book are constituted by their relation to the object of their desires and how they choose to obtain those objects.

novel's characters, money plays the largest role in the decay of Antioquian society. Second, money's "blankness" in these works refers to its quality as an empty signifier and a letter – that its meaning depends on how it is interpreted by those who want it, independent of what is written on the bill, or the letter. It is a "blank page" on which subjects write the objects of their desire. Finally, money depends on its "intricate relations with everything else" (Forrester 35) because money only has value so long as participants in a system in which it circulates decide to endow it with value: it depends on the faith in the system. Once that faith breaks down, money can devalue and the coherence of the system can suffer. I have labeled the three sections that correspond to these points Money, Desire and Faith.

### 3.1 Money

In *Cartas cruzadas* money "underpins everything else" (Forrester 35) because it drives the plot in this book as much as it does in Poe's story. It is the reason for the disintegration of the relationship between Luis and Raquel as well as the culprit at the heart of the decay Esteban, Raquel and Claudia see in Antioquian society.

In the "Seminar on the Purloined Letter," Lacan writes of "the signifier most destructive of all signification, namely: money" (68). In the Poe story, private detective Dupin, by claiming his fee for services, which is his share of the reward money offered by the Queen to recover the letter, attempts, unsuccessfully as both Lacan and Derrida note, to extricate himself from the letter's Symbolic circuit. As Lacan describes the Symbolic circuit of the letter, it determines dynamics of power and identity among the subjects, depending on who possesses it and their relationship with others in the circuit: the Queen, first, who intercepts it before the King notices it; the Minister, second, who robs the Queen of it and uses it for blackmail because it is believed to reveal her involvement in some scandal, of which disclosure to the King would undermine her "honor and safety" (41); and Dupin, third, who robs the

Minister of it and then uses it to set up the Minister for a political fall as revenge for a wrong the Minister had committed against Dupin some years before. Dupin invites the chief of police to his apartment, produces the original letter, and claims his part of the reward money that the Queen offered the police to reclaim it. Voilà! The letter's circuit would seem to be complete, and Dupin extricated from it.

Lacan's strong language on money, elevating it to the "signifier most destructive of all signification," may seem at first glance out of place in his analysis of the letter's symbolic circuit and how it determines identities and power relationships. But this mention of money in the "Seminar on the Purloined Letter" is only an intimation of the central position it would come to occupy in Lacan's later thinking. As John Forrester puts it: "My exposition – or rather my clarification – of the Lacanian Symbolic and its debt leads inexorably to the conclusion that the signifier of signifiers, the signifier that designates the effects of the system, as Lacan describes Lévi-Strauss's zero signifier [...] is not even the phallus, but is – money" ("Gift, Money, and Debt" 160). Forrester goes on to explain how the concept of money became essential to Lacan's thinking as it developed:

With the concept of debt, Lacan had found something that would harmonize equally well with the theory of the lack – whether in its existential version (*manque-à-être*, lack-in-being) or in its erotic version (the lack of the phallus) – and with the theory of speech, exchange, and death which underpinned the revision of the psychoanalytic anthropology. (160)

The importance of money as both a plot catalyst in Poe and a central concept in Lacan's philosophy invites an examination of how it works in *Cartas cruzadas*, a work obsessed with money in terms of plot as well as an object that can cause of social ills. In the first place, money takes center stage in all of the descriptions of the drug trafficking business – it is the ground for all accounts, the master signifier of their world. When Jaramillo Agudelo does tell of the day-to-day affairs in the drug

business, however, there is nothing in the text about distribution, networks, logistics, bribes and street sales – all of the aspects that would be typical in a book that most readers considered to be a part of the “narcobliterature” genre (Dexemple 2014; Blanco Puentes 2011; Polit 2013). Rather, there is a laser-like focus on money and its role in the business.

The character Zuttani, an acquaintance of Esteban’s who works in the business, explains it like this: “The principal problem [in narcotrafficking] is what to do with the money, from the handling, the counting, the control and transport, even up to how to invest it and launder it” (328). The amounts of money in question, “millions and millions and millions by pounds, by kilos, by boxes, by tons” (328), the sheer volume of the material, would induce a mild madness in the novitiates, who, upon seeing the stacks, “entered a state of delirium and madness. Some caressed themselves with the bills, grabbed handfuls of money and wrapped one another up in embraces, rubbing it all over their skin” (328). After a few minutes the skin became completely green, “their eyes glazed over, as if the rank stench of the bills invaded their lungs” (328). Zuttani, who has seen every aspect of the drug business, makes the startling claim that “counting money is the most difficult job I have had to do in my life” (328).

On the cultural level, Esteban writes in his diary that “The problem starts when the quantity of money in circulation is so monstrously gigantic that desire for it permeates all of society” (540). With respect to the power of narcotrafficking’s dollars, it has achieved “total penetration into all of society’s pores. We are now passing,” as he repeats the phrase that threads through the novel like a refrain, “from victims to accomplices” (540). On returning to Medellín after a long sojourn away, Esteban notes a palpable change: “Now the power of drug money is more explicit than ever before. The cartels are the owners of everything” (472). His list of what they own goes from most rural and urban property, to public opinion, sports, industrial business, the military and the government, even to “my best friend” (472).

To Esteban, valuing money above literature is a detestable error, as I will demonstrate in the “Importance of Literature” section below. Esteban’s critique makes a good segue from money as the root of all social ills in the novel to money as the root of individual ills as well. I will demonstrate how these two themes, love and literature, which preoccupy Jaramillo Agudelo's oeuvre in both prose and fiction, are particularly stressed in this novel. Giving money precedence over either is a betrayal of what is most dear to him and to his characters. Esteban reproaches Luis for allowing money, this new kind of paper, to supplant literature's place in his life (as a master signifier, in Lacan's terms). Raquel reproaches Luis for allowing his desire for money to destroy an otherwise perfect union. This betrayal on Luis’ part leads into the next development, which I outline in the section on desire – for while money is the ostensible object of his desire, further examination reveals that the enigma of his desire is a more insidious problem. We now turn to a closer example: the “blankness” of the money as signifier, what people read onto the money, what they want to do with it, and the vertigo that they might experience when they are confronted with the fact that they might not themselves know what they want to do with the money once they get their hands on it.

### 3.2 Desire

Money drives the plot in *Cartas cruzadas* and “The Purloined Letter.” But it does so by virtue of its “blankness,” to use Forrester’s phrase. The blankness of money refers to money’s quality, as Lacan defined it, as “the signifier most destructive of all signification” (68), or as Forrester puts it: “the signifier of signifiers” (160). For what drives the plot, what brings about the downfall of Luis, and the destruction of Raquel’s relationship with him, his friendship with Esteban, the deterioration of Colombian society (according to Esteban and Claudia), is not just the desire for money. Rather, it is what money *signifies* to each character, and how their desire for this object constitutes their identities in

whatever system of exchange (capitalism, language, drug mafia) they enter into. Money is also letter, words written on paper, whose content, whether known or not, is not as relevant as *how* its possessor wants to use it. In Poe's tale, the reader is never privy to the contents of the letter sent to the Queen. The Queen and the Minister are, but even that fact pales in relevance to the way the letter is used to create power through its possessor to subjugate he or she who desires it to his will (as the Minister does to the Queen, blackmailing her while he possessed the letter) or to enact revenge (as Dupin does to the Minister as retribution on an old grudge). In *Cartas cruzadas*, Luis is brought down by his desire for money and what he thinks he can do with it; and according to Esteban, Raquel and Claudia, society is in decay because of untempered greed associated with the influx of money from the narcotics trade, not simply the narcotics themselves. The crucial factor in most cases is desire. Thus it is the misdirected use of money, not money itself, that is the problem.

Luis' desire for money, and what it signifies for him warrants a more detailed example. Things began to go sour between Luis and Raquel on a trip to New York when they were treated to opulent gifts and expensive dinners by Esteban, whose wealth had dramatically increased due to an unexpected inheritance. Raquel writes that she began to perceive greed in Luis, in "a brusque new revelation with a reality that didn't exist before. Or perhaps it wasn't conscious [...]. Money suddenly became something absolutely essential in his life" (259).

From his letters it seems at first that he wants money to be able to measure up to his newly-rich best-friend Esteban. Luis writes that he is "floating in his beautiful \$150 shoes," a present from Esteban, while following Raquel around the city taking pictures "with the camera lens that you [Esteban] gave her" and developing the film "on the material that you gave her" (281). The tone of Luis' letter suggests that his envy of Esteban's wealth is colored by tinge of jealousy that Esteban is providing Raquel, Luis' lover, with things that Luis cannot. Luis concludes the letter with the petty

remark: “If becoming a millionaire is the only way to continue being your friend, then I will dedicate myself to making money” (282). To be fair, Luis’ jealousy is not completely unfounded. Raquel comes from a wealthy family, and although she never mentioned any dissatisfaction with her quality of life with Luis, Esteban viewed it as a problem worthy of remark in his first diary entry: “My primary preoccupation about Raquel is that she is accustomed to the high life with vacations in Miami that Luis can’t give her, not now nor in the future” (22). So perhaps Luis’ avarice is tied in with his traditional conception of masculinity and bourgeois values.

Luis’ greed, however, will soon have a different object than either impressing Raquel or maintaining Esteban’s friendship – that of his own freedom. Having recently returned to Colombia, he feels himself trapped, “condemned” (379) to “eight years of slavery” (418) as a professor of literature at his parent university, as recompense for a sabbatical he was awarded for study in New York. He plans to use the money that he makes from laundering money for the cocaine mafia to buy his freedom from the university. Yet, in an abrupt turn only a few pages later, the reason for his avarice changes back to jealousy: “I looked around at the thirty-something people that I knew” (419) who all had more money than he did, and he felt inferior. Then later, after all his needs listed above had presumably been satisfied – he paid off his debt to his university, attained his freedom, and achieved a level of wealth higher than his contemporaries – his involvement with drug trafficking did not cease.

So what does Luis want with the money? What does money mean to him? What is he going to do with it? The text suggests that there is no satisfactory answer to these questions. Not only do his objects of desire change (from rivalry to freedom and back to rivalry), but his own comments betray the fact that he doesn't even really know what he wants even when he thinks that he has settled on an object for his desire.

To complicate matters even further, when Luis’ desire is driven by rivalry, his desire is



determined by what he thinks others want, or want him to be or to do: he wants to be rich because *he thinks Esteban wants* a rich friend (282); he wants to be rich because *he thinks that Raquel needs* a rich husband, etc... (281). This perverted desire is precisely what Lacan refers to in his concept of desire: “Modifying the formula I have of desire as unconscious – *man’s desire is the desire of the Other* – I would say that it is a question of a sort of desire *on the part of the Other*” (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* 115). Lacan’s original formula is derived from that of his mentor, Alexandre Kojève, whose theory as articulated by Lacan scholar Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, is less consciously cryptic than Lacan’s own formulation: “What human Desire desires, Kojève asserted, is Desire as such, in its pure and insatiable vacuity: ‘Human Desire must be directed toward another Desire.... Thus, in the relationship between man and woman, for example, Desire is human only if the one desires...the Desire of the other’” (Kojève qtd. in Borch-Jacobsen 11).<sup>58</sup>

On the other hand, when Luis’ desire is for personal freedom, this desire is complicated by another aspect of Lacanian desire that Slavoj Žižek articulates in *How to Read Lacan*: “Not only does the other address me with an enigmatic desire, it also confronts me with the fact that I myself do not know what I really desire, with the enigma of my own desire” (42). For example, Luis claims that he wants to free himself of his obligation to the university. But as soon as he achieves his freedom, he begins to desire something else, like a bigger apartment or expensive clothes. He does not know what he really desires. Or, Žižek’s formulation, once he attained what he thought was the object of his desire, and he realized that his desire was not satiated; he was then immediately faced with the enigma of his desire.

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58 René Girard refers to this as mimetic desire. It is a situation in which the object of desire is determined by one’s interpretation of the object of desire of one’s perceived rival in an Oedipal triangle– what one wants turns out to be what one thinks others want, or worse, what one thinks others want one to want (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel*). While Girard’s model is developed out of the structural anthropology theories of Lévi-Strauss and Victor Turner, and therefore may be considered radically out of context when applied to a civil society in full possession of non-violent institutions to address conflict, it is still a useful way to consider the complicated dynamics of desire.

I would crudely simplify how all of this bears on *Cartas cruzadas* as follows: Luis does not know what he wants. He simply wants. He wants money for its blankness – for its ability to serve as a blank page on which he can write the objects of his desire, then erase the surface and then inscribe the next object. That is the problem. Raquel’s insight about this is the most penetrating. Disappointed in her own credulity for believing his promise that he would stop working with the drug mafia after paying off his university debt, his “escape” as he called it, she drills down into the nature of his desire, and desire in general: “My question was the old and crude existential query: freedom for what? At this age, thirty-five, the bird confuses the forest he lives in for a cage. I’ll put it more cruelly: he carries the cage inside himself. Now, much later, here, writing to you, the name of this internal cage reveals itself to me. Luis is made prisoner to greed, the desire to be rich – very rich, very fast” (424). The characters in this novel diagnose the problem with Luis, and the problem with Colombian society, as this Lacanian blindness to the nature of one’s own desire.

Esteban, no stranger to wealth, warns Luis but to no avail: “once you are infected with the virus of avarice, you will never possess enough money to satiate the need. It becomes an obsession. As soon as you get one thing, you will want two, then three, and so on. You will never be satisfied” (332). Throughout the book Esteban critiques society as much as he critiques his friend. For him the root problem, greed, is the same regardless if it affects a particular person or society in general: “Everyone wants to get rich, everyone wants to make more money, and that triggers the madness of greed, which is a bloodthirsty and remorseless madness. We live in an inhumane society without remorse” (540).

Again, the problem is greed, the desire for money without a clear idea of to what end it might be used once attained, not necessarily money itself, nor even narcotics. The issue at stake in *Cartas cruzadas*, one that Lacan’s thinking helps elucidate, is what money signifies for he who wants it, what he wants it for, what it means to him. Esteban’s theory of Antioquians (people from Antioquia, the

region of which Medellín is the capital) counters the conventional myth they tell themselves: that they are diligent and industrious because they descend from original colonizers who had to surmount many difficulties in geography and terrain to reach and settle the city. Esteban holds, conversely, that Antioquians are gamblers, not hard workers. They are “people who are always taking big risks. This land was colonized by fugitives, some Jews, some other refugees, who all went from gully to gully, isolated from each other, mining and panning for gold” (287). The advent of the narcotics business was like adding fuel to the fire: “Take a society that is predisposed to windfalls – from a mine, from a bet, from circulating contraband, buying low and selling high – and, all of a sudden, a formula to get-rich-quick appears, then lots of people are going to get involved” (287).

Esteban writes time and again throughout the book that desire and greed are at the heart of the problem. The introduction of cocaine changed the nature of Antioquians’ avarice by degree, not kind. But the degree was such a violent change, the sums of money that were introduced were so disproportionate with what had existed before, that “the corruption – that has always existed – is now more visible because the slices are bigger. The trigger factor is called cocaine” (507).

Lacan and his interpreters help us to understand the nature of desire and the pernicious role it plays in the individual and cultural trauma represented in this text. Its master signifier is money - “the signifier most destructive of all signification” (68). But money is merely an empty signifier on which the real problem is inscribed – desire. Desire plays an equally destructive role in other characters in *Cartas cruzadas*, such as Luis’ best-friend Esteban, who desires women rather than money.

### **3.3 Desire and the Blank Signifier**

Yet while in the novel Esteban can be a keen critic of the dangers of desire in his friends and in society, his insight often fails him when it comes to himself. For his problem is not a desire for money

or what can be bought with it but rather for women. Esteban in the beginning of the book is a serial philanderer, whose conquests of other men's wives he relates time and again in his letters to Luis. But for all the notches in his womanizing belt, he is never able to find a partner who can offer him an emotionally fulfilling relationship. The closest thing to love that he experiences is a weekly tryst with a mysterious woman calling herself Carlota, who reveals to him neither her real name nor any details about her life outside of their tryst – in this sense she can also be seen as a blank page onto which he can write his desire. In the end we find out that she had been terminally ill, and had wanted to sustain a passionate relationship with someone whose complete ignorance of her condition would assure her that pity played no part in his attraction to her.

Esteban becomes obsessed with Carlota to the point of neglecting his work, poetry, other love interests, and even his best friend: "I even forgot about Luis" (231). Luis rebukes this neglect forcefully in writing, intimating that Esteban has betrayed the nature of their friendship: "Do you exist? I haven't received a card from you since last year and this year is almost over" (242). Esteban makes a Christmas visit to Luis and Raquel in New York in an attempt to remedy the neglect. As soon as he arrives, it is clear to Raquel that his desire for Carlota, "a sickness, an obsession" (229) as he calls it, is taking its toll mentally and physically. The man who visits them is "a strange Esteban, emaciated, haggard, dry-skinned and chain smoking" (249), who has spent the last few months "in a nocturnal haze of alcohol, cigarettes and cocaine" (251).

Through the support of his friends and a diet of fewer chemical substances, Esteban overcomes his obsession with Carlota, only to have it replaced by a mad obsession for a much younger woman, Marta. A stunning, accomplished coquette, Marta succeeds in exploiting Esteban's largesse while keeping him at arm's length for more than a year – she is the only woman Esteban ever failed to seduce. Esteban, not unaware of her tricks, sees himself as powerless to overcome them: "I am an

addict addicted to a drug that I haven't even tried" (374). His obsession with her disorients him. He is "lost in this labyrinth" (384), as he puts it to Luis. He comes to his senses only upon surprising her *in flagrante delicto* in his guest room with none other than Boris, the adolescent son of Claudia, Raquel's sister.

That the objects of Esteban's desires differ from Luis' only serves to underline how Lacan's insights into desire operate in this work. For Luis the object is money...for what? For Esteban the object is women...for what? Esteban's recounting of a series of superficial relationships characterized by lust is colored by a melancholy that suggests he is searching for something else. Nor is Esteban presented as a two-dimensional philanderer. Rather, his letters and diary entries reveal him to be a highly sensitive, intelligent and profound human and friend, certainly capable and desirous of love. The obstacle that prevents him from fulfilling this desire is his blindness to the nature of desire itself. Obsession, desire, and desire that feeds on itself enervates him and undoes him, as it does Luis, as it does to the Antioquian society Jaramillo Agudelo writes about.

### 3.3.1 Faith and Trust

While money is the master signifier in Lacan's Symbolic order, it is only one of the factors that ensure that the order works as it should. Another essential factor is good faith – faith in the system of exchange that debts will be honored, that money has a lasting value commensurate to what is written on it. Forrester sees this concept of faith as the nodal point between several systems of thought – philosophy, linguistics, and ethnology – the combining of which evidenced Lacan's particular genius (164). For the faith demanded of the system of exchange is analogous to the faith demanded of the system of language, which is "the Good Faith of Other invoked in the act of speech" (Forrester 161).

The need for good faith in any system, any Symbolic order, led Lacan to develop one of his most famous concepts, central to his philosophy – that of the big Other, who is, as Slavoj Žižek explains, an overseer of Lacan’s Symbolic order, “society’s unwritten constitution,” which is “the second nature of every speaking being” (8). Forrester understands Lacan to link the big Other with money in this way: “the big Other began to function somewhat like a bank – the treasury of signifiers” (164).

Seen in the light of Lacan and Forrester, faith, or trust, is an essential factor that undergirds any system of exchange – money is but a promissory note that a debt will be honored; the bank, backed by the power of the State or some other system of power, promises that the money will reasonably hold to the value that is written on it. If faith in the system is undermined then money will cease to signify and therefore diminish in value. The erosion of such faith, in the system as well as in individual relationships, plays just such an axial role in *Cartas cruzadas*.

### **Faith in Social Systems**

The most poignant critiques of Antioquian society can be found in Esteban’s writing that centers around a breakdown in social trust and diminishment of faith in social institutions. He holds that Medellín is a city in decadence (28), that the drug dealers have altered the social values to such an extent that they have made life unlivable to anyone else, that they live in a society without shame and without compassion, that corruption has seeped into every sector of society, and that they live in a place in which “laws ensuring peaceful coexistence do not exist” (507). Antioquian society for him now is in “total shambles” (507).

For Esteban, the factor that exacerbated an already bleak situation was the influx of large amounts of money from drug trafficking: “The worst thing isn’t even the violence. The worst thing is that society itself comes unhinged when it becomes possible to get rich in one day. It is a business with

mind-blowing profits. Cocaine is a pioneer industry here: unbelievably high risk that is in direct proportion to the profit” (507).

Raquel and her sister Claudia echo Esteban’s observations. Raquel writes of “this society in decadence” where “taxi drivers, mechanics, day-laborers small businessmen have gotten rich overnight due to cocaine” (218). One nouveau-riche drug dealer had just driven up to her father’s ranch and made him an “offer he couldn’t refuse” of ten-times the market price to buy his land. She stayed overnight with him at the ranch after the sale, amid the stacks of bills worth millions, and woke up the next morning made “physically sick by the humid odor that the money emitted” (226). When criticizing society in general, Raquel’s sister Claudia diagnoses the problem similarly: “Too much prosperity too quickly. People lose their sanity along with their self-control; and thus a very dangerous class of people comes into being: those who are jaded, whose pleasure has been satiated. And a jaded man easily becomes destructive and arrogant; he doesn’t give two shits about anyone but himself” (543). International finance played a disruptive role as well. She noted in an earlier letter to Raquel that she had been propositioned a number of times to smuggle cocaine from Colombia to New York because the price increased there by orders of magnitude – close to one hundred times greater (201).

The common thread in the writing of Esteban, Claudia and Raquel is that the *rate of change* of money injected into their economy was the factor that led to the greatest social destabilization. This process is essentially a form of inflation on the domestic front and a devaluation of their currency on the international front. For instance, the fact that Raquel’s father is paid ten times the value for his ranch, which, as land, had been for generations the hard-currency that ensured wealth and security in Antioquia, is hardly recompense for the fact that he never wanted to sell it in the first place. In an economy when some parties suddenly acquire orders of magnitude more capital than others, the trust and faith in the system is undermined. There is no longer universal trust that money corresponds to the

value it purports to signify. The big Other isn't holding up his side of the bargain; the Symbolic order has a crack in it; the "treasury of signifiers" has suddenly started printing money, causing the money already in circulation to be devalued.

This problem, loss of faith in a system of exchange because some parties are able to acquire capital at a much higher rate than others, is what Raquel, Claudia and Esteban perceive to be most destabilizing factor in their society.

### **Faith between Persons**

*Cartas cruzadas* argues that broken faith damages individual relationships just as much as it does society. Claudia bridges these two realms in her pointed criticism of Luis' sophistry when he attempts to justify his illegal activities. He cites Balzac's dictum that "every rich man is a thief; behind every great fortune lies a crime" (451) to mitigate the severity of his own ethical lapse. But Claudia sees through the syllogistic bait-and-switch: "The fact that the only way to get rich is to do something illegal, immoral or shameful does not justify one getting involved in illegal activities. It might be a historical fact, but it is hardly a moral justification" (451). Luis has broken faith with his friends and with his lover, which is for her an unpardonable sin.

For Raquel can pinpoint the exact moment that she started to fall out of love with Luis, and it had nothing to do with a diminishment of her physical or emotional attraction to him. Rather, it started when she caught him in a lie. Recalling their relationship's halcyon days in her diary, she writes of a harmonious, all-encompassing love they had for each other, to the point where one existing without the other was inconceivable: "In my decaying idealistic and absolutist paradigm for the world, one lie signifies the eventuality of more lies to come, of all lies. A crack in the faith was the loss of faith. Our love was like an absolute symbiosis, and I was playing clean. My ethics were inextricably linked to my



relationship with Luis. I loved him but he, in deceiving me, in uttering any kind of lie, even the most innocuous, abnegated that symbiosis, that love” (411).

But while her ethical views on truthfulness in a relationship might seem morally unbending, she doesn't hold to this high standard in her actions: she stays with Luis for a couple of years even after discovering both that he deceived her and that he has continued to work in narco-trafficking. What convinced her to stay on with him is what she refers to later as her sister Claudia's "law of desire" (446). When pressed for advice on what Raquel should do about discovering that Luis is involved in something illegal, Claudia interrogates her: "Do you desire Luis, exciting yourself merely by desiring him, seeing the world in a different light each time you make love to him? – Yes. – Is this desire indispensable? – Yes. – Well then, little Raquel, follow your instincts" (446). This passage points to how identity emerges in such relationships, when the self is determined by its relationship to the other.

Desire here is so compelling that it can temporarily overcome even something that one partner perceives as an act that signified complete loss of faith, a crack in the "solid cement" of their "complex duality" in which "it was as if one brain was controlling the two of us" (406). But faith claims its prominent place in the end. Their relationship was doomed the moment that trust was broken. Their former love and "law of desire" only prolongs the inevitable split, once the relationship and trust passes.

Raquel's letter shows how her prediction that one lie would lead to other lies plays out, but in an unexpected way that compromises her ethics rather than his: during the course of a routine conversation she finds herself in the uncomfortable position of having to disguise her true motives of interrogating him about his business dealings. She tells of preparing a mental list of questions she wanted answered, with a plan to "insert the questions in the conversation at opportune moments to test, above all, the veracity of his replies" (444). He perceives that she is hiding something and confronts

her: “for the first time in our lives together you felt distant, automatic..., as if you were hiding something” (415). She finally does confront him directly with her questions, but not before lying one more time about why she spurned another of his advances. She claimed that she was sick when in fact she was irate at discovering his lie. For Raquel, someone who is accustomed to complete honesty with Luis, the tragedy is that she finds herself placed in the ethically dubious position of having to lie to her lover in order to find out the truth about his lies. The blank page is now marked and never completely erased.

She begins to be deceitful in other ways as well. Small lies build on each other and turn into bigger lies. For instance, she and Luis collude to keep Esteban ignorant of his old obsession Marta’s presence in Bogotá while he was there visiting them: he had just gotten over her betrayal of him but was still purportedly susceptible to her charms, and so Luis and Raquel didn’t want to see her continue to take advantage of him. While Raquel recognized that, in a case like this, the good end justified the ethically questionable means, a lie was still a lie: “whatever lie, even a white lie, was capable of compromising the total trust that I had arrived at achieving with Luis” (438).

The lies get worse and lose their white hue while the power relations become more overt: Luis turns into someone who is capable of not only betraying Raquel with another woman but bragging about it in a letter to Esteban; Raquel withdraws more and more into herself from him; their conversations, anesthetized with alcohol, rarely go deeper than the quotidian. They become the kind of bourgeois couple that they had always satirized – lying to each other, talking past each other, never allowing the conversation to delve deeper into more substantive issues. But no matter, once compromised, the relationship changes irrevocably from what it once was. The faith is broken whether the lie that broke it was little or big.

Putting his friends in positions where they must compromise themselves ethically in order to

keep him in their lives is another tragic consequence of Luis' action. To a degree, he makes them accomplices. Raquel intimated a fear of this consequence when she foresaw one lie leading to another, and so on. But Luis compromises Raquel's ethics to a greater extent than just putting her into a position of having to lie. He showers her with gifts and money, leaving her richer than she could have imagined. But this is small consolation for someone to whom money was never a priority. Worse, her ethics are further compromised. She writes to Juana: "I wasn't so morally upright with Luis. I accepted all of his gifts [...], thousands and thousands of dollars [...]. And I took everything without even considering how many loathsome cadavers might be behind the fortune. I am not so innocent" (533). While she is not pure, at least her ethical lapse was passive, not active. She didn't acquire the money illegally, she just didn't exert enough effort to divest herself of the dirty money or refuse it in the first place. And she would never have been put in that position were it not for her association with Luis.

Esteban is dragged in, as well. By coincidence his construction and development company owned the building that contained the apartment Luis bought as a gift for his mother. So Esteban was made accomplice to the transfer of ownership through no direct action of his own, and thus accomplice to the crime of money laundering. This is just one example of kind of event that makes him rail in his diary: "With respect to narcotrafficking, it has achieved total penetration of its dollars into all of society's pores. We all make the move, I repeated my transcendental phrase, from victims to accomplices" (540).

Thus the breach of trust between individuals has larger repercussions. As Raquel says, one small ethical compromise usually leads to another. The tragedy here is that persons who make genuine attempts at moral conduct end up breaking the law, as well.

## **Conclusion to “Money, Desire and Faith”**

Lacan’s insights, both in the Seminar on “The Purloined Letter” and in his later thinking, help to highlight how money, desire, and faith operate in *Cartas cruzadas*. Lacan’s *Seminar* draws attention to money in a number of senses, the first and most obvious of which is the way that it drives the plot of “The Purloined Letter.” The *Seminar* also shows how money is an empty signifier, one that can reflect whatever desire a given subject decides to project onto it. This concept is only alluded to in one paragraph of his *Seminar*, but it comes to occupy a central place in his later thinking. It helps elucidate the enigma of desire in *Cartas cruzadas*: as soon as Luis pays for whatever object he thought he wanted, he realizes that he wants something else; Esteban’s erotic adventures work the same way. Finally, Lacan’s thoughts on the importance of faith and trust in any system of exchange, any Symbolic order, help us see how the undermining of such trust can lead to the collapse of an entire order itself as well as the relationships of the individuals in it.

While Lacan’s analysis is insightful, there is a limit to what he can offer us in this type of literary text. For, as Derrida points out in his criticism of Lacan’s *Seminar*, Lacan “does violence” (25) to a literary text in order to bend it to his utility as a formulaic piece illustrative of his theories. There is more to be considered in the text, in the way that it is narrated, in the frame of narration, and in the others texts with which it is in conversation. The next section uses both Derrida and Lacan to show how the concept of blindness is at work in the text, on every level from the content of the story to the manipulation of the reader.

### **3.3.2 The Glance, Blindness, and Misrecognition**

The lessons derived from Lacan’s and Derrida’s writing on Poe’s story regarding the characters’

and readers' misrecognition of what is right in front of them can be applied with equal efficacy to Jaramillo Agudelo's *Cartas cruzadas*. After all, Lacan adumbrated the perceptive deficiencies of the characters in "The Purloined Letter" in a way that a first-time reader might easily have overlooked. For instance, that the police inspector failed to "see" the letter right in front of him in the Minister's office because it was *too* conspicuous is a concept that is easy to grasp on first reading: that much is explicit in Poe's narrative.

However, that the canny Minister failed to recognize that once he possessed the letter he himself now occupied a place in the Symbolic circuit that the Queen formerly occupied (for detective Dupin stole the letter from him just as he had stolen it from the Queen), and that Poe, sensitive to this, took care to endow him with stereotypical feminine idiosyncrasies in the second half of the story as the trick was played back on him (occupying the Queen's place in the symbolic circuit, he took on some of her attributes), is an aspect that might have escaped a cursory reading. Lacan's analysis helps bring this to light. Not only that, but Lacan shows how every member of the circuit is to a certain extent blinded: the King and the police are blind to the Queen's betrayal of the King, and of the existence of the letter (she leaves it face down on the table in front of him); the Queen is initially blind to the Minister's discovery of her desire to keep the contents a secret from the King; the Minister is blind to Dupin's gaze (who ensures this by wearing tinted spectacles), and his replacement of the Queen's letter with a facsimile; Dupin himself, once in possession of the letter, is blind to the difficulties he is going to have extricating himself from the circuit once he has entered into it, because just as in the Minister's case, the hunter becomes the hunted.

In a similar vein, Derrida's critique of Lacan's *Seminar* takes it to task for, among other things, overlooking some indispensable aspects of the Poe story: the other texts with which Poe's "The Purloined Letter" interacts, an entire narrative frame, the involvement of the narrator in the story's plot,

and the quality of Poe's text itself as literature as opposed to an analogy to elucidate Lacan's theories. "The Purloined Letter" (1844) is the third in a series of short stories involving detective Dupin and the unnamed narrator, who are introduced in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) and appear in its sequel, "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842). Derrida explains how the relationship that Dupin and the narrator have in the other two stories shows the narrator to be as much a double of Dupin as the Minister is in "The Purloined Letter," and even perhaps a lover. Derrida goes so far as to conjecture that Poe had worked out the formula for the relationship between Dupin and the narrator well before setting pen to paper for "The Purloined Letter." Therefore, the narrative frame that Lacan passes over, the "scene of writing," as Derrida calls it (144), to turn once again to Genette's terms, that of an internally focalized *homodiegetic* (*he is present in the content of the story*), *intradiegetic* (*the story is framed within another story*) narrator narrating the story, is indispensable to the structure of the story itself.

By contrast, Lacan says that this narrator "adds nothing" (qtd. in Derrida 140).<sup>59</sup> Talking about one without the other is to do "violence" (Derrida 25) to the story's framing. In this reading, Lacan either is blind to or ignores this just as he ignores the *mis en abyme* of the intertextual play that Derrida's meticulous reading shows that Poe invites. To name only a few instances: the untranslated epigram from Seneca in the beginning; the title "The Purloined Letter" refers both to the text of the story itself but also of course to the subject in the story; and Dupin's writing, as a clue to the Minister

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59 Here Derrida himself is guilty of doing the same violence to Lacan's text that he accuses of Lacan doing to Poe's. Derrida quotes Lacan out of context, selecting only the words that bolster his line of argument (see Barbara Johnson for a deconstructive critique of Derrida's deconstructive critique of Lacan). Lacan's full sentence, far from suggesting that the general narrator "adds nothing," reads thus: "Thus the indirect telling sifts out the linguistic dimension, and the general narrator, by duplicating it, "hypothetically" adds nothing to it" (48). Lacan, therefore, by including the parenthetical "hypothetically" that Derrida either ignores or purposefully omits, shows that he is more aware of the general narrator's structural indispensability to the text than Derrida gives him credit for. Nevertheless, Lacan does not attach the importance to the many frame narratives, scenes of writing, or intertextual *mise en abyme* that Derrida perceives so acutely and articulates so lucidly. But this misquote is a particularly egregious error, given that Derrida's critique rests on close-reading and Lacan's twisting Poe's story to fit as an example of how his own psychoanalytic theories work.

as to the identity of he who duped him, a quotation from another literary work on the letter that he substituted for the one that the Minister stole from the Queen. With this type of analysis, always sensitive to the extratextual allusions, Derrida is continually drawing the reader's attention to the texts that converse with and influence "The Purloined Letter."

Both Lacan's and Derrida's insights, the one on the characters' blindness to the obvious, and the other on Lacan's own blindness to the story's narrative frames and the role of the narrator in it, can be used with profit to elucidate aspects of *Cartas cruzadas* that have escaped critical attention and will prove to be essential elements in the text.

First, still drawing from Lacan before moving to Derrida, I will show how blindness affects each of the main characters in *Cartas cruzadas*. Luis, as discussed above, does not recognize that the object of his desire might be nothing more than a reflexive cycle leading back on itself, which is Kojève's notion of desire for Desire itself. Luis misrecognizes the object of his desire, failing to see that his desire is for Desire itself, in the Girardian or Lacanian sense described above. In addition, Luis fails to foresee the possible consequences of his decisions: he misses that his doing something illegal will almost assuredly influence Raquel, which of course it did; he misses that she had already given up on their love once she realized the extent of his breach of trust ("Don't you realize that Luis lost Raquel?" says Claudia to an ingenuous Esteban, pointing out both mens' blindness in this matter (543)); and, more in line with Lacan's reading of Poe, Luis fails to foresee the fact that once he enters the Symbolic circuit of the drug world there is no going back (just as in "The Purloined Letter," neither the Queen, nor the Minister, nor Dupin can get out of the circuit that stealing the letter has placed them in). Despite warnings from all of his friends and family, Luis seems to believe that he will be able to leave the business once it no longer suits him. Esteban warns: "At some moment, before you realize it, without intending to, you will become beholden to a system of loyalties, mutual support, and a way of

life in which you become an integral part of the machine. There is no way to retire from this because if you did you would adversely affect the interests of the others involved” (332). Once in, there is no way out. One’s fate and identity are determined by the system. Just like they are in Poe.

It takes the assassination of Luis’ chief contact and immediate superior in the drug mafia, his brother-in-law Moises, to make him realize the severity of the danger in which he has placed himself and his family. Worse still, he fails to recognize most obvious paradox of his reasons in getting involved with the mafia, and someone with his intelligence ought to have known better: he claims that he wants the quick money to purchase his freedom, as he claims his liberty is the most important thing to him (481), but his liberty is the first thing that is sacrificed as soon as his mafia handlers want him to do another job – when they bid him do something he does it, regardless of the inconveniences to him or his family. Desiring liberty, he becomes a slave.

Esteban, when it comes to himself and his own obsessions, is as much a victim of misperception as Luis. He willingly keeps himself in the dark about the motives and identity of his lover Carlota, who reveals to him (by letter, of course) at the end of the book that she had broken their pact of mutual ignorance of the other – she had known his identity all along after sneaking a peak at his business card while he was showering after their first tryst (another scene of writing, one character's knowledge of which the other character remained ignorant, or blind to). And even when Esteban has the chance to find out about her through a mutual friend, and later even through Luis, who had been informed, Esteban decides that he prefers the mystery. Next, he is blind to the coquette Marta’s machinations, despite warnings from all of his friends and family that she is deceiving him. Most importantly, he misrecognizes the path to his own happiness, which is writing poetry. It takes Claudia’s candor to make him realize his cowardice at not defying his father’s commands to seek a bourgeois career instead of pursuing his dream to write full-time.



Raquel's eyes are covered, as well. Her love for Luis and conception of their total unity prevented her from recognizing the possibility of his mendacity. She discovered the lie by accident, through incontrovertible proof of travel documents. But even after finding him out she was credulous enough to believe his claim that he would stop the activities once his debt was paid off. She was blind to the avarice that grew inside of him, only realizing in retrospect, after much time had passed, the extent to which it was changing him. It isn't that she, in most circumstances, did not have a good eye or perceptive gaze – her master's thesis was a graphic reportage of the history of Washington Square park in New York, photographed largely by her own hand. It was that she, like Luis and Esteban, lacked perspicacity when it came to herself. The gaze was always outward, never inward, seeing only what it wanted to see, never what was right in front of it, conspicuous.

The most egregious example of blindness in the book is Luis', Esteban's and Raquel's blindness to the "queen" of the drug-story plot of *Cartas cruzadas* – and this is another of Jaramillo Agudelo's masterstrokes that make this novel mimic the Poe story. After the murder of Luis' brother-in-law Moises, Luis finds out that the real boss all along had been his own little sister, Cecilia, rather than her husband Moises. Her money set the plot in motion in *Cartas cruzadas*, just like the Queen's offer of reward money for the purloined letter set events in motion in Poe's tale. All the trips that Luis made to the U.S., depositing amounts of money small enough to avoid suspicion in thousands of bank accounts, had been at Cecilia's behest, not Moises'. Considerable indeed was either Cecilia's power within the organization or her ability to dissimulate: despite that her husband was murdered and her brother lined up next on the hit list, she was still at large, perhaps even still calling the shots. Jaramillo Agudelo constructs a convincing veil over her: Moises' braggadocio, drug-dealer lifestyle and friends, Cecilia's act of timidity, ingenuousness and obsession with a shallow consumer lifestyle. Until the veil is lifted the reader is kept in the dark as much as the characters are. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to think that

someone would know his own sister well enough to ascertain, before it is too late, if she is someone capable of running an international money laundering operation for a drug cartel, or if she is someone only capable of shopping and watching telenovelas (soap operas) – unless that someone is as blind as Luis.

So the first revelation, on the level of plot that everyone had been blind to, despite that it had been hidden in plain site all along, is that the timid housewife has been running things all along. Her desire set the plot in motion: in Poe, the Queen's offer of reward money set events in motion that brought the letter back to her hands; in Jaramillo Agudelo, Cecilia's planning set events in motion that brought Luis into the business, with tragic consequences for all parties concerned. And all the characters in *Cartas cruzadas* were blind in some way that materially affected their well being. This is precisely where Derrida's critique of Lacan is helpful. Lacan's metaphor, that some of the characters in "The Purloined Letter" were behaving like ostriches who bury their heads in the ground but leave their backsides exposed to predation, while it was accurate enough insight concerning those to whom it was applied, erred in the scope of its application – Lacan himself failed to see some other ostriches. That is, as Derrida says, "There are only ostriches, no one escapes being plucked, and the more one is master, the more one presents one's rear. This is thus the case of whoever identifies with Dupin" (76). Dupin is duped, as is the narrator, as is Lacan, as is the reader. The quest of discovering Dupin's motives, or the content of the letter, or a stable meaning of "The Purloined Letter," is a quest for a chimera. The text refers to another text, which refers to another, and so on; the frame of narration is inside another, which is inside another, and so on. Lacan misses this reflexivity. It is easy to miss without help from Derrida's careful analysis.

Derrida's focus on the scene of writing, the homodiegetic aspect of the narrator, and the centrality of the text itself can also help us to see the centrality of one element in *Cartas cruzadas* that

has been overlooked by many critics: Raquel's letter. This is what I will examine in the following section.

### 3.4 The Scene of Writing

Why might readers overlook to the centrality of Raquel and her letter to *Cartas cruzadas*? Is it by design? Would the revealing to the readers of their own blindness confront them with another truth that Jaramillo Agudelo tries to unveil in *Cartas cruzadas*?

As a large body of criticism on *Cartas cruzadas* does not yet exist, proof of my claim that readers tend to overlook the centrality of Raquel to the text rests on a few readings. Yet despite their small number, it is telling to note the extent to which the readings move their focus away from Raquel. For instance, Gabriela Polit writes of Luis as “the main character in the story” (136). Raquel's letter is relegated to structural exigencies, and her status as character is relegated to one-half of the Luis-Raquel love story. For Polit, the fact that Raquel writes to Juana, who is an outsider ignorant of much of Colombian history and culture, is merely a device for Jaramillo Agudelo to sneak in some necessary historical background information to the reader: “The fact that Raquel chooses to write her story to her sister's lover implies that she has to deliver to Juana some background information [...] This implication makes it easier for the author to make this letter the connecting narrative of the whole story” (139). Polit observes how Jaramillo Agudelo puts himself into his characters, but in her view he only writes himself into Luis and Esteban, not Raquel: “Jaramillo Agudelo unfolds himself in these male characters” (136).

Another critic, Isaías Peña Gutiérrez, writes that letters telling of relations between “Luis Jaramillo Pazos and Raquel Uribe” are “responsible, with [those of] Esteban, for the better part of the letters and the diary” in *Cartas cruzadas*. For Peña Gutiérrez, the love story between Luis and Raquel

is the narrated content; there is no mention, for instance, of Raquel's own trauma and partial recovery through her own letter, which is something that I will demonstrate later and maintain throughout this chapter that is central to *Cartas cruzadas*. Finally, Donald Shaw, while granting that Raquel "always remains at the center" of the story, because "she stands for the ideal romantic relationship, destined to be contaminated and finally torn apart by the drug-industry" (25), conceives of her letter as merely supplementary: "its function is both to clarify and to comment on the episodes, underlining the meaning. In other words, the technique here clearly illustrates the Post-Boom's reader-friendliness" (34). The thrust of Shaw's argument is thus to classify *Cartas cruzadas* as a "Post-Boom" novel because it isn't obsessed with the crisis of representation that preoccupied the "Boom" writers like Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, and Gabriel García Márquez. The utility of Raquel's letter, then, for him is thus to "facilitate the reader's perception of what is going on" (34), which is the opposite of what most of the Boom writers were up to – they shuffled time, place, focalization, mood, voice, and anything else they could think of, to *confound*, not facilitate, the reader's perception of what was going on.

The critics above will either grant centrality to Raquel, or to her letter, but not to both. This is where Derrida's insights are helpful. First of all, Raquel's centrality to the book is inextricably linked to the letter, to the scene of her writing. If she is narrating part of a story "about" drugs in Colombia, or "about" her broken relationship with Luis, she is doing it through a medium that places her as close to the center of the story as Luis. I read the story as just as much about her trauma and recovery as it is about Esteban's, or even about the Luis' moral degradation and his disappearance, which is what critics such as Franco (13) and Polit (136) have identified as the center of dramatic action. I will cover the scene of Raquel's and Esteban's writing in more detail in the later section "Writing as Trauma Cure."

Another reason that the reader might overlook Raquel as protagonist and her letter is the

subordinate place to which women have been relegated in the aesthetics of writing and reading Latin American literature (Polit 2002). With a few notable exceptions, such as Elena Garro's *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (2011[1963]), the female has occupied the traditional feminine role of mother, virgin, or whore, one who is subjugated to the patriarchal system, acted upon rather than acting. Polit in her work on the caudillo novels of the twentieth century has suggested that, particularly among the writers of the Latin American *boom*, there has been a masculinization of the Latin American literary realm, “rendering writing and literary inspiration to be a virile value” (*Cosas de hombres* 10). She traces the literary tradition back to 1875 when Ecuadorian dissident writer Juan Montalvo commented on news of dictator Gabriel Garcia Moreno's death: “My pen quill killed him.” The act of writing became a weapon against oppressive regimes, and in most if the caudillo novels a poet or writer defeat the tyrant (*Cosas de hombres* 17). And with insights gained from the anthropological work of Lévi-Strauss, Marcel Mauss, and Gayle Rubin, Polit notes how women in the works of Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo* and Carlos Fuentes' *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* are not only subjugated as individuals, but worse, exchanged and bartered, mere commodities, between men who use them as currency to settle accounts in a male dominated system. In *Cartas cruzadas*, Esteban, when writing in his diary of Raquel as “the passive subject” (509), compares her, in her new-found cautious realism after having been betrayed in love by Luis, to Gabriel García Márquez's most famous female character: “The most Colombian thing about *Cien años de soledad* is that the daily life always depends on the women. Ursulas” (509). While Esteban implied that, in his example, the female's mastery over the quotidian empowers them in this regard, their social roles are still very much circumscribed: mater familias, but still mother. Ursula cannot do the multilingual prophetic work of Melquiades or the martial work of Colonel Buendia – she did bring him his coffee while he sat daydreaming in his study, though. Even books by *boom* authors that expressly undermine patriarchal power abuses, such as Mario Vargas

Llosa's *La fiesta del Chivo*, presented by a female narrative voice ironizing the Dominican tyrant Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, the female's protagonism is itself undermined: the female narrator is a hysteric, a choice of characterization which stands in stark contrast to the courageous writer characters of García Márquez, Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortázar or Juan Rulfo, who challenged the regime's authority with their powers of imagination and articulation.

The women in this book, however, are not relegated to a passive role, in contrast to Esteban's myopic description. Cecilia, as I noted above, is the agent that sets all events in motion, and not just the house-chores. She runs the multinational narcotics money laundering ring. A highly articulate Raquel, in full control of her mental faculties throughout, controls the discourse and its medium. Whether Jaramillo Agudelo is empowering his female characters to contrast with Latin American literary precedent or not, the precedent itself is a prejudice that the reader must work through to see the centrality of the females in *Cartas cruzadas*. It adds another layer to the veil over them, hiding as they are in plain sight.

Which brings me to the second question I posed above: does Jaramillo Agudelo intentionally veil the centrality of Raquel and her letter. The answer is yes. Could it have been otherwise in a story that purports to comply with the “law of Poe?” Raquel’s letter, as frame or connective thread, and Raquel herself as narrator, may seem transparent because the conventions of fiction are that the story is the content of what the narrator narrates. This is particularly true in the case of Hispanic literature, in which the convention of “finding” the text as something inside the letter of some imagined author is as old as the literature itself. Polit, in essential agreement with Shaw that the novel reflects in the characters’ relationships the destructive influence of drug trafficking and greed on society, perceives that Jaramillo Agudelo in *Cartas cruzadas* put a different “face” on the violence than was common in other contemporaneous literature such as Fernando Vallejo’s *Our Lady of the Assassins* which put the

sicario at the center of the story. For her, the different “face” is the other side of society: “instead of focusing on the comunas, he describes how the upper and middle classes also took part and profited from the illegal business” (138). I would add simply that there is yet another face that he is interested in showing. Not only did some members of the middle classes participate in and profit from the business (this is Luis in the book) but other members were adversely affected by the business through mere association with those who participated (such as Esteban and Raquel in the book, and, of course, from what we know of him from his writings, Jaramillo Agudelo himself). Despite that they too reaped benefits from tangential involvement in drug trafficking, Esteban and Raquel were passively involved. That is, Luis’ involvement forced them into complicity by making them choose between betraying their friendship to him – turning him over to the authorities, for example – or an ethically compromised position of keeping silent, a position which made them accomplices in the business. And they both suffered injuries for which no amount of money could serve as a compensation.

I follow Polit in the hypothesis that “Jaramillo Agudelo’s introspective narrative” is “a search for restoration after his physical loss” (137). Jaramillo Agudelo wrote this book while recovering from a narco attack, intended for someone else, that eventually claimed his right foot. If this book is in part about a restoration for his loss, then it is necessary to examine which of the characters’ situation most closely resembles his own. In terms of loss and damage, it is Raquel: the innocent bystander, in touch with drug trafficking only indirectly, whose life was ruined through no fault of her own. I will elaborate on these parallels as well in a later section.

It is this tragic aspect of Raquel’s and Esteban’s story that Jaramillo Agudelo tries to illuminate in the novel: the injustice of that fact that they were harmed by the drug business despite their not being completely culpable; they are harmed mostly because of their association with someone who is doing illegal things, not because they did those things themselves. But the sly way that he goes about doing it

underlines the problem. Even though at first glance it doesn't seem like it, Raquel's trauma is at the center of the story, just as her letter is its backbone. The letter, Raquel's ridiculously long letter, is right there in front of the reader, just as the Queen's letter is casually laid on the table in front of the King, and later hung conspicuously in the Minister's apartment, in full view of the police who search for it frantically. But one tends to see through it, to glance over it, because one's attention is diverted toward something else. The police were looking for a letter in a hiding place, not laid out in the open right in front of them – they were blind to it there. Derrida carries this lesson further, outside the story, to point out Lacan's own misrecognition of an obvious aspect of "The Purloined Letter:" "The narrator is called the 'general narrator.' He is like the neutral, homogeneous and transparent element of the narrative. He 'adds nothing,' says Lacan" (140). In this case of *Cartas cruzadas*, Raquel as narrator is easily glanced over, not only because of literary conventions that diminish the materiality of the narrator's role, but also because of the red herrings: the drugs, the violence, the sicarios. One tends to read novels about narco-trafficking to read about the business of narco-trafficking, just as one reads a story about a stolen letter to find out about what is written on the letter. But the real story, dear reader, is elsewhere, or more to the point, it was right in front of you, and you overlooked it.

In Poe, the letter serves as Dupin's means of enriching himself and enacting revenge on his brother, the Minister, who had grievously wronged him in the past. What is written on the original letter, or even the what the letter is in itself (as opposed to a blank device that sets in motion the intersubjective process, creating the characters' identities according to their position in it), is what movie director Alfred Hitchcock referred to as a "MacGuffin": the device that kept the action going, the ostensible object the protagonist pursues, but later turns out to be of subordinate importance; it is what the film on the surface appears to be about, but what in the end is revealed to be only a distraction from what the film sets out to depict (Gottlieb 47-48). Jaramillo Agudelo is well versed in literature – it is



not surprising that he conforms tightly to the conventions of the detective story in his own detective story. But it should be admitted that both Poe and Jaramillo Agudelo clued the reader in, as early as the title page, of their stories' real subject. Poe's story wasn't merely about a letter; it was, much more importantly, about a letter put out of place, pur-loined, as Lacan's penetrating eye perceives, and the consequences of that action. Jaramillo Agudelo's story wasn't merely about Luis or Esteban, or even Raquel, but about their letters, the path they took between the characters, and what the letters meant to each of their subjectivities.

This leads to my answer to the third question posed above, which asked whether readers, once made to see what was right in front of them, would perceive another truth that Jaramillo Agudelo wants to convey? Again, yes. In this novel, what is right in front of the reader is Raquel's letter. The way that *Cartas cruzadas* is structured and narrated, its very form, moves to the foreground of the narrative discourse the injuries suffered by those who are touched by those who are seduced by the quick riches that involvement with narco trafficking puts within their grasp. It is principally about those persons *indirectly* involved in narco trafficking, not about those who are *directly* involved, as much as it seems the other way round on first reading. Thus, it is about the Luis' friend Esteban, who is only tangentially involved in the business through association with Luis, as much as, or more, than it is about Luis. In addition to his letters, Esteban's poems and diaries are part of the text; Luis only contributes letters. Luis, the principal MacGuffin in *Cartas cruzadas*, disappears from the text in the end. And it is about Raquel, who is injured by mere association as well, as much as, or more than it is about Esteban or Luis. Her letter is the structural axis of the book, which is a book of letters. She loses the love of her life to greed, but perseveres to tell the story and build herself a new life in a new place.

In determining how much ground to grant Raquel as a main character, Derrida's critiques of the shortcomings of Lacan's seminar are once again pertinent. Derrida faults Lacan for failing to consider

which other texts might be in conversation with “The Purloined Letter,” and for missing entire narrative levels, or frames, the most important of which is occupied by a narrator who is integral to the plot. Derrida’s insight applied to *Cartas cruzadas* bring to light Raquel as the narrator and narrative frame level overlooked by other readers. Further, turning to other texts, outside of *Cartas cruzadas* but in conversation with it, sheds light on how much of Jaramillo Agudelo is unfolded in her.

Regarding the texts, I will lay this argument out fully in the section “Writing as Trauma Therapy,” but here I will mention that Jaramillo Agudelo’s ideas on writing, love and catharsis in his literary autobiography, *Historia de una pasión ‘Story of a Passion’* (2006), make compelling comparisons with Raquel’s in *Cartas cruzadas*. The comparisons are there with Esteban and Luis as well, of course. Esteban’s poems in *Cartas cruzadas* make it into print in a collected edition of Jaramillo Agudelo’s poetry (*Libros de poemas ‘Book of Poems’* 2003). Again, my intention in drawing focus to Raquel is to grant her her place as narrator, character, and avatar of Jaramillo Agudelo alongside Luis and Esteban, not to put her in place of them. Other critics have written convincingly on how Jaramillo Agudelo “unfolds himself” into his characters Esteban and Luis; here I simply insist on adding Raquel to that list.

In addition to the parallels between Raquel and Jaramillo Agudelo that other texts illuminate, another factor that might cement her place beside Luis and Esteban is Jaramillo Agudelo’s conception of love. Here, again, external texts are pertinent. Throughout his works, in both poetry and fiction, he is preoccupied with a quest for a perfect love. Peña Gutiérrez sees in all of Jaramillo Agudelo’s work a glimmer of the uselessness of the search for love, but the ceaseless pursuit of it all the same. Disillusion that the quest is quixotic cannot dampen his drive to persevere with the search: “I know that love / doesn’t exist / and I also know / that I love you.” (Jaramillo Agudelo, *Poemas de Amor* 45).

Yet, as I will demonstrate in detail below, Raquel’s love for Luis represents this perfect love as

Jaramillo Agudelo conceives it in his oeuvre: altruistic, a union of souls and minds, intensely erotic, and bathed in happiness. That she loses this love through no fault of her own but rather through Luis' betrayal, which was influenced and stimulated by the lure of riches through dealings with drug trafficking, is a tragedy that is heightened in degree when considered in full knowledge of the importance Jaramillo Agudelo attaches to love. Raquel is someone who had attained the near-impossible, had completed the quest to which Jaramillo Agudelo dedicates much of his life's creative energies, and her lover throws it away due his own misrecognition of the object and nature of his desire. When considered in this light, the moral decay of Luis pales in comparison. The injustice that those who suffer injuries from rampant greed are the ones indirectly associated with it rubs salt in the wound.

The scene of writing that Derrida helps me focus on here is that of Raquel writing her letter. If she is relegated to the supplementary level of merely telling the story, the female in Latin American literature redacting the exploits of the protagonist, or her letter relegated to the supplementary role of holding the other letters together, those of the "main character," then Jaramillo Agudelo has done the job that Poe taught him to do: he has hidden the letter in the most obvious place, right in front of us, and we have overlooked it. It may be that Jaramillo Agudelo profited from the prejudices that a literary tradition of masculine domination, stretching back at least as far as the nineteenth century, might cause its readers to fall prey to: why expect a fully developed, psychologically real female protagonist now when there has been a dearth of them in Latin American letters for over a century? Regarding the letter itself, he tells us he is hiding it in plain site. How? In a Derridean way. The "law of Poe" (567) is quoted in a text (Esteban's diary) within a text (*Cartas cruzadas*) referencing a text ("The Purloined Letter"), which is both the title of Poe's text and the reference to the object of desire within it, a letter purloined, which, in addition to being a text itself, references another text (Crébillon's *Atrée*), and so on

ad infinitum as Derrida shows us in his critique. Crossed letters. *Cartas cruzadas*.

### 3.5 The Importance of Literature: Love and Poetry

If the betrayal of Raquel's pure and selfless love is one of Luis' unpardonable sins, then his betrayal of literature damns him for good. The two topics that preoccupy Jaramillo Agudelo throughout all of his writing are love and literature. As Polit writes of *Cartas cruzadas*, it is "a love story, a story about friendship, and above all a story about poetry" (135). Alfonso Franco notes that throughout Jaramillo Agudelo's work there "is a permanent inquiry into the process of literary creation, reading and writing, so much so that many of his characters frequently reflect on aesthetic issues; something which leads us to conclude that this is one of his fundamental themes" (120). The passion that the title of Jaramillo Agudelo's literary autobiography, *Historia de una pasión 'Story of a Passion'*, refers to is the passion of writing literature. In it he writes that one of his earliest memories is of something "bubbling up" in his chest as he sat open-mouthed on the floor watching his father read him a book (9). He tells how over the past twenty years, after finishing a full work-week, he has spent every Friday and Saturday writing in his study. It consumes his life: "I forgot who said that the life of a poet is his poems [...]. This is certainly the case with me" (10).

In *Cartas cruzadas* literary references dominate the text so much that the claim that this book is a homage to literature as much as it is a homage to love and friendship is not at all an exaggeration. One example in particular might serve to illustrate. Both Raquel in her diary and Luis in a letter write of the time that they read Gabriel García Márquez' *No One Writes to the Colonel* (1986[1961]) aloud in Claudia's New York apartment as a way to educate Claudia's son Boris on Colombian culture, history and literature. There are a number of explicit clues that this allusion is important to *Cartas cruzadas*:

Márquez' book is of course about a letter whose circuit structures the plot; everyone present at the reading was affected profoundly by the story and Márquez' artistry; Raquel and Luis discuss to what extent Rubén Darío is like Márquez in the way that both writers can enchant with words, creating an "epiphany" (453); there are many more. But more significant than any of those explicit clues is the place that this anecdote occupies in the story's trajectory in *Cartas cruzadas* – it is located at the climax of all the plot threads: Luis' involvement with the drug world, the dissolution of his relationship with Raquel, and Esteban's resolution with his love interests. It is at this point in the narrative that *Cartas cruzadas*, an over five-hundred page introspective, cerebral novel, finally turns into a page-turner because of plot reasons. And what does Jaramillo Agudelo insert, just when the reader is turning the page to find out what is going to happen to Luis, or to Luis and Raquel? Another bit of literature performed by the characters in the novel. It would exasperate more if it were not such a good story.

Jaramillo Agudelo's move here recalls Shakespeare's in placing *The Mousetrap* play at almost the precise center of the text of *Hamlet*, or even, a couple of scenes prior, near to the center, Hamlet's demand that the actors recite, along with him, a scene of Hecuba's mourning from a performance he had remembered from his youth. The Hecuba scene is filled with dramatic tension because of the elements in the plot that are screaming for resolution, such as the revenge of his father's murder and his own personal safety, all hang in the balance while Hamlet stops the plot time to become a spectator and performer in another piece of literature. By comparison, notice Luis' language as he describes the experience of his reading Márquez aloud: "Almost from the beginning I realized that the words I pronounced had them hypnotized" (476). In what seemed to them like minutes, "when I got to the last page three or four hours of time outside of our room had passed because García Márquez detained time for us and transformed it into something else" (476). In *Cartas cruzadas*, as in *Hamlet*, what takes center-stage at the height of the dramatic plot tension, paradoxically, is *not* plot denouement but rather

literature itself, performed by the characters – a play within a play and a story within a story. Time is bent, “detained,” for the characters as well as the reader, by imaginative literature external to the text at hand. The plot events and reading of *Cartas cruzadas* both stand still until *No One Writes to the Colonel* gets its reading, just as everything has to wait for Hamlet to take his pleasure at seeing the itinerant player recite the Hecuba scene.

How the characters in *Cartas cruzadas* relate to literature determines their fate in the novel as well as the degree of sympathy with which they are depicted by Jaramillo Agudelo. The more Luis devalues literature, the more of a monster he becomes in the text. Conversely, the more Esteban values literature, the more he is endowed with redeeming traits. In the light of the importance of literature as a theme not only in *Cartas cruzadas* but also in Jaramillo Agudelo’s oeuvre, I will argue that Luis’ betrayal of literature damns him just as much as his betrayal of Raquel’s love does.

In the beginning, Luis is a dedicated student and lover of Latin American literature, who specializes in the modernist movement and the poetry of Rubén Darío. All the evidence in the texts suggests that this love and interest is genuine. He peppers his letters and conversations with literary references and his command of language is formidable. His enthusiasm for designing a course around the long-Romantic movement (extending from the early nineteenth century through to the present – Jaramillo Agudelo shares the exact same theory of Romanticism (García)) is palpable on the page. But his love for literature and command of language start to deteriorate when drugs enter the picture. The decline parallels the decline of his relationship with Raquel.

One of Luis’ most egregious betrayals of literature is his comment in a letter to Esteban regarding the value of a book of Walt Whitman poetry he carried through airport customs in one hand and a briefcase full of undeclared cash in the other. When asked to open the briefcase, on a whim Luis handed the book of poetry to the agent, as if asking him to hold it to free Luis’ hand to open the latch.

By coincidence the customs agent was a Whitman admirer. The poetry distracted the agent just enough that he waved Luis through the line. As conclusion, in a line of reasoning that subordinates the value of literature to that of money, Luis writes to Esteban: “This is the true salvation by poetry, you ruined poet” (515). The insult to Esteban was one of many in this particularly cruel and biting letter, marking the nadir in their friendship. Luis’ ire had been provoked by Esteban’s previous letter, which accused him of replacing his passion for books with “passion for another paper – money” (506). But the tone and intensity of Luis’ language was out of proportion to Esteban’s. Just above Luis’ signature is the news that he is about to betray Raquel with another woman (518). So in these few pages Luis pulls off a betrayal tri-fecta of the things that used to matter to him: his relationship with Raquel, his friendship with Esteban, and his love and fear for literature.

Luis’ command of language suffers the same fate as his love for literature and his relationship with Raquel. In fact, they all go down in parallel. Luis’ early letters were models of facility with language. In the end Luis’ language is reduced to vulgarities. In some cases it is even reduced to nonsense: in the letter above, his twisted logic leads him to reason himself into a corner which, to get himself out of, he actually writes the following ludicrous phrase: “Let me be clear that cocaine is not a narcotic” (516). In private correspondence with Esteban he starts to refer to his business associate, Moises, by his given name as opposed to the nickname “Shaggy” that Luis and Esteban had been using for him since their youth (500). Finally, Luis begins to use the hackneyed phrase “the business” to refer to narcotrafficking. Esteban reproaches him forcefully for these lapses: “sin of the professor, precarious covering of even more vulgar realities” (506). At this point in the narrative Luis is lying consistently to all his friends as well as sleeping around on Raquel.

Near the end of the novel, Luis’ subordination of literature to love of money is complete. The last time that he sees Raquel, just before he goes into hiding and disappears from both the novel and

their lives, he gives her “checks and titles for a heap of millions” (553). The checks and titles had been hidden in the filing cabinet that housed his important papers, inside the very “dust covered envelopes” (553) that had before contained the original prints of his doctoral thesis. Thus in this scene money *literally* displaces literature and Esteban’s incisive criticism of Luis takes material shape. Look inside the envelopes that used to contain an analysis of poetry and you will find not a thesis but another type of paper – money.

In the case that the prominent place that literature occupies in Jaramillo Agudelo’s philosophy isn’t adduced from his treatment of it in his poetry and fiction, then the point is made explicitly in his prose. As I quoted him saying in the beginning of this section, “The life of a poet is his poems” (*Historia* 10). For such a man, what could be a more shameful betrayal of literature, and therefore of life itself, than to substitute money for it?

There they were right in front of us the whole time, and we missed them: Raquel’s letter, Cecilia as the plot’s queen, and García Márquez’ work at the center of dramatic tension of a story that purports to depict narcotrafficking as the chief cause of social ills. Lacan shows us how to see not only the pernicious influence of money on individuals and society, but also how money here can serve as a blank slate on which to inscribe objects of greed, desire and obsession that drives the characters who are to some degree blind to and unsuspecting of its power. In turn, Derrida show us what Lacan himself was blind to in Poe and how that can illuminate aspects of *Cartas cruzadas* that I argue are indispensable: the scene of writing, narrative frames, and the other texts with which *Cartas cruzadas* is in conversation. These texts show Jaramillo Agudelo to be in love with love and with literature, and to endow the act of writing with a therapeutic power. *Cartas cruzadas* is as much about how his characters write themselves out of trauma as it is about the moral degradation of a narco money-lauderer. In the following section I will address the extent to which Jaramillo Agudelo demonstrates



writing serves as therapy for himself and his characters in *Cartas cruzadas*.

## 4. Writing as Therapy

### 4.1 Darío Jaramillo Agudelo Unfolds Himself into his Characters

Jaramillo Agudelo himself has affirmed in published interviews and a literary autobiography that writing is for him both a therapeutic and enjoyable pastime (García; *Historia*). On writing and crises in general, he states that “because during a crisis man appeals to the imagination. The great moments in literature and art have emerged during difficult moments” (García). In his literary autobiography *Historia de una pasión* he writes that he composes poetry because his verses “serve me as illumination and catharsis. They are my obsession and my diversion” (65). He lists many reasons why he writes, all of which bring him pleasure, to include his love of silence and solitude, and the euphoria he experiences while writing because it takes him outside of himself and the present moment (74). Noticeably absent from this list is catharsis, the only consolation that writing brings to him that is not directly related to pleasure: “The advantage of all these hypotheses, and others I have said, is that that are all happy ones, with the exception of the only unhappy one, that I forgot above: catharsis” (74).

Made conspicuous by omission in this list, catharsis is an advantage of writing that he comes round to many other times in *Historia*. He describes his poetry as “obsessive and consolatory” (64). Writing is “a good treatment to prevent less unprofitable and less enjoyable, or better said less harmful, forms of madness” (86). Catharsis for him comes through written correspondence as well: “Letters to friends, this form of catharsis, is a pleasurable form of giving order to the world – the logic of humor – by means of telling a story to a friend” (25). For him writing is not only cathartic but an all-consuming passion as well, so total that “to tell of its totality – I will affect a catharsis by telling something I had

suppressed” (87); that something is his father’s illness that began in 2003. He never ceases to think of his father “except when I write: then I abstract from all surrounding reality, including from pain as intimate as the sympathy for another’s pain” (87).

*Cartas cruzadas* came out of a similarly difficult crisis. He writes that in the early nineteen-nineties he suffered “three irrecoverable losses. Gérman Vargas, Fernando Martínez Sanabria and my right foot” (46). Vargas and Martínez Sanabria were dear friends whom he considered his “yardsticks for truth,” their loss “depriving me of my bearings” (47). His right foot was injured in a blast from a machine-gun trap that had been placed near the entrance to a friend’s ranch, a hit intended for someone else to settle a drug-related debt (“Ese otro que tambien me habita”; Polit 134). During his prolonged convalescence, which required multiple surgeries and the eventual amputation of his right foot below the knee, writing was a major source of solace. For instance, in May of 1989, five months after the accident, he composed a poem titled “Flayings,” the epigraph for which was a quote from R.L. Stevenson: “the seafaring man with one leg...,” and the first line of which reads: “My body without its foot continues to love as before” (*Historia* 49). The poem can be found inserted in the prose of Jaramillo Agudelo’s literary autobiography, just as his character Esteban’s poems are inserted into prose pages of his diary in the novel *Cartas cruzadas*.

The novel germinated in his imagination as he sat recuperating in his Medellín apartment in the middle of 1989. He found himself musing about the comings and goings of his neighbor, an older woman who lived in an enormous apartment given to her by her son, who was “perhaps an accelerated millionaire made tycoon through narcotrafficking” (“Ese otro que tambien me habita”). This woman makes her way into *Cartas cruzadas* as Doña Gabriela, who was given an enormous apartment by her son Luis, an accelerated millionaire made rich by drug money. Jaramillo Agudelo started writing on October 12th, 1990 and finished revisions sometime after March of 1994, in time for the first edition

publication date of October 1995 (*Historia* 55-56); this time period exactly overlapped the time period of his “three irrecoverable losses.”

For Jaramillo Agudelo, novel writing is “in reality, another facet of the poetic experience” (*Historia* 83). The particular facet that intrigues him the most is the psychological inhabiting of his characters: “It is unavoidable: while one writes, the author of a character must be that character” (83). In the case of *Cartas cruzadas* Jaramillo Agudelo spent an extended time in many characters, who were all in some ways a part of him. As he explains, “In each individual there live different “I”s that alternate, reincarnate, disappear and are reborn” (84). These personages can receive full development on a novelist's page: “Why try to deny it, this universal law that characters are manifestations of the novelist’s schizophrenia” (85). He cites Flaubert’s famous statement: “I am Madame Bovary” (qtd. in *Historia* 85), understanding that paradox that the novel’s quality is appraised on one level by the individuality of its characters, but on another by the degree to which they reflect an aspect of the author’s personality. A glance at the parallels between the characters in *Cartas cruzadas* and Jaramillo Agudelo himself will show the great extent that this novel reflects the schizophrenia of its author.

To start on the surface, let’s begin with Luis Jaramillo, who writes his dissertation on modernist poet Rubén Darío. Despite that Jaramillo is a common Colombia surname, the very choice of that name and area of study for his protagonist suggests that there is something of author *Darío* Jaramillo, whose novel *Cartas cruzadas* was in part a tribute to Rubén *Darío* (García) in his character Luis *Jaramillo* who studies Rubén *Darío* – so who is the character Luis Jaramillo, who writes on Darío based on? Is he not based on the author Darío Jaramillo? So much for name games. Moving deeper, Luis’ hypothesis for his master’s thesis – that many of the philosophical and literary movements of the last century, from Symbolism to Postmodernism, could be considered as subsets of the overarching tradition of Romanticism (80; 102) – is shared by Jaramillo Agudelo himself: “I believe that we are still

in a Romantic epoch” (García). In addition, they share the same aesthetics. According to Jaramillo Agudelo, Mark Twain is “the best writer born in the United States to date” (*Historia* 16). Luis, in a paragraph preceding discussions of the three most famous Latin American writers, Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, and Mario Vargas Llosa, no less, describes Twain as his “favorite writer” (*Cartas cruzadas* 145). Luis compares modernist poet Rubén Darío with García Márquez in their capacity to “enrapture us with words, to cast us into a waking dream [...] these guys rob you of your own attention and transform it with their words into an epiphany” (*Cartas* 453). By comparison, Jaramillo Agudelo writes of the power of poetry to “cut off our respiration, astonish us with surprise, to exorcise us, to make us smile at ourselves in introspection” (*Historia* 17).

If the kind of delightful wordplay in poetry that Jaramillo Agudelo enjoys writing and reading is obviously on exhibit in Esteban’s poetry, it is manifested as well in Luis’ prose letters. Each one written to Esteban opens with a playful variation on his name that underlines the subject of the writing to come. For instance, he addresses a letter to “Juan Estonto” (Esteban’s full first name is Juan Esteban, which is Jonathan Steven in English, and here the change of the last two syllables of “Esteban” to “tonto,” which means “fool,” makes the phrase “Jonathan is a fool”) that rebukes Esteban for his amorous follies. Throughout the novel, Luis’ letters and conversations are replete with the wordplay and punning that characterize much of Jaramillo Agudelo’s poetry and letters, which he wrote prolifically (*Historia* 24-25; 58).

If Luis is a depiction of one of the “I”s that Jaramillo Agudelo claims inhabit him, then Esteban is another. He is a poet, for one, with a tendency to slip poems into prose texts, just as I have shown Jaramillo Agudelo does. His passion for football might only be surpassed by that of Jaramillo Agudelo, who once responded, only half-jokingly, in an interview that poetry only started to interest him after he discovered that he would likely never be the right winger for Medellín’s professional soccer team

(*Historia* 16). Jaramillo Agudelo is an only child but “doesn’t like to have to say it,” and siblings are a “persistent obsession” in his poems (*Historia* 23) – a claim he substantiates by including on the same page a poem entitled “Stories (that never happened – yet –),” the first line of which is “I had here my little brother.” Esteban, while he is not an only child, grew up like one because his siblings were all a generation older than him and had already moved out of his childhood home. Worse, he suspected that his very conception was unintentional because his parents, while never lacking in outward shows of affection, by their actions showed that they were eager to be done with child rearing: they spent most of their time away from home traveling for business and pleasure. He spent hours of his youth alone in his large house, yearning for a playmate. Luis’ childhood proposal that they become blood brothers was so significant to Esteban that decades later he is able to recall the exact date and time while he is writing in his diary. It was in the afternoon, “a la hora del café” – “at coffee-hour” as he puts it (*Cartas* 25). By comparison, here are some lines from Jaramillo Agudelo’s poem about his imaginary brother: “Might there be a time, I ask myself, / that he will come to my house at coffee-hour / remembering the exact date of a secret anniversary / and then after speaking with me jump out of the window / like a thief” (“Stories (that never happened - yet -)”; 8-12, qtd. in *Historia* 23). The exact date of a secret anniversary done *at the coffee-hour*. Jaramillo Agudelo didn’t give his little brother a name in the poem, but it might as well have been Luis, who, although not younger than Esteban, is considerably smaller than him, and therefore could be considered the “little” brother in that respect.

Esteban and Jaramillo Agudelo’s share a common source for cultural theory. A theoretical and artistic inspiration for Jaramillo Agudelo is German poet and intellectual Hans Magnus Enzensberger, whom he quotes in *Historia*: “Poetry is the only medium of communication in which the number of producers exceeds the numbers of consumers”; poetry is a “medium of communication with oneself as well as personal therapy” (83). By comparison, when Esteban is diagnosing the problem of

narcotrafficking in Medellín, he turns to the theories of none other than Enzensberger: “the function of the State consists in maintaining a monopoly on violence” (qtd. in *Cartas* 289). It is in Esteban’s view the explanation for the emergence of narcotraffickers in Colombia in the 1970s: “Enzensberger’s explanation describes perfectly what we are currently living in Medellín. A small state manages the trafficking of cocaine” (*Cartas* 289).

Finally, both Esteban and Jaramillo Agudelo are sometime poets and writers. Jaramillo made time for writing only on Friday and Saturday nights, after having completed a work week at his full-time job. Esteban is a sports journalist who writes during his off-work hours. They both wanted to be full-time poets, but their fathers refused to allow it. The reasoning was the same, *verbatim*, in both cases. This is how each of their fathers put it: “He who writes to put food on the table ends up neither writing nor eating” (*Cartas* 68; *Historia* 22).

While the above comparison of Jaramillo Agudelo’s poetry and autobiographical writing with *Cartas cruzadas* reveals that Luis and Esteban are relatively explicit manifestations of the “I”s that inhabit the author, there is another “I” in *Cartas cruzadas* who is a more subtle reflection of the author’s personality. And it is at this point in my analysis that Derrida’s critique of Lacan’s take on “The Purloined Letter” illuminates an aspect of the text that may, at first glance, be of minor importance, but that turns out to be of critical importance upon examination. It is on a level of narration that on first glance seems, in Genette’s terminology, extradiegetic, above or outside the narrative discourse, but that is in fact intradiegetic, inside or part of the narrative discourse. Once again, I refer to Raquel.

Jaramillo Agudelo lost his foot to narcotrafficking and Raquel lost Luis, the love of her life and best-friend. For Jaramillo Agudelo the losses are comparable in terms of trauma: as he writes in *Historia*, the “three irrecoverable losses” he suffered over a period of years were the loss of two friends

and his right foot. Narcotrafficking claimed his foot even though he had absolutely no direct connection with the business. This injustice of indirect injury is what I see him exploring in *Cartas cruzadas* through the Raquel's story. Every tragedy that befalls Raquel happens because of her tangential position to narcotics and through almost no fault of her own. Without consulting her, her lover enters the business, and as one thing leads to another he ruins their lives. But she was hit with the tragedy unaware, just as Jaramillo Agudelo was hit with the machine-gun.

In May of 1989, a few months after the bomb blast, in the middle of the period he claimed he ruminated about the novel, one of Jaramillo Agudelo's poems won an award for best Colombian love poem at a poetry festival. He took the stage, one-legged, "dressed as a pirate" (*Historia* 53) to read his poem "Poemas de amor, I," of which the first lines are "That other who also lives inside of me / perhaps owner, perhaps invader or exile in / this body"; later, "this shadow of stone that has grown / inside and outside of me"; the last two lines read: "this other, / I love you too" (qtd. in *Historia* 53).

Compare this "other" to whom the poem's speaker refers with the way Raquel describes her love for Luis during their relationship's better days: "Our symbiosis was physical. It was a matter of one body, with only one center of gravity, so symmetric that his [Luis] half was right and my half left" (215). She writes that they lived for ten years "in a erotic rapport and conformity" that "was physical, total" (406). Incidentally, in the original Spanish the word for "rapport" is "compenetracion," which means "rapport" or "conformity," but might be translated, with an ear to its etymology, is "co-penetration." The metaphor, embedded in the word's definition, suggests an inextricable symbiosis and union that its literal meaning does not exactly convey. They did domestic chores "as if there were one head directing us" (406). After growing accustomed to this state over ten years, "both converting ourselves in the shadow of a complex duality that is the product of both and that becomes the only manner of existing for both. One doesn't exist without the other. They complete each other. They

determine each other on an ontological level. One cannot exist without the other” (406).

Jaramillo Agudelo had written “Poemas de amor, I” some years before his accident. It was not written in response to the loss of his foot. But that was the poem that he read in front of thousands of supporters at the Medellín Convention Center in May of 1989, hobbling to the stage only months after he lost his leg to a drug hit meant for someone else. The poem that cemented his fame as a poet, it was selected over the love poems of none other than José Asunción Silva (1865-1896), Colombia’s most celebrated poet, whose “Nocturne III” is one of the most famous poems in the Spanish language (Suescún), as well as one of the most anthologized (Mataix 204n11).

Narcotrafficking left Raquel bereft of Luis, this “other” who lived inside of her, completed her, who was as much a part of her body as, well, her right foot. She writes her autobiography disguised as a letter as a means of catharsis to overcome her loss, a loss that she suffered through no fault of her own, but by merely having had the bad luck of being associated with someone who was involved in drug trafficking. She claims at the end that the exercise was effective. Jaramillo Agudelo does the same with his writing, as he claims in no uncertain terms in *Historia*. In *Cartas cruzadas* the parallels between him and Raquel line up too well for me to not claim that she is one of the “I”s that inhabit him as much as, if not more than, Luis and Esteban are.

### **Darío Jaramillo Agudelo's Characters**

In the section above I have demonstrated how Jaramillo Agudelo makes explicit claims in texts that are external to *Cartas cruzadas* that for him writing is cathartic. In addition, I have drawn the tight parallels between the circumstances of his own trauma with the trauma of the characters in *Cartas cruzadas*, substantiating my claim, following Polit, that he is unfolding himself into the male the characters in this book, but adding that he unfolds himself into Raquel as well. Below, to substantiate



my reading that one of the major plot strains of the novel is this catharsis through discourse, I will examine the specific ways in which the characters themselves claim that the act of writing is cathartic for them

#### 4.1.1 Raquel

I argued previously in the “Scene of Writing” section that Raquel’s letter is the purloined letter of *Cartas cruzadas*. Luis’ letter, the one that the drug mafia wants badly enough to kill for, is the distraction, the MacGuffin. Raquel’s letter is the one right in front of the reader’s nose, the one that is easily overlooked while attention is paid to the manhunt for Luis.

Raquel’s letter is distinct. It lifts her discourse up another frame, which make it extradiegetic from that of the other characters. Hers is the retrospective letter, written upon reflection in a time and place farther removed from events, that ties all the other letters together. It is the only letter whose destination lies almost completely outside the narrative: it is addressed to Juana, who is inside the narrative as the lover of Claudia, but whose speech is only directly represented twice in the whole novel. It might be argued that Esteban’s diary entries are extradiegetic in the way that Raquel’s letter is, but the diary’s destination is ostensibly Esteban himself, or the “big Other,” as Žižek holds (10), not some other reader. Diaries are between the writer, himself and God. Further, Esteban’s discourse is intradiegetic throughout. The framing of Raquel’s letter sets her up like an extradiegetic, heterodiegetic narrator when it comes to the content of *Cartas cruzadas*. Conversely, when the frame is made one level higher, again with the insights that Derrida gives us from his reading of Poe, it is easy to see her letter as intradiegetic and homodiegetic. On this concept, Derrida points out that in the Poe story the key is in the title: “The Purloined Letter,” which, in addition to referring to the letter in the content of the story, refers to the materiality of the story itself, as a letter. Similarly, Jaramillo Agudelo’s title is

itself a frame: *Cartas cruzadas* 'Crossed Letters.' The title refers to the book as much as it refers to the content of the book – the letters as well as the story – and it binds the letters together just as Raquel's long letter binds all the other letters within it. If one takes the title, *Cartas cruzadas*, to refer to the actual letters that the books holds bound between its covers, Raquel's letter is then intradiegetic, in the same frame as the other letters, rather than extradiegetic, as I mentioned above. Furthermore, the rich ambiguity of the title implies that the letters carry more symbolic weight than might seem obvious at first glance. For crossed letters refers on the surface to the fact that the letters are crossing paths. But "cruzada" in Spanish carries the same connotation as "crossed" in English when it is used in the sense of "double-crossed," or "foiled"; and of course the word carries the connotations of the Catholic cross and the making of the sign-of-the cross. Whether Jaramillo Agudelo intended these connotations or not, the title nevertheless moves the letters to the foreground of the novel's content and story.

One of the stories of Raquel's letter is her trauma and recovery. This is stated explicitly upfront. After some pleasantries and mundane news, the first substantive thing Raquel writes in the novel is this: "With the blessing of starting a second life someplace else, I have the option of exorcising the past one, of telling it – of telling it to myself – in a sort of final report. While I wait [for my departure], I will spend my hours of agony and prenatal discomfort writing you this, my cathartic letter" (30). "Exorcising" is the operative verb, "agony" and "cathartic" the operative adjectives. These words come up again many times throughout the letter: "Now what I want is to exorcise him [Luis]. I want to substitute something for this empty present, something whatever, that in any case has nothing to do with my past that I am killing with this letter" (312). Later: "All throughout this letter, this catharsis, I have taken as a given my rejection of Luis' new way of life" (533).

She uses "prenatal" to maintain the metaphor of a rebirth, or a "second life" that she mentioned a few lines earlier. The earlier life is exorcised by the telling of it, and the way is paved for a new one

to take its place: trauma and recovery.

Finally, in an instance that is more profound than mere catharsis, she writes: “What’s more, I write this letter to affirm, by way of testimony, as catharsis, that it is possible for me to exist on my own. That I exist without Luis. Affirming this conviction has cost me so much; it has consumed so much of myself that a Raquel capable of love can no longer be found” (359). Raquel writes this on fixing the exact day that her relationship with Luis changed irrevocably. Before that day, Raquel was incapable of conceiving of herself without Luis in her life (359). On writing this, she affirms not only that she can conceive of herself as independent from him, but that the act of writing and the letter itself are constitutive of her new identity.

Raquel’s conviction in the therapeutic aspect of letter writing parallels almost exactly Jaramillo Agudelo’s own. Catharsis is the chief reason she offers for writing the letter to Juana. As I quoted Jaramillo Agudelo above, he feels that “letters to friends, this form of catharsis, is a pleasurable form of giving order to the world” (*Historia* 25). Her situation with respect to losses sustained due to indirect as opposed to direct involvement in drug trafficking, of all the characters in *Cartas cruzadas*, most closely resembles Jaramillo Agudelo’s own – they were both injured in attacks whose object was someone else. Jaramillo Agudelo lost his foot and Raquel lost the love of her life, which, considered in light of the importance that Jaramillo Agudelo gives love in his prose and poetry, is at least as significant as an appendage. Raquel’s most-used metaphor to describe their love is that they were as one body, that their union was a “complete symbiosis” (215). If Jaramillo Agudelo’s characters are, as he said, “manifestations of the novelist’s schizophrenia” (*Historia* 85), then Raquel is just as much a manifestation as Luis and Esteban are. One could do worse than to substitute “Raquel” for “Madame Bovary” in Flaubert’s dictum, that Jaramillo Agudelo cites on numerous occasions in prose and interviews (*Historia* 85; “Dentro de mí hay muchos yoés que no conozco” “Inside of me there are

many ‘I’s whom I don’t know’): Jaramillo Agudelo *is* Raquel.

That her trauma and her story is in many critics’ eyes eclipsed by the trauma of Luis and Esteban is testament to Jaramillo Agudelo’s ability to bring a problem to light in form as well as content. We Colombians, those of us who are not drug-dealers, suffer too, he seems to be saying. Perhaps they suffer more. They suffer the consequences of narco-trafficking, like physical injury and decline of social stability, without enjoying any of the seductive rewards like enormous wealth. The drug dealers and assassins have their discourse. They even have their own literary genre - the “sicaresque” is the term Abad Faciolince coined for the prolific stories combining conventions of the picaresque with subject matter of sicarios (Polit 18). But the Raquels of the world don’t have a discourse that takes center-stage. In this book it does. This is a book that owes its existence and form to her scene of writing – her letter of personal therapy due to losses suffered by association with narco-trafficking. The fact that readers miss this aspect of the book highlights the problem. What about all of us who loss things as a result of the narcos? Who will listen to our story? It is hidden right there in front of the reader’s face, but it goes unnoticed.

#### **4.1.2 Esteban**

If Jaramillo Agudelo *is* Raquel, he is also Esteban. It is just that Esteban reflects one of the “different ‘I’s” of the author much more explicitly in the text than Raquel does. Esteban has more forms available to him for the writing cure: epistolary correspondence, conversation, diary entries, and his poetry, which he consistently maintains is cathartic.

In the following case the psychological benefits Esteban draws from writing in his diary overlap with those of narrating a trauma in conversation. Not surprisingly for Esteban, a woman was at the center of the trouble. The young temptress and tease Marta was the only woman whom Esteban had

wanted to seduce but could not. He showered gifts on her, but in return she played only the allusive coquette, bathing naked in his pool with her friends under his nose, flirting with others, and making a fool of him for a year's time. He was only capable of ending things with her when he caught her in the act of cheating on him at his own house with his guest Boris, the teen-age son of Claudia, Raquel's sister and Esteban's dear friend who had been privy to his unrequited yearnings for Marta.

It is in his diary that he is able to write: "Now I feel clean, washed clean of Marta. I broke from her and my current repose is so exquisite that I don't feel my pride battered" (457). Further: "Recalling that day, what I am most thankful for is that my discovery had occurred in the middle of a telephone call with Claudia. To be able to tell the whole tale as it was occurring in the full flush of its absurdity was the best exorcism" (458). This is the double catharsis for Esteban: to write about having told his friend (Boris' mother, no less, who, thankfully for both, was very progressive and had a sordid sense of humor) of a traumatic event while it was happening. Notice that his claims that he is cleansed of her occurs not in the transcription of his conversation with Claudia, which is on the previous page, but rather in the introspective lines that follow it. That is, he never said to Claudia that telling her about it was the best exorcism. He realized that only as he was "recalling that day" as he sat down to write about it in his diary. His recovery required both a witness to hear the tale and the act of writing it out.

It is testament to the importance of writing in Esteban's life that, recollecting again Marta's influence in a diary entry almost a year later, Esteban condemns her more for interfering with his writing than for betraying him sexually. She was the cause of "the longest and stupidest frustration of my life; guilty of even repressing my capacity to write. At least she is some use to me for that reason, as a scape-goat" (512). Any number of useful lessons could reasonably be drawn from the fiasco of his experience with the siren Marta, such as the dangers of obsessive love, or the folly of pursuing a younger mate who plays at lust to get at money. But the fact that Esteban in the end values her only for

her use to him as a scape-goat for his inability to write highlights how important writing is to him.

Finally, in some cases reading, or the act of corresponding with a sympathetic friend, is almost as good for him as writing in his diary or composing poetry. “My partner” is his address to a letter in response to Claudia’s letter calling him “My beloved partner” (544): “My partner: Today I received your letter and it turned my day around” (545). In her letter she had begged him to send her some of his poems that brought her so much enjoyment. Written poems from Esteban, those that had a destination other than his diary, were a rarity. The only ones left to her were those committed to memory during his last visit. Here he responds with a letter filled with eight of his most joyful and playful poems, designed to cheer up a reader whom he knew understood him, appreciated his poetry, and drew solace from its meaning.

But these poems were quite different from his earlier, darker poems. These later poems were from an Esteban who had come to terms with his troubles. I will cover them at the end of this section. For now I will cover all of his poetry, starting with beginning and tracing the development, from trauma to recovery.

The first poem in the book is a fragment, the first canto of his longer work, *Nocturno*, transcribed in his diary. The title and theme is an allusion to the collection *Nocturno* (1908) of Colombian Modernist poet José Asunción Silva (1865-1896), but the imagery, tone, and mood is much darker. In Silva’s poem, the images of shadows, night, and darkness convey a sense of sadness and melancholy. But the night’s darkness is mitigated by a ray of light from the sun or the moon, such as in “Nocturno,” “Nocturno III,” and “Notas Perdidas.” For instance, here are some lines from the first stanza of Silva’s “Notas Perdidas”: “vague rays of moonlight / and the indistinct glare / of a veiled lamp / illuminate the chamber” (3-6, my translation). The poem takes place at midnight, but the darkness is pierced through by rays of light. These rays run throughout all the poems in Silva’s

collection. The darkness is not all-encompassing.

By contrast, in Esteban's first fragment and in many subsequent poems as well, the darkness is deeper and more impenetrable, almost to the point of a complete inversion of how they work in Silva's poems. For instance, the first line of the first canto of Esteban's *Nocturno* is: "Drowned is the sun, between colors it sinks / taking with it the precise contour of things" (1-2). Later, "The day remains behind night's black wall: / sometimes a crack lets in a ray that allows one to see the light / of three o'clock in the afternoon in the storeroom" (5-7). And, "It is said that the night lives at the base of the / seas. Night is liquid" (11-12), a "swamp leveled by shadows" (16). Whereas in Silva's poems the night, even at its darkest hour, is illuminated by full moons and rays of light, in Esteban's poem, by contrast, the only light that penetrates the wall of darkness is a thin ray of the three o'clock sun, which is in many places the brightest part of the day – if there is not light at three o'clock, then there is not going to be light. Esteban's poem can thus be read as a response to and partial inversion of Silva's poem. Both Esteban's and Silva's poems are paeans to the night but circumspect of the sadness it brings. But the night in Esteban's poem is much more pervasive: "the night is humidity, human sweat, lust's saliva / semen, spirit recycling oxygen" (89).

Esteban's second poem in the *Cartas cruzadas* is a continuation of his *Nocturno* that he wrote while mourning his father's death: "Poetry has helped console me these last days," he writes in his diary (127). This poem builds on a comparison between silence and darkness, in which "there is no power distinct from / the self-same darkness / The shadow is an ink that composes destinies" (127). The night here again is pervasive of the day and of destiny, powerful and ever-present: "Each night is a piece of one night, / a night without end, a cylinder that turns eternally" (127).

In the third poem it becomes more explicit that pervasive night and darkness, in addition to representing sadness and depression, are metaphors for both drugs and avarice seeping into the society:

“night delivers the dose of darkness that matter / needs for itself to be matter” (199). Night here is represented as an essential part of matter and being, but for all that it is malevolent, described as “the conscience of the criminal, soul of the usurer [...] / domain of the same black / character of the witch” (199). The drug metaphor becomes explicit in the last line: “Morphine is night that you inject and slumber / is that night that reigns in your body” (199). Esteban even sustains the metaphor into his prose, as he refers to this letter that contains the poem as an “overdose of a letter” sent to Claudia (199).

In the next poem, night, there associated also with madness, invades the day again: “There are pieces of the night / that slip into the day / like lovers do / when they close the curtain” (271). In the rest of the poem the “pieces of night” work their way into trees, empty houses, forests, rivers, the rain and lovers’ voices. Night permeates everything.

Despite that Esteban mentions a number of times that he derives solace from the act of writing the poems, the imagery and tone is very dark in these first poems. And there is nothing in the poems themselves to indicate that they have a cathartic or cleansing effect on the speaker. But this starts to change in the later poems, and the change coincides with Esteban's maturation and attainment of tranquility.

The next poem, included in a letter to Luis, is a written copy of the poem he wrote while getting over the collapse of a tumultuous relationship with Carlota – the closest thing to the experience of romantic love that Esteban had had in his life. Esteban had read it aloud to his friends while visiting them in New York, a trip he made in search of consolation for his loss. It opens, as can be expected at this stage, with darkness: “The day is not light, / it is transparent darkness that dresses itself in black / as time goes on” (333). That the speaker is preoccupied with trying to overcome a painful experience is evident when the poem turns to the theme of forgetting: “Oblivion is not something that one erases from one’s memory, / oblivion occupies you all the time, when you are at work / or in the bathroom,



when you dine or play you don't forget / about forgetting" (333). The speaker expresses an acute need for catharsis: "I have to purify myself of you, kill myself off from you, to shed / the skin that you caressed. / I have to kill off that part of you in me so that I can become something / other than a mere remnant of the past" (334). A few lines later the speaker claims partial success what he set out to do: "I expel you from myself, I exorcise you, I call to you every / second that you depart form my soul, that your spirit does not quash me" (334).

In contrast to the previous poems, this poem marks a shift to an explicit attempt at catharsis within the content of the poem itself. Again, Esteban had always claimed that the act of writing the poetry was itself cathartic, despite the pessimistic tone of the poems themselves. But in this poem there is an invocation, recalling a Catholic exorcism ceremony, of an expulsion of the painful memory from the speaker's psyche. And there is an expressed intent that the writing or recitation of the poem itself would bring that exorcism about: "I have to purify myself of you," is followed a few lines later by the invocation, "I exorcise you" (334). With the writing of the poem, as well as the reading of it aloud to a sympathetic public, Esteban avails himself of two forms of trauma therapy that Shay holds as effective: writing and performing.

The final three poems in *Cartas cruzadas* are of an entirely different hue. These are written by an Esteban who has come to terms with his losses, whether they are romantic failures or the disappearance of his best friend, or both. In contrast to all the previous poems in the book, the most conspicuous aspect of them is the absence of any imagery of night, darkness, sadness or loss. Rather, in these poems the speaker talks of pleasure, music, playfulness, happiness, and thirst for being. More significantly, the form of these poems matches the content: that is, the vocabulary and syntax is playful and exuberant; the poems are fine examples of the kind of exercise that Jaramillo Agudelo has written elsewhere had given him the greatest pleasure (*Historia* 83). The poems are celebrations not only of

catharsis, but of the sheer joyful sound and texture of words. These two aspects of Esteban's poetry, catharsis and the joy of language, come together well in his last poem, "Uno et Pluribus" - "For One and Many." Since I cannot rival Jaramillo Agudelo in poetic skill, I will transcribe the poem in its original Spanish before translating it to English, which I cannot bend to convey the rhythm and rhyme that he orchestrates with the Spanish words: "El brindis / con el énfasis / en el analisis / de la catarsis / del virus / de la crisis: / luego el éxtasis. / Los brindises / con los énfasis / en los análisis / y las catársises / de los virus / de las crisis: luego los éxtasis" (547) – my translation – "The tribute / with the emphasis / in the analysis / of the catharsis / of the virus / of the crisis: / then the ecstasy. / The tributes / with the emphasises / in the analyses / and the catharses / of the viruses / of the crises: then the ecstasies" (547).

While this poem doesn't rival the previous three final poems in terms of a nimble display of wordplay virtuosity (not compared, for instance, to this first line of another poem in the final letter: "Sumo y asumo los sumos zumos y sus humos" (545)) I choose it because it combines the sheer joy of language with elements of trauma therapy. For the words that Esteban plays with are taken from psychoanalysis: analysis, catharsis, crisis, and finally tribute and ecstasy. But the process of healing cannot be accomplished alone, as we have learned from Shay, Herman, and others. So in the second stanza Esteban has simply written the plural forms of the nouns, moving the poem from one to many, like the title. The poem itself is presented inside of another text, a letter, one that constitutes a conversation. Further, it is the continuation of a discourse of poetry that Esteban conducts with his friends while they are together. Esteban send Claudia this poem in reply to one of her letters in which she wrote that she missed both him and his poetry terribly.

More significantly to the literary critic as opposed to the psychoanalyst, if the poem signifies a triumphant overcoming of trauma through analysis, catharsis, and artistic expression, first alone and

then with others, the very act of reading the poem aloud emphasizes the extent to which the form underlines the content. In the first place, it can't be read aloud without eliciting a giggle because of the too-simple rhyme between the words and inexorable rhythm. The repetition in the second stanza of the exact same words but made plural emphasizes the need for others that is made explicit in the title. The sense is triumphant as well. A "brindis" is a congratulatory toast, a salutation or tribute given in a public setting. There is ecstasy and catharsis. The sound is triumphant too. When read aloud, the sound that is repeated most often in the poem, although it is hidden inside the other words and thus may not be detected at first look, is "sí," which is of course Spanish for "yes." The sound is repeated twelve times in a poem of fourteen lines. It is doubled in the enunciation of lines 3 and 4 ("analysis / y"), because one says "sí" in the middle of the word "analysis" as well as the sound between the end of "analysis" and the "y" conjunction, which means "and"; but despite the literal meaning, the sound that comes out of the reader's mouth is "analy-sí-sí." One more "sí" is added to the same word in the next stanza because of the plural. On reading this poem aloud one finds oneself making almost as many affirmations as Molly Bloom does at the end of James Joyce's *Ulysses*: yes, yes, yes, yes!

Esteban's poems, the writing of which is always a solace to him, move from darkness and sadness to triumph, from private to public and from trauma to recovery. His first two poems are included in his diary for his own private consumption. The next one is included in a letter to Luis, and the final poems are included in letters to Claudia. In a move that takes them outside *Cartas cruzadas*, Jaramillo Agudelo published all of Esteban's poems as a sub-set of his collection of poetry, *Libros de poemas* in 2003. Esteban lives on and reaches out to a wider audience.

## 5. Conclusion

“The true space of the epistolary novel is the human soul” is part of the Kurt Spang quote with which I opened this chapter (652). All the other “palpable and material realities are secondary” (652). Such is Darío Jaramillo Agudelo’s skill that he makes those realities seem primary to highlight the injuries to the human bodies and souls of those hurt by mere association with narco-trafficking, those who are usually relegated to the sidelines of a discourse on narco-trafficking in Colombia that is dominated by books about drug dealers and sicarios.<sup>60</sup> As Polit observes, Jaramillo Agudelo does indeed set out to give another “face” to the effects of narco violence in Colombia. But while she and other critics see Jaramillo Agudelo reflected mainly in the faces of Luis and Esteban, I see him reflected as well in the face of Raquel.

What is hidden in plain sight is sometimes well hidden. Jaramillo Agudelo alludes to Poe to teach us this lesson. But his exploitation of this human tendency in his writing is far more profound than merely revealing in the plot that the reader and the other characters had been searching for a MacGuffin. That is of course the case, but there is a great deal more at stake. Luis’ little sister, the house-wife Cecilia, turns out to be running the whole operation; Luis’ absconds with a document, a letter, that contains some kind of damning information to the narcos, but we never find out what it says; Luis himself seems to be at the center of the plot, but he fades away. They are all distractions. Perhaps distractions that more easily dupe a reader who is accustomed to texts written by virile masculine protagonists, fighting the dictator's power with their pen, but trading women as currency in a system that, while it might be politically progressive in revolution, is still patriarchal conservative in terms of

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60 It is telling that *Cartas cruzadas* never approached the volume of sales that books with drugs, sex and violence at the center of the content. Fernando Vallejo's *Our Lady of the Assassins*, Jorge Franco's *Rosario Tijeras*, and Alonzo Salazar's *No Nacimos Pa' Semilla* all looked at the life of the drug dealer and assassin head-on, in all of its salacious detail. By contrast, *Cartas cruzadas* is an introspective novel telling the story of those upper middle class people who are injured as well by the narco violence, but whose stories don't dominate the discourse. And the book about them was dwarfed in sales by the others books mentioned above. Theirs is the story that is hidden in plain site.

gender equality. But regardless of why the reader is distracted, what is at the center is the scene of writing and its therapeutic power to mitigate the psychological trauma of a tragic situation.

For all his insight into the nature of money, desire, faith and blindness, Jacques Lacan himself is shown to be blind to many narrative frame levels in the very story he chooses to best illustrate his theories. Derrida points this out in an insightful essay that illuminates Poe's text, just as the same method illuminates Jaramillo Agudelo's text had. The centrality of Raquel's letter is what I highlight, simply because I noticed that other perspicacious readers had been led astray from it by Jaramillo Agudelo's artistry. But what Derrida helps us focus on is the scene of writing itself, whether it be the scene of Raquel's writing, Esteban's writing, or that of some other character. Further, Derrida shows us that the Poe story is an endless chain of allusions to other literary sources; stories within stories ad infinitum. Attention is always drawn back to the writing, to the literature.

So it is in *Cartas cruzadas*. Following Derrida, I take into account many of the other texts that are in conversation with it to show the importance of literature to Jaramillo Agudelo, specifically the importance of composing literature as a catharsis – this theme runs through his poetry and prose. The other prominent theme is the importance of love. The character who betrays these themes in *Cartas cruzadas*, Luis, gets what he deserves, and the characters who represent faith to these themes are in part redeemed. Esteban and Raquel are profoundly injured by their association with narcotraffickers, but their writing is partial therapy for their psychological trauma. This therapy is what the story is “about” just as much as it is “about” the plot of Luis' ruin through his involvement with narcos.

But recovery and redemption does not imply return to a state of happiness and innocence prior to the injury. Jaramillo Agudelo's realist eye will not tie up the loose ends so neatly. Even Raquel's recovery, so strongly proclaimed in her discourse, is problematized by her own logic. For as she writes to Juana: “I write this letter to affirm, by way of testimony, as catharsis, that it is possible for me to

exist on my own. That I exist without Luis” (359). But she has stated earlier, at the very beginning of the letter, that she may not decide to send it. Therefore, if her new identity construction is to be done “by way of testimony,” then there will have to be a reader to constitute the event; otherwise it cannot be considered testimony. Her very own language shows her claim to be precarious. The text deconstructs itself, to borrow a phrase from Paul de Man, Derrida's colleague. Lacan claims that a letter always arrives at its destination. But Derrida demonstrates that this is not always the case – not even, most significantly, in the very story that Lacan chooses as exemplary of his theory (191). And the very tension generated by the fear of the letter *not* arriving drives the story. In *Cartas cruzadas* we are left with the Raquel in indecision as to the destination of her letter, the one purloined, and therefore her recovery and, as she herself asserts, her very identity.

Nothing turns out to be what it seems. Paradoxically, Luis, who seemed to be the protagonist of a tragedy, might turn out to be the one in the best position in the decaying world Jaramillo Agudelo paints. For the title of the collection of poetry that Esteban could never seem to complete is *El Azar de no ser*, which translates literally, and clumsily, as *The Fortune of non-Being*. The figurative sense of this is a kind of Buddhist notion of transcending the materiality of the world. But literally it refers directly to Luis – he has the “luck” of “not being” there. He has escaped. If he does exist, if he has being, then he exists in the letters of his former lover and friends. He exists as literature – such is his fortune to thus transcend the palpable realities of a world made sick by desire, greed, obsession and unchecked volumes of money injected by narco-trafficking. The code name he chooses for himself in making his last calls to Esteban is Félix Rubén García Sarmiento, which is Rubén Darío's given name. And these very words are the last that Esteban will write in *Cartas cruzadas* in referring to Luis: “Each time the phone rings, I hope to hear the voice of my brother identifying himself with the given name of Rubén Darío: Félix Rubén García” (580). So perhaps Luis is the lucky one, if there is any luck left to

distribute in the bleak world that Jaramillo Agudelo creates.

And if Luis exists as literature, he owes his existence to the indispensable intradiegetic, homodiegetic narrator whose story told at the scene of writing Derrida teaches us to grant its rightful place in the story. In the end, it is Raquel who holds the material that moves the plot – the money. Millions and millions. And it is her letter, should she decide to send it, that will constitute Luis' identity and existence. But we will never know what she will decide to do. Jaramillo Agudelo refuses to resolve the tension. Far from it. He has held the resolution in suspension since the beginning of her letter, once again placing it at the center of dramatic tension of his tale. A letter doesn't always arrive at its destination.

## Chapter Five: *El ruido de las cosas al caer* ‘*The Sound of Things Falling*’

### 1. Introduction

Juan Gabriel Vásquez’ *El ruido de las cosas al caer* ‘*The Sound of Things Falling*’ (2011) is a novel that on the surface purports to delve into the roots of narco-trafficking in Colombia, and, like *Cartas cruzadas*, tells the story of a cultural trauma through the experiences and recollection of a few individuals. Like *Cartas cruzadas*, it is a detective story, the report by one individual on his investigations into a traumatic past. But unlike the epistolary *Cartas cruzadas*, *The Sound of Things Falling*’s narrative form is for the most part one of first-person retrospection containing multiple frame narratives within it. While Vásquez’ more conventional style of narration might not allow for the penetrating windows into the souls of his characters that Jaramillo offered with his letters, it does allow Vásquez to illuminate other causes of trauma, all of which are in line with what he claims is his obsession as a writer – to show the private side of a public trauma: “I started remembering what it was like to live with this constant fear,” he explains as much in a recent interview discussing what inspired him to start on the novel: “I started thinking about those years [the violent late eighties-early nineties], I started remembering those years as I had never remembered them before. I realized that the novel was about the emotional or moral side of something we already knew quite well in its public side”



(Schonfeld).

If the novel aimed merely at shedding light on the origins on narco-trafficking in Colombia, it would fall far short of its goal. Other than mentioning in passing the role that internal Colombian organizations played as actors of the violence (state, army, *frente*, etc...), he underplays the Colombian paramilitary and governmental role in the social injustices and overplays meddling of the United States imperialism, from the soft influence of the Peace Corps to the hard influence of the DEA and War on Drugs policy. But this is not Vásquez' intended subject matter. And as Henry James observed: "one must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donnée*: our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it" ("The Art of Fiction" 753). In the case of this novel, Vásquez' *donnée* is individual psychological trauma and recovery.

Vásquez' novel does not require any particular mental gymnastics on the part of the critic to arrive at the claim that PTSD is a key theme: his protagonist's psychiatrist diagnoses him with it. In fact, the first section of this chapter is an analysis of his PTSD symptoms and some of their causes. But that is not the reason I chose this book as a subject for my final chapter of this project. I chose this novel because it brings to light precisely the same causes of PTSD that circumvent the trauma paradigm in the *DSM* that the American Psychological Association adheres to, tracing back to Freud, that Luckhurst, Leys, Young and others criticize. Vásquez' novel helps me demonstrate that Shay's model is the one that is in fact robust enough to account for the additional trauma-inducing elements that I have identified above: most particularly, that the cultural or environmental atmosphere, such as the cumulative effects of small traumas like the constant exposure to danger from ubiquitous violence and the information overload of traumatic violence through news outlets, can cause PTSD symptoms that are just as debilitating as those that stem from a direct experience to trauma, such as a gunshot wound. Overall, the book is about the effects of public and collective trauma on private lives, and its

implication is that these effects are just as traumatizing as direct violence. If *Cartas cruzadas* helps Darío Jaramillo Agudelo articulate and account for a personal trauma that befell him, then *The Sound of Things Falling* can help all Colombians of Vásquez' generation understand and account for the trauma that affects them, even if they had not overtly been touched by Colombia's violence.

To analyze the ways that Vásquez goes about achieving this end, I turn to Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory and Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory. Hirsch defines her idea of postmemory in part as an "intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, linked specifically to cultural or collective trauma" ("Surviving Images" 10); it is also "the response of the second generation to the trauma of the first" ("Surviving Images" 8). In trying to make sense of their own tragedies, Vásquez' characters' investigations all lead them back many generations, and the implication in the novel is that the traces of these wounds in the collective consciousness are not easily erased; they remain to haunt the psyches of subsequent generations.

In addition to Hirsch's concept of postmemory, I turn to the idea of prosthetic memory, which is defined by Alison Landsberg as a phenomenon that "emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past" at sites such as the "cinema, television and experiential museums" (14). In making contact with the media content, "an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history" (2). What is interesting in Vásquez, especially because it departs from Landsberg's idea of prosthetic memory as a salubrious method of coping with cultural trauma through cinema or museums, is the way that the novel represents prosthetic memory as traumatizing and damaging the characters: I will thus refer to how it works in Vásquez as prosthetic trauma.

Such an idea is not new, at least when it comes to Shay's model. He argues in both *Achilles* (1994) and *Odysseus* (2002) of the deleterious effects on the psyche of inundation of information of

danger and ubiquitous violence. In a section below, in consequence, I will analyze how Vásquez shows in the text that the causes of his protagonist Yammara's PTSD owes as much to prosthetically sutured memories as they do to his own traumatic experiences – and he certainly has claim to trauma from direct experience, given that he was shot and almost died. But as his psychiatrist tells him, and as the text itself demonstrates, his PTSD symptoms after the gunshot owe more to the violent past he lived through as a teen-ager, the constant threat of violence to which he and all urban dwellers were subject at the time and the inundation the information of trauma through news outlets, than it has to do with the physical difficulties recovering from the gunshot wound. The trauma paradigm espoused by the APA, which I and many others see as reductive, looks to find the one violent event that caused the trauma – the etiological event. Shay's model, on the other hand, while not denying that PTSD can emerge from one single event, argues in addition that trauma can come from the accumulated psychological injuries that an individual sustains over time, being constantly exposed to violence or danger, repeatedly experiencing moral outrage and disillusion at the abuse of power and authority, and being subject repeatedly to injustice and arbitrary punishment (*Achilles* 1994). Vásquez' text is exemplary in representing one aspect of these accumulated psychological injuries: constant exposure to violence or danger through media inundation, or what I call here prosthetic trauma.

Finally, Vásquez shows in his novel a possible road to recovery, a road that, remarkably, runs parallel to that road that Shay recommends for his trauma patients. I dedicate the final chapter of the book to my analysis of this. It involves reasserting authority over one's memory, an authority that PTSD challenges because of its persistent, intrusive memories and disruption of self, by reconstructing the story of one's own past and retelling it to not only oneself but to a sympathetic listener, a witness to the testimony. Paralleling Odysseus' own physical and psychological restorative sojourn with the Phaeacians in Books seven through Thirteen of Homer's *Odyssey*, Yammara makes a journey of his

own that allows him to heal mind and body. Yammara's mind is healed by his reconstructing not only his own story, but the story of the character Ricardo Laverde, whom I will demonstrate is a doppelgänger for Yammara himself, so that Yammara telling the story of Laverde is an analogue to the Odysseus at the Phaeacians court telling the fantastic story of Odysseus the wanderer in Books Nine through Twelve. Both Yammara's and Odysseus' stories are a complex mix of fact and fiction, but the psychological benefit they offer the teller, and this is the key to both regardless of how much of them is fact and how much is fiction, is the opportunity to refashion the Self, to reassert authority over one's memories and therefore one's sense of Self – to treat, if not heal, the PTSD symptoms.

Throughout this process, one that, following Shay, I call the narrativization of the Self, Yammara makes use of some literary devices that both call attention to the literariness of the work as a whole as well as highlight certain themes that are predominant in the text – postmemory, prosthetic trauma, and narrative therapy. The device can straightforwardly be called a metonymical connection. Here I must be careful to say that I am using the term “metonymical” in the way that Russian formalist and linguist Roman Jakobson used it, not as a mere rhetorical device related to synecdoche in which a part stands for a whole or a whole stands for the part, but rather as a trope that works along a perpendicular axis to that of metaphor: metonymy associates by contiguity; metaphor associates by equivalence (Jakobson 1153-1156). I see the linking device, the metonymical connection, as an organizing structure for the entire discourse, a master trope, so that things are connected either by contiguity, when things that are unrelated are connected because of juxtaposition in the discourse, or by association, as when all the traumatic events in the story are connected by the strange silence that the victim perceives as the event is occurring. He uses the device in a number of instances, all of which tie together in complex nodes key elements in the plot as well as the key themes. I touch on this term throughout the chapter, but focus more intensely on it in this last section. I mention it now clearly to

define how I will be using the term.

### **Introducing *The Sound of Things Falling***

*The Sound of Things Falling* 'El ruido de las cosas al caer' (2011)<sup>61</sup> is a novel narrated in first-person retrospection by the protagonist Antonio Yammara, who while sitting in his Bogotá apartment in 2009 is driven to recount the story of a traumatic experience that happened to him in 1986 and his subsequent struggle to overcome the posttraumatic symptoms he suffered. The event that inspired Yammara to tell the story was the news story, transmitted over every media outlet in Colombia, of the capture and killing of a hippopotamus that had escaped a couple of years prior from the former exotic menagerie of drug kingpin Pablo Escobar, who died at the hands of Colombian authorities in 1993. For many Colombians who lived through the violent years of the mid-nineteen eighties, when Escobar's personal war against the state led to collateral damage of the civilian population due to such dangers as bombs placed in public places and stray gun shots from chaotic urban warfare, the story of the hippo's death was a symbol of the end of a terrible era, a collective memory for many that served as a collective catharsis to the worst years.<sup>62</sup> It seems to be so for Yammara, or at the very least it is a catalyst for his narrative, which after only a couple pages jumps back to the events in 1996 and stays in that narrative frame until the end of the novel.

Yammara's trouble in 1996 starts when he befriends a mysterious character named Ricardo Laverde, a small aircraft pilot recently released from nineteen-year prison sentence served for, as

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- 61 Awarded with the Alfaguara novel prize in 2011, the English translation by Anne Mclean was released in 2013 by Riverhead books. When I wrote this section I was working from the Spanish original, and all translations are my own.
- 62 When Maria Helena Rueda, a Colombian literary critic and violentologo (one who has made a study of *La violencia*, the period of civil war and violent social unrest in Colombia from the late 1940s to the early 1960s), spoke to my class about the book in the spring of 2012, she opened her talk with media images of the killed hippo. She wanted to convey a sense of the extensive influence the media portrayals had on the Colombians who had lived through those violent years. The hippos were both a symbol for Pablo Escobar, who was the most notorious of the narcos and the chief reason for the violence against the state starting in the mid-nineteen-eighties, and a symbol for the innocents who were subject to the violence by their mere presence in the brutality of that time.

Yammara finds out later, involvement in narco-trafficking. While walking with Yammara, Laverde is shot and killed by a motorcycle-mounted assassin, and Yammara is wounded by the bullet that passes through Laverde. After a protracted convalescence Yammara recovers physically, but he continues to be plagued by symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD): he is rendered sexually impotent, fears the dark and the night, can't sleep because his mind starts to race with visions of Laverde's assassins and a fear that they will kill him, jumps and starts at loud noises, and cries often and without rational provocation. He becomes obsessed with thoroughly investigating Laverde and the events surrounding the assassination out of a conviction that a more complete knowledge of these things will be psychologically therapeutic. He becomes, as it were, a detective of his own past.

His investigations lead him to Laverde's estranged daughter Maya, who is in the middle of her own genealogical research project, as she has recently learned of her mother Elaine's deception, carried out to protect Maya from the mortification of having a father in prison for drug trafficking, that her father Ricardo had died when Maya was just a child. On his release from prison almost two decades later, Ricardo Laverde had urged Elaine to arrange a family meeting, which may have led to a reconciliation, but it was thwarted when Elaine died in a plane crash. Through piecing together the story by combining details that each were privy to, Yammara and Maya learn that the only reason Laverde re-entered the drug trade was to make enough money to bribe the Colombian aviation officials to give him a copy of the "black box" from the airplane his wife Elaine was on when it crashed, so desperate was he to obtain some trace of his beloved wife and daughter whom he continued to love. Laverde somehow ran far enough afoul of his new associates that they ordered his assassination, but, significantly in terms of both plot and theme, the details of Laverde's last job, exactly how and where things went wrong, are never revealed.

Maya, deprived of a father, and Yammara, deprived of his manhood (his impotence is

psychological and not physical, even though its onset came immediately after the gunshot wound) and almost his life, are both convinced that reconstructing Laverde's biography will help them come to terms with the trauma that left them both psychologically injured. Through materials such as newspaper clippings, interviews, personal recordings, correspondence, and memories of first-person testimony, Maya and Yammara reconstruct the history of her family, which can be read as an allegory for the history of the drug trade in Colombia. Yammara presents their reconstructed version of her family's story, "according as I have reconstructed it and according as it lives in my memory" (138), as a story within the larger frame of his narrative discourse of his own investigations. It started in 1969, and the highlights are as follows.

Maya's mother Elaine met her father because Laverde's family, in need of money, sub-let a room in their house to her while she was on a Peace Corps assignment. The presence of the Peace Corps in the early 1970s in Colombia is widely believed to be the origins of the current drug trade between Colombia and the United States.<sup>63</sup> It started with hippies cultivating marijuana for private use and then grew to an international trade because of the distribution channels opened by the Peace Corps volunteers – their co-presence in both countries, the network that they stretched out to all socio-economic levels of American society, and the legitimacy provided by government sanction of their primary mission, kick-started the drug trade between the two countries. The young Ricardo Laverde, a talented small aircraft pilot with ambitions to bring his family out of poverty, begins to work with some of Elaine's colleagues, and his involvement in the drug trade grows significantly from there.

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63 For some literary accounts of the history of the drug trade in Colombia, see, in addition to Darío Jaramillo Agudelo's *Cartas cruzadas* (1995) and Juan Gabriel Vásquez' *The Sound of Things Falling* (2011), Laura Restrepo's *Leopardo al sol* (2005). Despite that these works are novels, are all in a tradition of Latin American literature that writes to make sense of the trauma of the past. Their plot structures are a modification of the historical fictional novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, with imaginary characters superimposed over historical events. For some historical accounts, Paul Gootenberg's edited *Cocaine: Global Histories* (1999) and authored *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug* (2008) are well-researched accounts of the drug's history. For an account more oriented toward the deleterious social influence of the drug trade, see Alonso Salazar's *Drogas y narcotráfico en Colombia* (2001) and his earlier, extremely influential book based on interviews with sicarios *No nacimos pa' semilla* (1990).

Laverde became a pilot against the wishes of his father, whose face was burned severely while he was still a teenager in 1938 at an airshow when a daredevil pilot, a close friend of Laverde's grandfather who was himself a war hero and pilot, tried to catch the national flag in his hands as he passed but then crashed into the spectator stands.<sup>64</sup> The plane exploded, killing many Colombian dignitaries, all of whom were friends of Laverde's grandfather. Although the grandfather survived, his fame as a war-hero and pilot was not enough to help his career and sustain his fortunes. The shame of a fall in social standing and in fortune was exacerbated by his son Julio, Ricardo Laverde's father, who eschewed a martial career, especially one in aviation, and became an actuary, a person whose professional career centers around using risk models to estimate life insurance rates – in effect, he is a predictor of death. In fact, the first conversation with him that Elaine can recall centered on life insurance probabilities and statistics (147). When Ricardo Laverde expressed interest in flying, his grandfather encouraged it despite his father's disapproval. The grandfather saw a career in aviation as a way to recapture the past glory of the Laverde family name and fortune, tarnished by both his failures and his disappointing son's life choices.

Far from recapturing the glory of the Laverde name, however, Ricardo tarnished it even more by using his pilot skills for drug smuggling. That risk that landed him in jail for twenty years when he was snared in a DEA sting, leaving behind Elaine to raise their young daughter Maya on the land where Maya still lives, bought with drug money Ricardo made before he was caught. The Ricardo/Elaine story ends with Ricardo's incarceration, and the narrative frame expands back out again to the story of Yammara and Maya, whose quest for information brings them together both spiritually and physically. To satisfy a mutual curiosity, they journey together to revisit Hacienda Nápoles, the site that had been

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64 The plane crash in the novel is based on the historical crash during a military airshow in 1938 at Campo de Marte, Santa Ana, Usaquén, Colombia, in which the pilot crashed when trying to thread his plane through the space between two grandstands. 75 people were killed and over 100 wounded (Time).



Pablo Escobar's private exotic menagerie and playground for his family turned national park. Coincidentally, Yammara and Maya had both, on the same day but separately, visited this place as teenagers against the wishes of their parents. Later, as adults, they believe that a journey together back to this site, emblematic of the violence of their youth and the events that derailed their lives, will be somehow redemptive. Their co-presence there before solidifies their value to each other as an empathetic listener and witness to the other's trauma.

The text shows that the journey, investigation, and retelling were to some degree redemptive for Yammara, who in the first pages of the book before his narrating these past events claims that he has “overcome” his “sufferings” (14); there is less evidence that the journey and investigation were therapeutic for Maya, who, in classic Freudian repetition-compulsion of a traumatic event, at the end of the story remains in her mountain retreat obsessing over listening to the black box recording of her mother's plane crash. Yammara, on the other hand, attempts a return to his wife and young daughter in Bogotá to repair a relationship that was severely strained due to his acute PTSD symptoms that lasted three years following the gunshot wound. The novel doesn't reduce itself to making a tidy resolution of these problems with Yammara's homecoming; far from it – he returns to an answering machine message from his wife Aura explaining that she has abandoned him, taking their daughter with her. Yet still there is a strong suggestion that there will be some sort of reconciliation, and of course an explicit claim from Yammara himself at the beginning of the book that after many years he will have overcome these troubles (14).

## **2. PTSD Symptoms and Causes**

That the PTSD symptoms come before the PTSD causes in this section's title is not an error, although it at first glance it may seem like I have put the cart before the horse. But Yammara's case of

PTSD is complex and has multiple causes, some of which occurred many years before he was shot – his situation is more complicated than traditional accounts would have us believe.

In the subsections that follow, I will outline the PTSD symptoms that immediately follow that gunshot wound. Vásquez lays these out almost in complete correlation with the *DSM-5*'s criteria for PTSD, for which Yammara is diagnosed by a therapist (58). As in most PTSD cases, Yammara's symptoms persist months and years following the gunshot wound, long after his physical injuries have healed. As the story develops, Yammara becomes aware that his persistent PTSD symptoms have more to do with the traumatic experience he passed through while living through a constant threat of exposure to violence as a teenager in Bogotá during the nineteen-eighties, the years that Escobar had declared an open unconventional war against the government. This previous trauma that he lived through primed him and conditioned him to suffer exacerbated PTSD symptoms to any future traumatic event; in the terms of Shay and Herman, living through the trauma of the eighties primed him to develop complex-PTSD from a subsequent trauma which might have caused only simple PTSD in another person under normal circumstances. Shay simplifies complex-PTSD to "simple-PTSD *plus the destruction of the capacity for social trust*" (*Odysseus* 4), which is a good working definition. Herman characterizes it more in terms of chronic trauma experienced by victims of repeated child abuse or prisoners of war. In both *Achilles in Vietnam* (1994) and *Odysseus in America* (2002), Shay explains that soldiers who in prolonged campaigns are exposed for long periods to violence and threats of violence often develop complex-PTSD from simple-PTSD following a subsequent traumatic event.

This is exactly the case with Yammara in *The Sound of Things Falling*. His life as a young man in Bogotá in the nineteen-eighties was every bit as traumatic and epistemologically unsettling as the experience of soldiers exposed to prolonged combat, as the examples in his discourse will show. The second part of my section will deal with these examples. I label it "Context of Violence," because I try

to illustrate the multiple ways in which his life was exposed to violence and danger, and the ways in which he perceived that danger. These are the causes of his complex-PTSD, which is why the “causes” section follows the “symptoms” section: the symptoms are for the most part symptoms of simple-PTSD, at least according to the *DSM*; the causes deal with things that make Yammara experience complex-PTSD, for which some of the symptoms are listed in the *DSM*, and some are not.

## 2.1 Symptoms

Vásquez is at pains to catalog all of the symptoms listed in the *DSM* and put them on the shoulders of his protagonist, leaving no room for doubt that Yammara is severely traumatized and suffering from the same acute symptoms that plague victims of PTSD from the extremely violent trauma. The degree to which Yammara’s PTSD symptoms correlate with the *DSM* criteria is so great that this section of the novel might be justifiably criticized as formulaic: it almost seems as if Vásquez simply had taken the *DSM* PTSD criteria chart and superimposed it on his character, changing a few terms here and there so that the symptoms applied to the real history surrounding his character Yammara.<sup>65</sup> However formulaic it may be, though, at this point in the discourse it is important for Vásquez to establish the severity of Yammara’s PTSD symptoms, to make unmistakable that Yammara is traumatized psychologically, so that the exposition of other forms of traumatization, such as postmemory and prosthetic memory through the media, which are what I argue are the major insights of his novel in terms of trauma theory, can fully play out later. As Yammara’s wife Aura says, and the discourse of the novel suggests, the paradox that the PTSD symptoms he suffers from have much more to do with the period of violence that he lived through in the eighties and how it was transmitted to him and perceived by him than they have to do with the gunshot wound he suffered, is one that the tension

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65 Please see my Appendix for the complete copy of the *DSM-5*’s PTSD diagnostic criteria.

of the novel revolves around. “You are suffering from something else entirely” (95), says his wife Aura, and he knows what she means because he heeds his therapist’s words that fear is the “principal infirmity of my generation of Bogotános” (58). He suffers more psychologically from the way he *perceived* the threat of violence in the eighties than from the actual gunshot wound that almost killed him in the nineties.

Since Yammara states explicitly that his therapist diagnosed him with PTSD, it is not surprising that he lists some symptoms that match the *DSM* criteria almost to a word. For instance, Yammara’s “hypervigilance” and “exaggerated startle response” (*DSM-5* PTSD Diagnostic Criteria E3 and E4) show up in his constant “on edge” feeling because he often jumps and starts whenever a door is slammed (59). His “persistent negative emotional state (e.g., fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame)” (*DSM-5* PTSD Diagnostic Criteria D4) shows up in his paranoia for months after the attack he felt like he was being observed every time he walked down the street (57). His “feelings of detachment or estrangement from others” and “Irritable behavior and angry outbursts (with little or no provocation) typically expressed as verbal or physical aggression toward people or objects” (*DSM-5* PTSD Diagnostic Criteria D6 and E1) show up in the many instances the narrative when he is reduced to tears in front of his friends, family (55-60), or students in his class (63) and no one dares either approach him or speak to him to break the uncomfortable silence and tension. In fact, the first thing he does when he regains full consciousness after coming out of his morphine treatment in the hospital is to dismiss his family and friends from his presence; he desires only solitude (55), which again is Criterion D6: “Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others.” Criterion B2 is “recurrent distressing dreams,” E6 is “sleep disturbance,” and both of these Yammara recounts in distressing detail: he is obliged to sleep with the light on because of terrible dreams and for many months only succeeds in sleeping a few hours in each night (56-57). His “violent heart palpitations” and “instantaneous sweats” (58) at

unexpected sounds conform to Criterion B5: “Marked physiological reactions to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).” These physiological symptoms recur even a decade later, even after he has claimed that he has overcome most of his psychological troubles: “Not even now, while I write, can I manage to remember those details without the same chilling fear filling my body” (58).

Criterion D2, “Persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectation about oneself, others, or the world (e.g., “I am bad,” “No one can be trusted,” “The world is completely dangerous”)” show themselves in his unreasonable paranoia about the dangers to Aura and Leticia when they leave the house; he always insists that Aura call him on the phone after arriving to their destination, a habit to which he grew accustomed in the eighties during the Escobar years. Further, he speaks of his desire to bear the pestilence on his shoulders alone, in a misguided attempt to keep Aura and Leticia “pure,” from the bad world that he inhabited and that somehow infected him:

Because to keep Aura and Leticia far away from Las Acacias [Maya’s farm], far away from Maya Fritts and her story and her documents, far therefore from the truth about Ricardo Laverde, was to protect their purity, or better said to avoid their contamination, the contamination that I had suffered one afternoon in 1996, and whose causes I have started to understand just now, whose unforeseen intensity emerges now like a falling object emerges from the sky. (216)

Later, at another important point in the narrative, when he is speaking on the phone to Aura who is confronting him about his posttraumatic symptoms and irrational behavior, Yammara experiences what the *DSM-5* refers to as the dissociative PTSD symptom of “Depersonalization”: “Persistent or recurrent experiences of feeling detached from, and as if one were an outside observer of, one’s mental processes or body.” His hands begin to sweat, and he has the “absurd fear” that he will drop the phone

and cut off the communication at this crucial point in their relationship. She speaks of their past, “and as I listened to her with attention, I swear that I did, no memory of her words formed in my mind. *In my mind’s eye*, as the saying goes. My mind’s eye tried to see Aura before Ricardo Laverde’s death; tried to look at me myself; but it was in vain” (136). In addition to experiencing physiological PTSD symptoms and falling in a dream-like state, in this scene Yammara also perceives that he is dissociated from himself, look at himself from outside himself as if he “were an outside observer of” his “mental processes or body” (*DSM-5* PTSD section). His wording is very precise on this point. It is not *he* who is trying to see Aura; rather it is *his mind’s eye*, whoever or whatever that is, who is trying to see Aura and his old self.

I could go on, but the evidence that I would offer would only be more examples of the type of evidence above. If the reader is not already convinced of my earlier assertion that Yammara’s PTSD symptoms are a formulaic superimposition of the *DSM-5* PTSD criteria over the story, she is not likely to be convinced by more examples of the same. For those who are already convinced, I ask them to stipulate – more examples will mean more evidence for my case, but not better evidence.

In the sub-section below, though, I will focus on one particular PTSD symptom that is crucial to the recent controversy surrounding trauma theory, as well as one of the central themes of the Vásquez’ novel: the nature of traumatic memory. Yammara’s symptoms are in line with two of the sub-categories for *DSM-5* PTSD Criterion D: “Negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred.” Of the seven sub-categories, the two that apply to Yammara’s symptoms are numbers one: “Inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic event(s)” and three: “Persistent, distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that lead the individual to blame himself/herself or others.” To simplify matters, I will put both of them under the banner of “unreliable memory,” on which I will

comment below, after commenting on some of Shay's variations on it.

### 2.1.1 Unreliable Memory

In line with the trauma paradigm models of Herman, the APA, van der Kolk, and Caruth, Shay writes: "Traumatic memory is not narrative. Rather, it is experience that reoccurs, either as full sensory relay of traumatic events in dreams or flashbacks, with all things seen, heard, smelled, and felt intact, or as disconnected fragments. These fragments may be inexplicable rage, terror, uncontrollable crying, or disconnected body states and sensations" (*Achilles* 172). While Leys, Young and others may take issue with the claim that traumatic memory elides narrative, the claim that a traumatic memory is simply recorded somehow differently from a normal memory is perhaps less ambitious, but one with which fewer people might take issue. Further, in the section I quoted above, Shay focuses more on the deleterious effects on consciousness that a traumatic memory can cause subsequently than he does on the memory itself when it is recorded during the event. I reiterate these characterizations of traumatic memory to forestall any criticism of the kind that Leys and Young write that might undermine Shay's views on traumatic memory by impugning Caruth and van der Kolk's work.

Shay's subsequent claim, therefore, that a traumatic memory such as a flashback "explodes the cohesion of consciousness" (173) due to its intrusiveness can be maintained regardless of whether the actual memory can or cannot be put into words. His point was that the victim's subsequent memory and perception of reality are shaken after the traumatic experience in large part because of the nature of the traumatic memory – and this claim is safe enough to maintain even in light of both sides of the vigorous debate over what constitutes the nature of traumatic memory. More importantly, whatever position one takes on that question doesn't undermine the reality of the traumatic symptoms that occur after the event. One of the symptoms that Shay saw in trauma victims was precisely this "explosion of

the cohesion of consciousness” (173) caused by an intrusive flashback that resulted in the victims’ losing faith in their own perception of reality and their own memory. After experiencing posttraumatic symptoms, Yammara’s narrative discourse of his traumatic memories conforms very closely to this model.

As I mentioned above, for my purposes in this section I will characterize this narrative strategy as representing “unreliable memory,” a term suited to literary analysis in that it alludes to the “unreliable narrator” term coined by Wayne Booth (158-159). While it would be going too far to characterize Yammara as an unreliable narrator, he does however acknowledge the unreliability of his own memory when it comes to recalling both traumatic events in his life and those times when he made momentous decisions. Sometimes these moments are better described by the *DSM* PTSD Criterion D 1 and 3, while other times they are better described according to Shay’s terminology of the disruption of the cohesion of consciousness due to the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. Regardless of which sets of criteria one chooses, the *DSM* or Shay, the symptoms clearly meet criteria as traumatic.

For instance, Yamarra’s narration of the most traumatic event that happened to him personally is characterized by unreliable memory. While part of the reason for this is surely Vásquez’ desire for mimesis of a Yammara’s slipping in and out of consciousness while he is hospitalized after the gun wound, this motive doesn’t account for the unreliable memory during the event itself, which is the aspect of traumatic memory that Caruth puts at the fore of her theory (*Unclaimed Experience* 6; *Trauma* 8). I argue that Vásquez renders the etiological event in disjointed and surreal prose precisely to emphasize the different way that it is recorded in the consciousness. The whole passage is constructed by antithetical anaphoras alternating between “I remember this” with “I don’t remember that,” a rhetorical construction that highlights what was not remembered, which in this passage are for the most part the details of the traumatic event. For instance, he says that he knows, although doesn’t



remember, that the bullet crossed his stomach. He does remember the notion of being lucky as that was one of the first “manifestations of my recovered consciousness” (53). He doesn't remember the three days of surgery, nor the hallucinations, but he does remember the claustrophobia, the fever, and the feeling of vulnerability. He remembers doing his screams and that those screams traumatized the other inmates. He remembers asking about Laverde but doesn't remember who told him that Laverde had died. He doesn't think he felt sad at the news (in this comments we are two levels removed from the memory – he claims that he doesn't even know what he felt) (53).

Later, Yammara's narration of the moment when he makes the momentous decision, so difficult for him but so crucial for the plot of the novel, to investigate his past by going back to Laverde's apartment, is also plagued by memory lapses. Here's how Yammara words it: “I think that I decided something at that moment, or at least I felt capable of something, although I don't recall the words that I used to formulate the decision” (70).

These are peculiar equivocations indeed. Yammara can't even say whether or not he decided something, just that he thought that he might have decided something. And he doesn't say that he doesn't exactly remember the decision. He says that he doesn't remember *the words that he used to make* the decision, which suggests that the memory is recorded in his brain in some non-narrative form that is not easily accessible by his conscious mind – he merely *thought* that he arrived at a decision, and he can't even recall the words that brought him to that point. Furthermore, even his memory of the events leading up to the decision is wrought with uncertainty. He doesn't even remember what part of the city he was coming from, and he cannot remember the name of the waitress at the café who had served him countless times before (70).

In another instance, as Yamarra goes walking back through his neighborhood he muses on the mutable nature of Bogotá and other Latin American capital cities caught in the wave of rapid change.

As he puts it, if one were to close one's eyes for an instant, one would find oneself surrounded by a different world. By contrast, Laverde's neighborhood was one of those Latin American places that lived "outside time" (71) and seemed strangely unchanged: "Here reality adjusted itself – unlike it does under normal circumstances – to the memory that we have of it" (71). Such bending of reality to one's memory or perception is in line with the *DSM-5* PTSD Criterion for "Derealization," which is one of dissociative PTSD symptoms: "Persistent or recurrent experiences of unreality of surroundings (e.g., the world around the individual is experienced as unreal, dreamlike, distant, or distorted)." Later, his voyage both to and from Maya's farm is rendered in self-consciously dreamlike language, as if his journey were temporal, taking him back in time, as well as spatial, taking him out of the civilization of the Bogotá (98-99; 253). The APA's criteria for the dissociative symptom of Derealization are fitting adjectives to paraphrase how he described his journey to her farm: "unreal, dreamlike, distant, or distorted."

On describing his first phone conversation with Maya Fritts, an event that was for him shocking because it both confounded his former belief that she was dead by confirming unequivocally her existence, he writes that he "said something, but it is possible that I limited myself to repeating the name, both names, her name and her father's name" (88). And Yammara's memory is similarly unreliable when he narrates a phone conversation with his wife Aura that occurred at a crucial juncture in their relationship after he left without notice to pursue his investigations with Maya at her ranch: "I listened to her attentively, I swear it, but no memory of her words formed in my mind" (136).

Yammara's narration of his physical intimacy with Maya, an occasion that is momentous for him because, had it been successful, it would have marked the first time in the three years since his accident that he would have overcome his posttraumatic symptom of sexual impotence, is related by a narrator betrayed by the same unreliable memory that plagues him when he suffers violent trauma and

in other moments of crisis. He says that “in his memory” it was her hand that reached for his and that “he doesn't remember” (240) walking over to her bed, but he is sure to have done so because he winds up on it naked caressing her. He asks her certain questions, “or thinks that he asked her” (240).

I cite so many examples of this particular posttraumatic symptom, Yammara’s unreliable memory surrounding the traumatic events, because Vázquez’ explorations with different forms of memory and contention of memory’s primacy in phenomenology are predominate themes for the rest of the novel. While he emphasizes this view of memory time and again throughout the narrative discourse, it appears most prominently in an aside occurring very early in the novel that is set off from the rest of the surrounding text with parenthesis: “(And I tell myself at the same time that we are poor judges of the present moment, perhaps because the present moment doesn't really exist: everything is a memory; in fact this phrase that I just wrote has already become a memory; this word that you, reader, just read is a memory as well)” (23).

Such a statement brings to the fore all of the complexities associated with trauma. If the “present moment doesn’t really exist” and “everything is a memory,” then what is at stake when one’s memory can’t be trusted or relied on? If one’s Self, consciousness, perception of world, perhaps even reality itself, if we are to believe Yammara, is based on a memory, then the consequences of faulty memory are dire indeed. One’s way of understanding the world, one’s memories, one’s sense of Self, one’s very identity, would all be called into question. And this is precisely what Vázquez does to his narrator’s testimony at every crux point in the story, not just the traumatic events, although these are plagued with unreliable memories more than the other events. Yammara calls his own memory of the events to question even as he is recalling them and constructing a narrative. His parenthetical aside so early in the narrative, an aside that is incongruous with the context around it, signals to the reader that what is to come is going to be built on very unstable epistemological grounds. More importantly for

my purposes, his professed views on memory make this text particularly appropriate for analysis using modern trauma theory.

## 2.2 Context of Violence

What follows is an analysis of Yammara's account of the ubiquitous violence that his generation lived through in the mid-nineteen-eighties to the mid-nineteen-nineties in Bogotá. Vásquez is at pains to present the occurrence of multiple violent events, each as shocking or more than the Laverde's assassination, to show that the aggregate psychological effects on people who have lived through them. He cannot pinpoint for this period one etiological event, the precise source of the trauma, as he could for Yammara's bullet wound. That is not his objective. Rather, Vásquez shows that the constant exposure to violence during the Escobar years in Bogotá is just as much a cause of posttraumatic symptoms as one violent event might be. In other words, the cause might be thought of not as one etiological event but rather as an aggregation of violent events, a psychological trauma from the threat of exposure to multiple events, accumulating and exacerbating with each subsequent event. In Shay's terms, a constant subjection to danger and threats of violence (9) leads directly to posttraumatic symptoms of "persistent mobilization for danger" (173) and what the *DSM* refers to as "hypervigilance" (*DSM-5*).

Here is how Yammara describes his experience of constant exposure to danger on multiple fronts. The Escobar years were "the most violent of my city's history" (18), and he goes on to add that the violence was perpetrated by "collective actors whose names are capitalized: the State, the Cartel, the Army, the Front [guerilla organizations such as the FARC or ELN]" (18). He recalls that he was fourteen years old in 1984 when Escobar "killed or had killed" (18-19) Justice Minister Roderigo Lara Bonilla, sixteen when Escobar "killed or had killed" Guillermo Cano, editor of the newspaper *El*

*Espectador*, nineteen when Luis Carlos Galán was killed (an assassination caught on live television), and a few days later the 727-21 flight exploded in the air. A hit on provincial political candidate César Gaviria was Escobar's objective when he ordered a bomb planted on that commercial plane, which was full of other civilian passengers who had nothing to do with either politics or drugs. Escobar likely rated their death as acceptable collateral damage. They all died, despite the fact that Gaviria never even made it on board. "That's when we knew for sure," said Maya in a subsequent conversation with Yammara while recollecting this time, "that this war was against us [innocent civilians] too" (229). According to Maya, "as if the rules of the game had changed," (228) this kind of open violence against public officials was something unprecedented in Colombia. "That night we went to bed a changed people," noted Maya about herself and her family, "a different country, no? Or at least I remember it like that, my mother afraid. I looked at her and I saw the fear" (228). Many of Maya's and Yammara's generation simply resigned themselves to the ever-present threat of violence, justifying their resignation to it because it seemed to be the norm for life at that time in Colombia. They called it a "national idiosyncrasy" (19).

According to Yammara's therapist, whose technical name for Yammara's "fear" was...posttraumatic stress disorder (58), the symptoms had as much to do with the period of violence that Bogotános had lived through years before as they had to do with the gunshot wound: posttraumatic stress "the principal infirmity of my generation of Bogotános" (58). The therapist said that the psychological damage done to many Bogotános from living through the "devastating period of bombings" (58) almost a decade before was resurfacing in many people over a decade later. Yammara's situation was nothing unique, and his symptoms were the same as many that had passed through the doors of his psychiatrist's office (58). It is significant to note that the PTSD symptoms affecting the Bogotános were the same regardless of a subsequent traumatic event, such as the one that

befell Yammara. The psychiatrist's account suggests that the etiological event for most of the PTSD cases he has seen was the extended period of violence rather than one violent event in particular, which is the way PTSD is understood according to the APA paradigm. Aura sees this in him when she offers her own diagnosis after one of their arguments: "There is nothing bad happening now that should worry you. But you are still ill and getting worse. You are sick from worry. And therefore it is I who worry more" (62). "Sick from worry" is another way of saying that he is in a state of "persistent mobilization for danger" (Shay, *Achilles* 173).

The shared trauma of those years binds the victims together in a morbid bond of mutual suffering; and membership to the sad club depends on having lived through the experience. Outsiders, however hard they might try, cannot seem to be made to understand. Yammara tries to explain as much to Aura but finds that their lack of common exposure to the trauma forms an impassable barrier to communication. Notice his caustic response to her comments in the exchange below. Aura tries to calm him by reasoning with him that his fears are exaggerated when it comes to the times they are currently living in: "You are worried – you are freaking out...Antonio, Bogotá is not a city at war. There aren't bullets flying through the air wherever you go. Just because something terrible happened to you doesn't mean that it is going to happen to everyone" (61). Notice how he responds: "'You don't know a damn thing,' I wanted to say to her, 'you grew up in another place.' There is no common ground between us,' I wanted to add that 'there is no way that you can understand. No one can explain it to you, least of all me.' But these words wouldn't take shape in my mouth" (61).

More aggressive words did take shape, however, as he shifts to a more sardonic tone, one that vividly renders the psychological strain of living through a period of constant exposure to danger:

"No one thinks that something bad is going to happen to all of us," I retorted. It hadn't been my intention to raise my voice and I was surprised at how loud it sounded. "No one was worried

that you wouldn't arrive were you were going. No one thought that you could possibly be hit by a bomb, not like the bomb that struck the Three Elephants, nor the bomb that hit the DAS, because you don't work there, nor the bomb that hit Center 93, because you never go shopping there. And this period has already come and gone, right? So no one really believes that anything like that will happen to you, Aura.” (61)

Maya's symptoms were much the same as Yammara's during the period of violence in the nineteen-eighties. She says that she was reacting to the chronic fear: “Or better said, that the thing I felt in the pit of my stomach, the occasional bouts of dizziness, and the irritability were not typical symptoms of a college freshman, but of pure fear” (230). On the bombs that went off in commercial centers:

It was a hard time, right? You never knew if you were going to be the next victim. You were always worried about friends not making it safely to their destination. [...] We lived like that, hanging on the possibility that our friends might die, preoccupied with calming ourselves so that we wouldn't think that we dwell among the dead. We stayed indoors, remember? We always avoided public places. (230)

Later in the book, Yammara describes adolescents in Bogotá growing up “fearfully into adults while the city around them drowned itself in fear and the sound of gunshots and bombs without anyone having declared war, or at least not a conventional war, if such a thing exists” (254). The constant exposure to violence and the threat of violence to which they were subject are the same conditions that drive soldiers in conventional warfare to develop posttraumatic symptoms. The common ground of the experience is the threat of violence, not the characterization of the conflict, whether the conflict is conventional war, insurgency, or terror from guerrillas or paramilitaries. Furthermore, in Yammara's case, and in the case of Colombians in general for the past half-century, the violence was all the more traumatizing precisely because of the absence of a declared war. In a declared war between states, at

the very least one might have a clear idea of who the enemy is and therefore from where the attacks might originate. What Colombia had was violence from undeclared and unaccountable actors, which is as epistemologically unsettling to the victims as attacks from multiple insurgents are to soldiers in wartime – a principal cause of PTSD symptoms (*Achilles* 9-10; *DSM-5* PTSD Criteria A4).

The discourse above complicates the APA trauma paradigm's claim that origin of PTSD symptoms can be traced back to a single event. The damage done to Yammara was done long before the gunshot that wounded him. He had PTSD from living in Bogotá during this period of violence, just as his therapist diagnosed him and many of his generation. They suffered from fear. Those who suffer acute, chronic PTSD, like Yamarra's, are those whose nerves have already been frayed by particularly psychologically stressful circumstances prior to the occurrence of the traumatic event. The event in many cases is just the straw that breaks the camel's back. It may trigger entry into the berserk stage (Shay 1994, 2002; Farrell 1998, 2011), or development of complex-PTSD from simple-PTSD (Herman 1992; Shay 1994, 2002). But the seeds were laid long before the etiological event, which for Yammara was the gunshot.

Take the case of his sexual impotence, which is another common PTSD symptom (*DSM*) as well as a normal reaction to the recovery from a massive physical trauma like a gunshot wound. But according to Yammara's psychiatrist the impotence should have subsided within a few months. Aura keenly observes: "It has been three years, Antonio. What you are going through is something else entirely" (95).

That his former experience of constant exposure to danger traumatized him is all the more evident in how it manifests in another form of his post-injury symptoms: his fear of public places. He describes how he began to "hate the city, to be afraid of it, to feel threatened by it" (66); he "lost part of the city, or better said, a part of my city was robbed from me" (66). His therapist diagnoses this as



agoraphobia, which is a fear of public places that are perceived as dangerous because they are either too wide-open or too crowded (*DSM-5*). Yammara's PTSD that cuts him off from familiar and public places in his city recalls the cultural trauma recounted in novels of displaced peoples, such as Evelio Rosero's *Los ejércitos* (2007), in which access to public places and the community is denied by the occupying soldiers. If Shay and Herman are correct that communalization of the trauma is an essential step on the road to recovery, subjects whose access to the public is denied are prevented from an opportunity to heal.

Public ceremonies are interrupted as well. The ability to conduct communal rituals such as weddings and funerals is another important mitigating factor in PTSD symptoms (Shay 1994, 2002; Herman 1992). Yammara's wedding is supplanted, in the discourse, by the traumatic event: there may have been a wedding, but it is never mentioned. The first time that Yammara refers to Aura as his wife is immediately following an argument that they had a few months after his injury. He uses the word "mujer," which translates literally as "woman," although it is a commonly used way to refer to one's wife. And while it is possible to use the term in reference to one's common-law wife, it is not traditionally used that way. Regardless, in the discourse their relationship jumps from a rather quick decision to move in together after finding out about the pregnancy just before his injury to a point after his injury when he refers to her as his wife. What is missing in between – a glaring omission – is a wedding. What would normally be a joyous milestone is not only completely omitted, but the time during which it might have taken place in the story is taken up with his injury, physical recovery, and psychological decline; furthermore, the place where it would have logically fit in the narrative discourse is taken up with the discourse of the traumatic event. Thus trauma supplants, both figuratively in the story and literally in the discourse, what should have been a wedding, an event conventionally considered to be the happiest of one's life.

That he withdraws socially we know because the students at the school talk about him, he doesn't leave the house, and he has stopped going to his billiard hall completely.

But his fear of ubiquitous violence is not completely unfounded, which suggests that he is not completely paranoid, just that his perception of vulnerability is exaggerated. The Bogotá of 1996 was not the Bogotá of the Escobar years, but there were instances of violence. For instance, Yammara's brother and sister needed to give blood in order to save him because the hospital supply was low at that time due to the inordinately high "demand on the part of the afflicted Bogotáno society" (53), implying that the hospital was overloaded with victims of violence. In a more explicit comment, Vásquez notes that the same night that Laverde was killed there were sixteen other similar assassinations in different parts of Bogotá (54). Even the naming of his daughter is connected metonymically with danger. Just before he and Aura come to an agreement on naming their daughter Leticia, they hear the sound of an ambulance siren in the distance (43).

In conclusion, I hope to have shown through these examples the many kinds of violence and danger to which Yammara and Bogotános were subject. This context of violence as I call it must be recognized either as a cause on its own of PTSD, as Vásquez shows throughout the text, or the kind of epistemologically and phenomenologically destabilizing environment that can exacerbate simple-PTSD to complex-PTSD. Regardless, Vásquez shows Yammara to be someone who suffers from severe PTSD symptoms.

### **3. Postmemory**

Another of the novel's themes is transgenerational traumatic memory. Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory, a term she coined in an article on family photographs of Holocaust survivors titled "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory" (2001), may be the most

succinct way of articulating it. For Hirsch, postmemory is “the response of the second generation to the trauma of the first” (8). The second generation experiences the traumatic memories indirectly, mediated through representations such as photographs or stories or film. She thus sees postmemory as an “intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, linked specifically to cultural or collective trauma” (10). Expanding on Geoffrey Hartman's idea of “witnesses by adoption” (Hartman 232), she further defines postmemory as “*retrospective witnessing by adoption*” (10). Hirsch says that, for the descendants, postmemory is “a question of adopting the traumatic experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one's own life story” (10).

Photographs are special sites of postmemory in *The Sound of Things Falling* as well. Hirsch's work is helpful here because she writes of the photograph as the medium to communicate trauma and also as the physical trace of the trauma – a memory trace and a physical bridge to another time and place. I will show how certain photographs, conceived of in this way, are central to both plot and theme in *Vásquez*. As Roland Barthes writes in his posthumously published work *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981):

The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed things to my gaze. (80-81)

While Barthes does not quite have the science of photography figured out here, his point is germane. The photograph is a palpable, physical connection between time and space, whether the medium is the light which recorded the content, or the photograph itself which was passed down from hand to hand.

Hirsch's isolation of this particular mode of trauma and memory contributes to the dialogue in

the explosion of memory studies in the past decade. Children of Holocaust survivors were traumatized by the representations of their parents' experiences and the phenomenology was of a different kind – but not to be disregarded on the grounds that it does not compare in degree. Similarly, every Colombian generation this century has inherited the brutal trauma of the previous generations and experienced them through some kind of mediation. There was a post-Civil War, post-Violencia, post-Escobar and, I will go so far as to say, a post-Uribe generation. These people may have a unique cultural claim to an atavistic trauma – a postmemory.

In this section I will first examine how traumatic postmemory influences the characters Ricardo Laverde, his daughter Maya, Antonio Yammará, and Yammará's daughter Leticia. I choose the two main male characters and their daughters to demonstrate how the memory works both looking back and looking forward: it looks back to determine how the influence of one's ancestors can persist into the present; it looks forward to predict how one's self might influence one's descendants in the future. This forward looking postmemory will have dire consequences for Yammará's relationship with his wife and daughter. In connection with these relationships, I will also examine postmemory inherited in physical objects, such as old photographs, news reports, and personal letters, which are all types of postmemory that Hirsch enumerates in her article, and I will locate in the text other physical memory traces, such as scars; further, I will examine postmemory in the mind, a place with no physical location but is still a "intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance" that manifests on "the second generation the trauma of the first," such as how Yammará's posttraumatic symptoms might be affecting his young daughter Leticia, and how cultural and collective trauma might be transmitted to and influence future generations of private lives.

### 3.1 Laverde

Using the concept of postmemory to understand the character Ricardo Laverde's psychology is an example of how the "cultural or collective trauma" that Hirsch specified influences a private life. For instance, the teenage Laverde tells his prospective bride, Elaine, that if she wants to understand him, she must first understand the decline of his family that started with the plane crash at Santa Ana in 1938 (75). For Ricardo, his identity and their romance depended on a story that happened two generations before Elaine set eyes on him – an article written about this story was the first gift that he gave Elaine (111). Laverde sees this event as the defining moment of his life despite the fact that he did not experience it first-hand. He said that it was the reason he became a pilot – which is also the origin of all the trouble behind the events in the book.

The event for him was experienced as a postmemory, indirectly, through the countless retellings in family stories as opposed to first-hand. Ricardo Laverde remembers his grandfather Captain Laverde retelling the story while stroking the scar of his son Julio, Ricardo's father, even into his father's adult years, literally rubbing salt in the wound (a scar, which is itself a trace of trauma – physical trauma in this case), enjoining his son not to pass on to the grandson his same fears of aviation (151). Ricardo later ruefully remarked on the cruelty of the gesture, an act that undermined its expressed intent: if his grandfather wanted to prevent the transmission of traumatic postmemory to Ricardo, calling attention to the palpable trace of a postmemory by touching it only exacerbated the pain for his own son Julio, who would flinch at anyone else's hand coming near his face (151).

This event was thus mediated for Ricardo through the stories of his family and the media of his country. The piece of journalism that Yamarra is given by Maya, Ricardo's daughter, as a retelling of this Laverde family tragedy by an unknown writer, one who came to the house to conduct the interviews and then disappeared from their lives. The event became part of the national collective

memory because it was a notorious and spectacular crash involving the highest ranks of Colombian society. It strikes a chauvinistic tragic chord, as well, because the pilot crashed the plane because of a failed display of machismo tied to national pride – the pilot tried to get close to enough to grab the national flag mounted in the spectator stands while flying his plane out of a dangerous aerobatic maneuver.

According to Ricardo's own logic, the chain of events that ultimately led Ricardo to his downfall and death stemmed from the traumatic postmemory of his father's injury that Ricardo relived through the traces, such as his father's scar and photographs. Even as a young child, Ricardo realized that the best way to capture the attention of his schoolmates was to tell the story of his father's injury as opposed to his grandfather's war feats: "I realized that no one wants to listen to heroic stories, whereas everyone likes to hear stories of other's misfortunes" (155). He would reproduce his private photographs of his father's face to legitimize the story. "I am absolutely sure," he added later, blaming the story for influencing his decision to accept his grandfather's invitation to teach him to fly, "that if someday I want to become a pilot, if nothing else in the world interests me, Santa Ana is to blame" (155). When it comes to skill at flying, he claims transmission of postmemory from his grandfather to him. On remembering his first lessons, he muses: "I will never recapture the feeling of those days of what it would be like to be a dolphin, and what it is to possess a bit of inherited power" (155). Apt pupil to his grandfather's daredevil flying, Ricardo became skillful in fast, low, and dangerous flying, which was a perfect fit for drug-running.

He concludes the discourse with a phrase whose significance cannot be underestimated for my purposes of highlighting narrative and trauma: "The story is to blame" (155). That is to say that not only does the transmission of postmemory from Ricardo's father and grandfather to him play a pivotal and determining role in his life, but his own telling of this story, his transmission of the memory to

others, was just as pivotal and determining. Vásquez structures his narrator's discourse very carefully to highlight this point. It isn't so much the tragic events nor even the memory of those events that influences Ricardo, but it is his *retelling* of these events, embodying the memories as if they were his own (feeling inherited power, carrying the photos to corroborate his story, etc...) that influences the course of his life. He considers himself "the grandson of a hero" with a destiny for "great things," one who will "recover the name of Laverde for aviation" (156).

Then Maya gives this newspaper report to Yammara, connecting him to Laverde and Elaine literally through the hands of his daughter, who received her father Ricardo's gift to her mother Elaine and she passed it on as a gift of her own to her friend Yammara. It serves to illustrate the degree of the Laverde family's social fall. Captain Laverde, Ricardo's grandfather, was a war hero, "a captain whom generals sought out in the name of the President [of Colombia]" (116). Julio, Ricardo's father who after the trauma from the plane crash was terrified of flying, became an actuary whose job it was to limit risk, and, as he puts it, to predict death, a subject over which he had obsessed ever since the Santa Ana plane crash: "I am he who predicts when this or that man will die" (148). Ricardo, the last in line, became a drug runner who spent the majority of his adult life in jail. Far from recovering the Laverde name for aviation, Ricardo, only two generations removed from a nationally recognized war hero, presided over a steep and shameful fall.

At this point in the narrative discourse Vásquez does something very interesting that draws the reader's attention to the narrative frame. He sets the newspaper story off paratextually, with indents, to let the reader actually see the difference in the frame on the page. Thus, the reader then occupies the position that Elaine, Maya and Yammara had each previously occupied in turn, as the consumer of this bit of postmemory, the newspaper report redacted (Maya makes a point of mentioning that the author's identity is not important, a comment that emphasizes the commodified aspect of the piece (111)). Just

as Laverde explains to Elaine that if she wants to understand him she will have to understand this story, and Maya claims to Yammara that this story has “nothing to do with” her father “but at the same time has everything to do with him” (110). Thus Vásquez, by placing the reader in the subject position of his characters in relation to the story, is saying the same thing to the reader – if you want to understand the characters and Colombia and cultural trauma that culminated in the violent nineteen nineties, then this is a good place to start; it has both nothing and everything to do with the violence.

In addition to news reports, personal photographs play a large role in *The Sound of Things Falling* as well. In fact, one key object in the story that connects all the characters together in both plot and theme is the photograph that Ricardo Laverde took of himself to give as a present to his estranged wife Elaine. For Hirsch, the photograph was the site of postmemory, the literal memory trace that allowed the possessor to inscribe the photographically represented subject’s life story on his own. Further, the photograph as physical object was a connective tissue from one time to another – the photograph in most cases had passed from the hands of the persons photographed to the hands of their children or grandchildren; for some, descendants of Holocaust survivors in particular, the photograph was the only physical connection between them and their ancestors two or three generations in the past. In touching the photograph, they touched the same object that their grandparents had touched, forming a human connection through both time and space. The photographs told a story, and, in the case of the Holocaust survivors, it was a traumatic story, and the text of the story inscribed itself on the possessor’s life; the possessors of the photographs literally carried with them the story’s discourse.

Let us examine what Yammara has to say about Laverde’s photo because in *The Sound of Things Falling* it fulfills all the functions that Hirsch observed photography fulfilling in her theory postmemory: a connection with the past, allowing the trauma to inscribe itself on the possessor’s life, and also a window into one’s private life that allows in public events, as it is “linked specifically to



cultural or collective trauma” (“Surviving Images” 10).

Laverde had what Yammara considered to be, for its time, a ridiculous kitsch and touristy photo taken of himself by a street photographer. Yet, Yammara admits that “every Bogotano of a certain age has one of these street photos” (24), taken by a street photographer of an earlier time before anyone could reproduce his own photo. “My generation grew up looking at these pictures in family photo albums” (24). In fact, most of them were taken in the very same spot that Laverde’s was taken. Yammara writes that he himself has one of his grandfather in the 1950s and his father fifteen years later. By contrast, in the very next line Yammara writes that even though he does not have Laverde’s photo in his possession, “the image persists with such clarity in my mind that I could trace every line of it” (25). In narrative structure then, by discursive contiguity, Vásquez connects sutures Laverde into his own family story: the reader reads lines about Yammara’s grandfather, then his father, and then Laverde, as if Laverde somehow logically fit into his family.

Furthermore, Vásquez writes as if Laverde’s photo has somehow sutured itself into Yammara’s own memory, persisting “with such clarity” (25) in his own mind, due perhaps to the combination of its importance to him because it was of Laverde and that it shared the same place and characteristics of other transgenerational memory traces, or perhaps also that it serves as a physical and emotional connection between him and Laverde. His knowledge of it helps him gain the confidence of Consu, Laverde’s former landlord, who then lets him listen to the black box recording of Elena’s flight (75). His hands were the last besides Laverde’s to touch it before the shooting, and hers were the first to touch it after Laverde’s death. In this way it served, much like the bullet that passed through both bodies, as a physical memory trace connecting Yammara and Laverde through time and space.

### 3.2 Yammara

The bullet is responsible for the more visceral memory trace inscribed on Yammara's body: the scar it left is what gets him through the door to Laverde's apartment when he begins his investigations into Laverde's past after the accident. Laverde's old landlord Consuelo would not initially let him in, but she opened the door immediately once Yammara explained, lifting his shirt to show the scar, that it was left by the fatal bullet that passed through Laverde: "Scars are eloquent," muses Yammara (73). Near the end of the story during his night of intimacy with Maya and attempt at love-making, she touches his scar, something that only "one other person in the world had done up to that point" (241). Notice the careful wording that leaves the interpretation ambiguous as to whom that other person was: he could have meant that he himself had been the other person, or that the other person could have been his estranged wife Aura. In either case, Maya holds a privileged position in his life: she is either on equal footing with his wife in terms of knowledge of his body and trauma, or she is on higher footing; she may have touched something that he wouldn't even allow Aura to touch. And that same scar that is so important to Yammara, made from the physical trauma caused by the bullet that passed through the body of Laverde, is also that last physical trace that connects Maya back to her father, a postmemory more poignant than any photograph.

It is for this reason that Yamarra is particularly special to Maya: not only does his mind bear the story of her father and the last traces of his existence, but his body does as well. The bullet that killed Ricardo passed through him and lodged in Yamarra, leaving its trace forever as a scar on his stomach. The night they spent together Maya caressed this scar, and when she did it she reached through time and space to touch the burned face of her grandfather, mimicking the cruelty of her great-grandfather stroking his son's scar. Yammara may have been correct after all in his suggestion that she benefited more from him than he did from her (244).

This scar serves the same function as the photographs did for the descendants of Holocaust survivors in Hirsch's article – that of postmemory. It is a trace of a spirit. Children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors who hold in their hands photographs of the victims are making both a physical and mental connection with the life on that paper. They gaze at their ancestors from the same perspective as the man behind the camera gazed at them. They touch the same photos that either their ancestors touched or people who knew their ancestors touched. The photograph is channel for a connection through space and time.

So is a scar. Yamarra's scar especially because it is the most immediate and closest physical connection that Maya is every going to get of her father. No photographs exist of the time that he was in prison. She does have the one that he made that afternoon with Yamarra after his release. But the scar on Yamarra's stomach contains traces of the object that entered the body of her father and took him from her for good. The scar on Yamarra's stomach connects her to her father just like her stories of her parents fill in the gaps in Yamarra's story of his accident.

### **3.3 Maya**

What of Maya, Laverde's daughter who was at the age of five by her mother deceived into thinking that Ricardo was not in prison but dead? That this revelation was tragic for her she attests to at the end of the novel: "The saddest thing that can ever befall a person is to have memories built on lies" (238). The first thing that she does when she finds out about his death is to gather every possible scrap of evidence about his past in an attempt to reconstruct it, and him, for her. Since she herself was robbed of a father at the age of five the only way that she can interact with him later is to reconstruct a memory of him through the mediation of photographs, letters, reports, journals and journalism.

The work was no small task because it took her at least three years from start to finish. We know that she began on the death of her mother, which preceded the death of Laverde by a short time, and then at least three years passed before she found out about the existence of Yamarra through the common connection of Consuelo, who possessed the airplane's black box. Hers is an extraordinary case of postmemory because not only her father's trauma is experienced by her through mediation, but also her entire adult relationship with her father is based on nothing but what she constructs through mediation.

Maya suffers from what might be called a double-dose of postmemory trauma because it is transmitted to her from both sides of her ancestry. Her mother Elaine is marked by as much transgenerational violence and trauma as her father is. Elaine's mother died in childbirth and her father died when he stepped on a land mine in the Korean war (139). Even what was supposed to be a routine visit to the obstetrician for Elaine while she was pregnant with Maya turned out to be traumatic because the young doctor attending her who was doing his apprenticeship insisted on doing a genital examination "without any medical justification" (190). Maya's patrilineal genealogy is plagued with violence, from a war-hero and sadistic great-grandfather to a grandfather obsessed with death to a father jailed for drug trafficking when she was five years old and who died a violent death before had could be reunited with her. Her matrilineal genealogy is not much better: she has a grandmother who died in childbirth, a grandfather killed in the war, a mother who was raped while Maya was still in her womb and later died in a violent plane crash. And, just in case all that isn't tough enough, she lived through some of the most violent years in the world in the second half of the twentieth century, caught in the middle of an asymmetric war between the state and a drug lord.

### 3.4 Leticia

Yammara's daughter Leticia is an example of how trauma might be transmitted to future generations, postmemory transmitted forwards instead of backwards. Yammara's wife, Aura, tells him that their daughter Leticia has started to fear the hallway at night and needs to sleep with the light on, implying that it is his fault that she has picked up these fears. Yamarra responds, ironically: "'I understand,' I said. 'So it's my fault.... It's my fault that our daughter is afraid of the hallway.... Please, that's ridiculous. As if fear were hereditary.' 'Not hereditary,' Aura said. 'Contagious.' And immediately after: 'I didn't mean it like that.' And later: 'You understand what I am trying to say'" (136).

Aura has an intimation of the transgenerational influence of trauma, the postmemory, but she either can't articulate it or she is afraid to do so. She backs off as soon as she calls it contagious. In the psychology of his characters and the novel's plot, Vásquez presents traumatic postmemory as both hereditary and contagious: the whole premise of the story is the efforts that Yammara and Maya take to construct their posttraumatic identities based on the stories of their ancestors, ancestors whose lives have been marked as well by other forms of trauma and violence. On another occasion, Aura reproaches Yammara that it isn't fair to Leticia to expose her to these psychological conditions: "It isn't fair to our daughter" (258) were the words she left on the answering machine in their apartment as an explanation for why she left him. Aura felt that he was passing on his PTSD symptoms to his daughter; she was having the same psychological problems as he was having even though she didn't experience the trauma, as in Hirsch's notion of postmemory.

Like the obstetrician's rape scene of Elaine at which Maya was present pre-partum, Yammara's transmission of his trauma to Aura through his PTSD symptoms can be seen to have started pre-partum as well, a parallel construction that reinforces my claim that Vásquez is at pains to develop the

postmemory theme in all of his characters. For instance, his requirements to sleep with the light on and his constant starting in the middle of the night (56-57), symptoms that subsided soon after Leticia's birth, disturbed Aura's sleep and therefore affected Leticia whom she carried inside. Perhaps Leticia's fear of the dark is an atavistic symptom – it is certainly Aura's chief complaint to Yammara of her childhood fears: Leticia is afraid of the hallway and insists on sleeping with the light on (135). My theory is bolstered by Vásquez' highlighting Yammara's psychological decline by connecting it metonymically to Leticia's development in the womb. Yammara's visits to various psychiatrists are juxtaposed in the text by Aura's visits to her obstetrician (57); Aura's body changed shape, but Yammara hardly noticed it; she pleaded with him various times to put his hand on her stomach to feel the baby kicking, but he never felt anything: "I didn't feel anything: I was distracted: fear distracted me" (57). PTSD symptoms literally cut him off from one of the purest pleasures of a first-time parent: the physical contact through the mother's skin with the fetus during its first ostensible signs of life in the womb. This theme of PTSD symptoms interrupting the reproducing process will recur in other scenes later in the novel. One of his most caustic outbursts at Aura about her not being able to understand his condition because she didn't live through the years of trauma in Bogotá is followed immediately by her announcing that the baby is almost overdue and that a cesarean procedure, another unnatural, intrusive procedure, will be planned if it isn't born within the week.

Yammara himself sums it up best while reflecting on one of his many disgraceful breakdowns in front of his university class: "I thought for the first time that my life was falling apart in pieces, and that Leticia, poor ignorant girl, could not have chosen a worse moment to come into the world" (64).

#### **4. Prosthetic Memory/Prosthetic Trauma**

Allison Landsberg in her book *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American*

*Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (2004), argues that “modernity makes possible and necessary a new form of public cultural memory” (2) that she defines as prosthetic memory, which “emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past” at sites such as the “cinema, television and experiential museums” (14). In making contact with the media content, “an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history” (2). The prosthetic memory that emerges as the product of this process can suture itself into the person's consciousness as well: “the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person’s subjectivity and politics” (2). Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s insights regarding the implications of new technologies of reproduction, she emphasizes that it is prosthetic memory’s reliance on commodification’s enabling “memories and images of the past to circulate on a grand scale,” (19) and to be transmitted to “people who have no ‘natural’ or biological claims to them” (19) that distinguishes prosthetic memories from other forms of passing on memories.

While it can be argued that Landsberg’s idea of prosthetic memory can be more accurately be considered a mere sub-category of Marianne Hirsch’s idea of postmemory, I maintain that Landsberg’s emphasis on the grand-scale dissemination and commodified nature of the prosthetic memories justifies granting them their own category. With postmemory, Hirsch focused on the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next through media such as “stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up” (“The Generation of Postmemory” 106) on the familial level: “Postmemorial work, I want to suggest – and this is the central point of my argument in this essay – strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinventing them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (111). Hirsch goes on in her essay to specifically focus on family photographs and stories – photography and stories of a

collective or cultural trauma, but transmitted at the familial level. In comparison to prosthetic memory, the sense of the memories being “sutured” into the person’s psyche, influencing her subjectivity, is firmly present in postmemory: “to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation” (107). But, in contrast to prosthetic memory, the emphasis in postmemory is on the origin of these memories in the trauma of one’s ancestors, not some commodified content designed for mass dissemination. In sum, both Hirsch’s postmemory and Landsberg’s prosthetic memory are defined carefully and specifically enough to be considered completely separate categories of indirect memories that are transmitted to a person with no direct experiential claim to them.

To return to prosthetic memory and my treatment of it, the departure that I want to make from Landsberg takes into account the kinds of links made in the novel. The account I propose here moves from her stress of the power of prosthetic memory’s political potential to its power to exacerbate traumatic symptoms in the individual – in other words, hers is the optimistic view in terms of its ability to affect social change, whereas mine is the pessimistic view, one that Vásquez powerfully illustrates throughout the novel, in terms of its potential to cause or exacerbate PTSD. Landsberg stresses the “usefulness” of prosthetic memories: “Because they feel real, they help condition how a person thinks about the world and might be instrumental in articulating an ethical relation to the other. One goal of this book is to explore the ability of prosthetic memories to produce empathy and social responsibility as well as political alliances that transcend race, class, and gender” (21). While her book, particularly in the experiential museum sections, does a superb job of showing the possibilities for prosthetic memories to produce empathy and social responsibility, I will point out that prosthetic memories also have the potential to traumatize, to do bad, for precisely the same reason they have the potential to do good: “they feel real” (Landsberg 21). I will call prosthetic memories’ ability to harm prosthetic



trauma.

These examples are to be found among many that can demonstrate the many and varied ways that Vásquez uses both prosthetic memory and prosthetic trauma throughout the novel: as the main plot device and as the central trope to structure and articulate his many of his significant and traumatic memories. In terms of a plot device, the airplane black box recorder is the prosthetic memory that drives it – all of the characters’ interactions and motivations revolve around a search for it. In terms of the trope that structures his memories, I will consider a few different aspects.

First, in many cases of Yammara’s significant and traumatic memories, prosthetic memory as a trope colors his perception and articulation of the experience. What I mean by Yammara using “prosthetic memory as a trope” is that he articulates these significant memories by use of media metaphors, such as when he compares the early days of his love affair with Aura with “a story seen in the episodes of a television series” (36). Second, I will consider my concept of prosthetic trauma in this novel. Specifically, I will look at how media dissemination of culturally traumatic events, both local and international, permeates Yammara’s consciousness. More importantly, I will look at how the dissemination of the violence events in the eighties may have exacerbated the trauma to the viewers, who were already certainly conditioned for PTSD from exposure to the real violence. But the continual broadcast of the violent events made them seem even more threatening than they might have been on their own, contributing to what I called the “context of trauma” or what Shay noted as the “constant exposure to danger” that frays the nerves and causes PTSD in combat veterans. Finally, I will consider how prosthetic memories permeate and govern the characters’ perceptions of traumatic events both as they are occurring and later, such as Yammara’s recourse to tropes from Silva’s “Nocturno,” a poem of which he had listened to an audio reading moments before being shot, to describe what happened to him moments after the gunshot.

#### 4.1 Plot Device

To start at the beginning, one of the sounds to which the novel's very title refers is a prosthetic memory, which Yammara experienced indirectly, second-hand, through listening to the black-box plane recording of someone else's traumatic moment. But the unresolvable ambiguity as to which sound the title refers reflects the difficult question Vásquez raises throughout the book regarding the causes of posttraumatic symptoms: are they caused by the traumatic event itself, or the context of violence surrounding the event, or other culturally traumatic stimuli such as prosthetic memory transmitted through news or postmemory transmitted from preceding generations, or a combination of all these? What is the sound referred to in the title *The Sound of Things Falling*? What are the things falling? Does the title refer to the sound of the plane crashing, the sound of the screams just before it crashed, the sound of Yammara and Laverde as they fell after the shooting, the sound of Maya's screams through the phone when her life fell apart, the sound of the black box recording of the plane crash, or all of these sounds and things at once?

The text doesn't choose. But this unresolvability is the same unresolvability that plagues Yammara and drives the plot – do his symptoms come from the injuries sustained from the gun shot, or from living through years of violence in Bogotá, a violence whose ubiquity in our lives was assured by the constant deluge of news from media outlets? Do Maya's and Yammara's trauma originate from the plane crash, as Yammara claims (248), or from the black box recording of the plane crash, as the plot of the book suggests (Laverde and Yammara were shot because Laverde involved himself in narco-trafficking in order to buy a copy of the black box)?

To establish the importance of prosthetic memory to plot, I will first lay out the centrality of the black box, which is the novel's most palpable manifestation of prosthetic memory. The black box

recorded the sounds of Elaine's death. To get at these sounds, the last trace of his lost love, Ricardo Laverde gets involved in some kind of illegal activity to raise money to bribe the aviation authorities who can provide him a copy. He enlists Yammara's help to find a place where he can listen to it. As a result of his illegal activities, he becomes the object of an assassination plot that not only kills him but injures Yammara as well, who was with him by only by coincidence. Yammara's quest to investigate the cause of the injury that derailed his life leads him to Consu, Laverde's landlord, where he listens to Laverde's copy of the recording himself. Through the mutual connection with Consu, Maya finds Yammara, whom she needs to fill in the missing pieces of her own investigations concerning Laverde her father; the black box is the nodal point for this contact as well – he literally places on top of the black box the paper on which he scribbled his full name and address (86). In short, on one level, the black box is the MacGuffin – it is what the reader is tricked into caring about only to become drawn into a narrative about deeper, psychological issues. Part of Vásquez brilliance lies in the fact that he uses the black box as a central metaphor for the theme of his novel, as well as an object of his plot.

Incidentally, Vásquez also leaves a subtle linguistic clue that links Yammara and Maya together through the box: Yammara uses the verb “garabatear,” which means “to scribble,” to describe the lines that he wrote beneath his thank-you note to Consu for letting him read the “grabación,” which means “recording”; “grabar” is the verbal infinitive, meaning “to record;” “garabatear,” the verbal infinitive meaning “to scribble,” is different from “grabar” by the addition of a few letters; furthermore, the linguistic association connects the two actions, to record and to scribble, implying that Yammara too is generating a prosthetic memory with his writing. Later, while Yammara is at Maya's ranch, together they listen to the black box recording. That cursory summary merely covers the black box's importance to the plot structure, to say nothing of its importance to the themes at work in the novel.

But the black box is only one of the receptors and transmitters of prosthetic memory that

connects the characters together. Other forms of prosthetic memory emerge from the print and electronic media. For instance, Yammara's and Laverde's paths are first made to cross by prosthetic memory: the first words that Yammara hears Laverde utter are in reaction to the mistreatment of the animals left behind at Hacienda Nápoles (20). The words reflect one of the themes of these trauma novels – which is the suffering of the innocent, and the lines apply as much to Yammara as they do to the animals, and they apply to Raquel as well. “The poor animals are dying of starvation and no one gives a damn,” Laverde complained, “they never did anything wrong” (20). Yammara knows exactly what he refers to because they had both seen the recent reports of the animals on television. Reaching further back, the story of the fall of Escobar was a collective memory of their age, broadcast and disseminated on every form of media outlet.

In another case, an answering machine message, which is a recording and a conveyor of prosthetic memory just like the black box, is Yammara's last contact with Aura (257) and the first contact with Maya (87). Aura's message is the most momentous of his life: she called to tell him that she had left him, taking her daughter with her; Maya's message is just as crucial in terms of healing his trauma because she is the key to his reconstruction of the story and his narrating it to a sympathetic listener. Prosthetic memory connects other characters together, as well. The first gift that the young Ricardo Laverde gives to his lover Elaine is the media report of the crash that injured his father (111); and this report is the very first thing that Maya shows Yammara when he comes to visit her, making a transgenerational connection and therefore generating a postmemory, as well as a prosthetic memory.

Prosthetic memory is at work in the novel in more ways than the device that drives the plot. In the next section I will look briefly how it colors Yammara's language to become the principal trope he resorts to in his narrative discourse.

## 4.2 Media as Main Metaphor

Media metaphors dominate Yammara's discourse to a distracting degree. At times it seems as if he cannot conceive of the world in any other way than through his interacting with media. I contend that that is not a stylistic oversight or failure on Vásquez' part, but rather a carefully controlled effort to mimic in his narrator's discourse what is occurring in the content of the story: the invasion of intrusive prosthetic memories into Yamarra's consciousness, a process on which I will expound in the subsequent sections. But for now, let us examine some of the media metaphors.

Yammara compares the early days of his love affair with Aura to "a story seen in the episodes of a television series" (36). During the first hours in the hospital after recovering from his gunshot wound, Yammara writes that "I pressed the morphine dose button like a kid pressing a video controller button" (55). In addition, he slept at all hours, without an apparent routine, "like prisoners in stories" (55). Later, writing of reconstructing Elaine's death on the airplane, Yammara says that "a thousand times I have imagined this moment, a thousand times I reconstructed it like a scenographer constructs a scene" (80). On observing Maya's removing her glasses and pinching her tear ducts to keep from crying, he asks himself whether that gesture is cross-cultural sign of crying, or if people have been only conditioned to think so because of the "ubiquitous cinema" (106). While driving home from her farm, Yammara describes even a playful kiss that Maya blows to a passing truck with a media metaphor: "(with the flourish of a movie star) that filled the moment with a sensuality" (228).

His life's milestones are rarely marked without a reference to some mediated, transcultural event. For instance, the beginning of his investigations into Laverde's past is described like this: "One day in 1998, a bit after the World Cup finished in France and a bit before Leticia turned one" (68). Juxtaposing Leticia's birthday with news of the World Cup gives both events equal standing in the discourse, as if one event were as important as another in terms of how he reconstructs his memory.

Later, Yammara sees the media notifications of the American Airlines 965 plane crash while on his way to meet Aura for her pregnancy sonogram. Aura's smile, "beneath the electric radiance of the screen" (41) is something that he will "never forget as long as I live" (41); but it was the electrons of the screen (media) that illuminated her face, not the sun (reality).

Even his perceptions of his sexual and intimate experiences are governed by prosthetic memory generation. In the following example, the desire to maintain a mediated experience of reality seems to take over his body: to "continue living in the black box, with the black box, my body therefore made the decision for me and I ended up entering into a porn movie theatre" (87) where he watched a salacious movie – another mediated, secondary experience. In a more serious example, one of his life's milestones, the moment that he and Aura decide to move in together, is to some extent mediated. Aura places a photograph of her parents on the night-stand on her side of Yammara's bed. Then she stretches herself on the bed and begins to tell him details of her relationship with her parents. He uses the phrase "the image is very clear in my memory" (37) to relate the event, but it is ambiguous whether he is referring to the memory of the photograph or to the memory of Aura on his bed telling him of her life. One could read the syntax to conflate both memories, as if they both occupied a privileged place in his mind.

In this brief section, to show the extent to which prosthetic memories generated from the media have infiltrated Yammara's psyche, I have listed only a few of the many media metaphors that dominate Yammara's discourse. In the following section, to show the ways in which prosthetic memories can traumatize, to describe prosthetic trauma, I will outline the specific traumatic events that Yammara recalls consuming through the media.

### 4.3 Trauma in the Media

The novel opens with a scene of prosthetic memory, a traumatic experience transmitted through mass media that sutures itself into the psyche of the consumer. Printed “at mid-page of an important magazine” (13) is the 2009 report of the killing of the hippopotamus that had escaped from Pablo Escobar’s former zoo two years earlier. Metaphors of violence predominate in Yammara’s narration of the event, a narration that fixates on the most traumatic aspects. For instance, the hippo is said to have “invaded” (13) watering holes and “terrorized” (13) local fishermen. From under a tree protecting them from the “violent” (13) sun, the hunters who felled it, described as “snipers” [francotiradores] (13), begin dismembering it for ease of transport, leaving its viscera behind in that same spot. At least two more hippos were still at large, and “less scrupulous” (13) media sources reported that they were the killed hippo’s “mate and child” (13). The story of the hunt for these two took the “flavor of a media tragedy, the persecution of some innocent creatures by a cruel, barbarous system” (13).

The killing of the hippo was real event in 2009, sensationalized in the Colombian media, and it served for many as a collective catharsis for the violence of the late nineteen nineties that was attributed by most to the narcos. The hippos were the last vestige of the excesses of Pablo Escobar, and news of the killing of one of the last ones for many marked the end of an era. As he followed the news coverage of the hunt for the hippos, itself a story of violence and trauma, Yammara “found himself remembering” (14); here the use of the reflexive verb construction shifts agency to the prosthetic memory process and away from Yammara as a subject, the story of his acquaintance with Ricardo Laverde, a story the telling of which will be the novel. It is as if the mediated cultural trauma is his muse for him to narrate his own trauma: “Little by little I began to realize, not without astonishment, that the death of this hippopotamus marked the end of an episode of my life that had begun some time ago,” and he adds two lines later, “And that’s how this story got started” (15).

The next litany of traumatic events that he learns of through the media come a few pages later. They were no longer a novelty to Bogotános, who had “accustomed ourselves to them, in part because the images came to us with a portentous regularity through the news outlets and the daily newspapers; that day, the images of the most recent attack had started to come in, in the form of breaking news, through the television screen” (18). The particular attack in question was the assassination of conservative politician Álvaro Gómez, son of a former president and himself candidate for president on various occasions. This was one of the many news reports of similar attacks which had “sliced up my life, or at least punctuated it like the visits of a unpredictable visits of a distant relation” (18). He goes on to list the traumatic events of the eighties that I listed in an earlier section, but the highlights are the assassinations of Lara Bonilla, Galán, Cano, the bombing of the Avianca flight. Galán's assassination is “distinct, or is distinct in our imagination because it was seen on television” (19). Later, the crash of American Airlines 965, the plane that the bore Elaine, was announced on television and in the papers (40). That was the very same day he and Aura had scheduled the sonogram for Leticia – here trauma in the media is carefully placed to influence their lives at the most important moments; even the evidence of Leticia’s life, verified through media, is juxtaposed with evidence of collective trauma.

Prosthetic memories suture themselves into Aura’s unconscious as well. The next example serves to illustrate the commodified aspect of prosthetic memories that Landsberg stresses because the news story is not domestic and has nothing to do with the violence in Bogotá – it meets all of Landsberg’s criteria in that it is commodified, transcultural and relayed through the media. As Aura was taken to the operating room for the caesarian section, her last words to Yammara were: “I think that the glove really was O.J. Simpson’s” (64). This reference works on multiple registers of trauma in addition to those of prosthetic memory. Regardless of how one feels about Simpson’s guilt or innocence, the O.J. trial shed light on multiple social and legal injustices in the US – which is relevant



here because loss of faith in social institutions is one of Shay's and Herman's key criteria for the moral injury that contributes to a victim's complex-PTSD symptoms. In the Simpson case, a woman was murdered, but the murderer, whom everyone in the country knew to be O.J. Simpson, was neither punished nor convicted. Rampant and extended racism was exposed in the L.A. police department. The justice system was later shown to be seriously flawed: at the very least, there was an unresolvable conflict between the O.J.'s acquittal in criminal court but loss of his case in a civilian trial for charges of personal injury her family brought against him. And of course the case was tried over television, from the initial footage of the getaway case to the pictures released of the murder scene – prosthetic memories that reached beyond the borders of the US.

In terms of the degree to which trauma is disseminated through medial outlet generates prosthetic memory in Elaine, the case is remarkably similar to Yammara's. For instance, according to what Yammara and Maya could put together from the extant evidence, the cultural trauma in the decade of the sixties in the US were the reasons Elaine and her companions joined the Peace Corps. The examples of the tumultuous sixties read like a litany of violent trauma as depicted in the media. Their conversations with one another revolved around contemporaneous news. The fragments that are meant to convey the violence of the Civil Rights movement are as follows: "a sawed-off shot gun killed Malcolm X, a bomb under a car killed Whalest Jackson, a bomb in the post office killed Fred Conlon, and stray police bullets killed Benjamin Brown" (141); "corpses arriving from Vietnam," "as soon as revelations about My Lai began to emerge there would be talk about Thanh Phong" [another massacre of allegedly innocent civilians by US soldiers in Vietnam] (141) are the phrases that evoke the disillusionment with the Vietnam war. Edward Kennedy's notorious drunken incident of driving his car off a bridge into a lake, drowning the passenger Mary Jo Kopechne while somehow swimming himself to safety, are the friends' topics that Vásquez includes to convey a sense of profound disillusionment

with justice and politics.

Yammara condenses the media depictions of some of the most traumatic events in the sixties, focusing on the most violent news pieces as the prosthetic memories, to paint the disillusionment in the idealism of Elaine and her colleagues. The phrase they repeat to each other between toques on the joint at their parties are the lines from the Frank Zappa song: “What’s there to live for / Who needs the Peace Corps?” (Zappa qtd. in Vásquez 170). In her words they were all fleeing from “the destruction of their dreams” (142); and their dreams were destroyed by the prosthetic memories generated from their consumption of the news through televisions and newspapers; *their* dreams were destroyed by news of a far away war and of a Civil Rights movement that did not personally involve any of them – their dreams were destroyed by the prosthetic memories sutured into their conscious *as if* the dreams were their own.

Even the Sharon Tate murder finds its way into one of Elaine’s letters from Colombia back to her grandparents in the US. Elaine expresses horror at the photos in the news reports she reads, which are more traumatic, prosthetic memories, commodified images of extreme violence that travel cross-culturally. Even Elaine’s area of Bogotá is marked spatially with traumatic prosthetic memories: she fixes her position one afternoon not by mentioning that she was outside the Center for Colombian-American University Studies, but rather by noting the banners on the outside of the building protesting the Vietnam war atrocities committed at My Lai (150).

Elaine’s daughter Maya’s life is determined by trauma conveyed through the media, as well. The very day on which Maya came into the world is described as “more or less the same time that President Nixon used the words *war on drugs* in public discourse” (191). Maya notes the sad irony that “the most important news of my life” (109), her father’s death, she learned from a report in a sensationalist newspaper that she had always despised. Her father Ricardo decided to name their villa

in 1973, “just before the creation of the Drug Enforcement Agency” (198).

In sum, Vásquez both intensifies the degree of the role that violence and trauma play in his characters’ lives and stresses prosthetic memory’s ability to traumatize by relating all of their milestones in terms of the most violent domestic and international events, all of which are experienced by the characters indirectly through various media outlets.

Whereas in this section I have focused on prosthetic memory’s ability to traumatize over the long-term by continual inundation through media of violent events, in the next section I will focus specifically on the degree to which the characters’ conceptualization of the etiological traumatic event is determined by prosthetic memory. In the next section the cause of the trauma will not be commodified news media but rather something far more personal, such as the loss of a loved one or violence done to the subject; what will be interesting to note is the way the victim experiences the trauma, his or her perception of things as they are happening, is colored by prosthetic memories generated by consumption of the various memories’ delivery through various forms of media.

#### **4.4 Prosthetic Memory During the Traumatic Event**

Vásquez combines the themes of prosthetic memory and trauma in the form and structure of Yammara’s narrative discourse, superimposing prosthetic memory perceived experience of the violent event itself, not just in the media representations discussed above. The most significant instance of this is when Yammara is shot just after he pursued Laverde out of the Case de Poesía, José Asunción Silva’s former residence, later turned cultural center, that provided a lounge room to listen to recordings of poets reciting their own verse and other literary fare.

While Laverde sat in a separate stall and listened to the black box recording of the flight on which his wife Elena had died, Yamarra listened to Silva’s voice reciting his own famous poem series

*Nocturno*. Minutes later, the sounds that ran through Yammara's head as he caught up to Laverde in the street outside where they were both shot by motorcycle-mounted sicarios were the sounds of Silva reciting his own poem – a prosthetic memory sutured into Yammara's consciousness at the precise moment he suffers the most traumatic event of his life. As Yammara puts it, just moments before the shot, he was “thinking without thinking” the last lines of the poem's second stanza “Y eran una sola sombra larga” (Silva qtd. in Vásquez 49) – “As one together in a great single shadow” (Walsh trans. 585); and he adds, making the comparison to a traumatic flashback even closer, “or better said [I was] tolerating the verse like a song refrain that you can't get out of our head” (Vásquez 48). To think without thinking about a song that you can't get out of your head is to have your consciousness invaded by an intrusive memory. Hirsch describes the process as “having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated” (“Generation of Postmemory” 107) by an intrusive memory.

The poem's conceit even governs Yammara's discourse when he describes how he was placed in the ambulance. In *Nocturno* the speaker plays on the multiple interpretations of “shadow,” which is first taken literally as the shadow cast by the lovers as they walk side by side on the beach, second, to mean “soul,” as the souls of the lovers are reunited after one of them dies: “And your shadow, slender and light [...] / As on that soft night of your spring time death [...], / Came near and walked with me – Oh, shadow's interlaced! –” (Walsh 587). Compare those lines with Yammara's description of how he was placed in the ambulance, the last image he has before losing consciousness and that “remains clear enough” in his mind (50): “they placed me next to Laverde like one shadow next to another, leaving a stain of blood on the car body that at that hour, with such little light, was black like the night sky” (50). It is as if Silva's poetic conceit determines Yammara's memory of reality, rather than reality determining the inscribing of Yammara's traumatic memory. Even recalling the event years later, Yammara recalls it through the poetic metaphor, a prosthetic memory which had gotten into his head

via an external, commodified, media source (the recording machine).

The black box recording serves as a nodal point of the trauma of Elaine's tragic death – the inhuman scream it picked up seconds before the crash is testament to the trauma of the crew and passengers, and the recording itself traumatizes Yammara and Laverde, even though it was experienced second-hand and through media. On first realizing the recording that he sits listening to in Laverde's former apartment is the black box recording of Elaine's flight, Yammara says: "The revelation hit me like a blow, and I suffered it with the same loss of equilibrium [that Laverde suffered the first time he heard the tape], the same dislocation with the world around me" (79). In this description, a prosthetic memory traumatizes both Laverde and Yammara to an equal degree, regardless of the degree to which their emotional connection to Elaine differs. Furthermore, the sound recording's centrality to the book is confirmed by the fact that the book's title derives from Vásquez choice of words to describe the recording as he listens to it:

There is a sound that I can't quite identify, that I never have been able to identify: a sound that is either inhuman or somehow more than human, the sound of the lives that are extinguished but also of the materials that break apart. *It is the sound of things falling* [my italics] from above, a sound interrupted and therefore eternal, a sound that goes on forever, that continues resonating in my head since that afternoon without any sign of stopping, that is forever suspended in my memory, hanging there like a towel on its holder. (83)

He notes later that "I would have preferred not to listen to it and knew at the same time that my memory would continue to listen to it forever" (84); "Forgetting it is not possible" (85).

Yammara's description of the sound recorded on the black box shows it to be at once traumatic and prosthetic. It is traumatic in that it stays with him forever, as an involuntary flashback or a compulsion to repeat ("eternal," "continues resonating in my head"; he knows that he will hear it

forever without wanting to listen to it); it is recorded differently than other memories and therefore more memorable (“a sound interrupted and therefore eternal”); learning what it was “hit him like a blow” that caused him the same loss of equilibrium that Laverde suffered; and of course it is a recording of something that is outside the range of normal human experience (“inhuman or somehow more than human,” “the sound of the lives that are extinguished”). It is of course also traumatic for him because it is intimately related to the cause of his own physical trauma: if Elaine hadn’t died, Laverde would not have had to purchase the black box recording, and they would never have been walking together that day. It is prosthetic because it is relayed to him through media and it sutures itself into his psyche as if it were his own, “hanging there like a towel on its rack” (83); he adds later that the “final words of the dead pilots came to form a part of my experience” (84) and “part of my auditory memory” (84) even though the only connection he had with them was once mediated through time and space via a recording device. He concludes, “This machine, invented as the airplanes’ electronic memory, has in the end converted itself into a definitive part of my memory” (85) – just as a prosthetic limb adheres to a body.

More significantly in terms of trauma and memory theory, according to Yammara the recording, as a prosthetic memory, has the ability to “modify the past” (85). For instance, after Yammara’s having listened to the recording, his perception of Laverde’s cry is no longer the same: it carries “a density that it had lacked before, owing solely to the fact that I had listened to what he, seated on that leather sofa, listened to that afternoon” (85). “Experience,” Yammara thus concludes, “is not the inventory of our sorrows, but rather the sympathy we learn for the sorrows of others” (85). This revelation is brought about by his encounter with the black box, which transmits a prosthetic memory that ties together all the major themes that I argue are at work in the text: prosthetic memory, postmemory, and trauma. The very grounds of perception, Yammara seems to say, are tied to humans’ ability to learn through

secondary, mediated methods, of the traumas and sorrow not only that they themselves have passed through but also those that others have passed through.

News that shattered Maya's understanding of her world was delivered via a medium, as well, a point which is emphasized by Vásquez metonymically by delivering her narrative discourse by fragments interspersed in Yammara's narrative discourse of both of them sitting and listening to the black box recording together. For instance, the recording begins with the plane captain's wishing all of the passengers a "happy and prosperous 1996" (244). "With these false words," observes Yammara, "Maya turned to remembering, began to dedicate herself to the fatiguing job of remembering" (244). The discourse on the next few pages alternates between lines of the black box recording and lines in which Maya tells Yammara the shocking news that her mother relayed to her on the phone from Miami: that her father Ricardo was after all not dead, as she had been led to believe her whole life, but instead very much alive. Not only that, but he was in Bogotá and wanted them all to get together for the New Year! "That we should get together," repeats Maya, incredulously, "as if he had simply gone shopping for a couple of hours" (245). And then, immediately following Maya's line, the narrative discourse turns seamlessly to the airplane captain in the black box recording: "Merry Christmas, señorita" (245).

As Yammara puts it, this "brutal" news for Maya was the "disappearance of her world as she knew it" (245). In language that strongly evokes what Shay calls the "shattering of a paradigm" of the way that one formerly thought of the world, Yammara goes on to observe that for her "perhaps this might be the most difficult and the least acceptable, the change in the past that we had formerly believed to be fixed" (245). Maya's initial response to the news was a fury at "the vulnerability in this life that one phone call could undermine everything in short a short time" (245), a fury she changed to hatred and social withdrawal. She refused to see anyone, especially Ricardo. At this point in the discourse, as before, focus is shifted back to the black box recording. Thus the reader of the text

literally sees the trauma Maya suffers from the undermining of her previous phenomenology woven into the prosthetic memory of the next trauma, her mother's death, that she suffers.

Such examples show the ways in which Alison Landsberg's idea of prosthetic memory is at work on many different registers in the novel's plot and theme. As a plot device, it is indispensable, for the black box is the object that serves as the node that connects all the characters' plot stands. In terms of the themes of memory and trauma, the novel shows how the characters can be traumatized by subjection to continual dissemination of violent events through various media outlets; in addition, prosthetic memory theory shows how those external memories can evacuate the subjects' own memories, or alter their perception of reality, as the etiological traumatic event occurs; and finally the novel shows how the prosthetic memories can color and determine a subject's subsequent articulation of the traumatic event, as in for instance how Yammara's discourse relies on mostly media metaphors.

In the next chapter, I will consider the various methods of trauma therapy offered by the novel, which are the same methods recommended by mental health workers: reintegration of the traumatic memory to normal memory, communal retelling to sympathetic and understanding listeners, and a redemptive journey to a site associated with the trauma, an experiential therapy.



## Chapter Six: Trauma Therapy in *The Sound of Things Falling*

### 1. Introduction

In this section I will outline the methods of trauma therapy in the novel, all of which the text suggests are ultimately to some degree successful for Yammara, who, on the first pages of the novel, before launching into the framed retrospective narrative discourse, speaks of “the pains that I suffered but have now overcome” (14). The methods fall under the general rubrics of, one, a restorative journey, and, two, a narrativization of trauma in a communal setting. First, the restorative journeys in the novel are both real and symbolic. In lock-step with Shay’s model, I will make the argument that the journeys are loosely based on journeys in Homer’s *Odyssey*, which are a mix of real and symbolic journeys, as A.B. Lord comments that the concern of epic is generally “with the journeys of heroes into the world beyond, the world of the spirit” (205). Yammara makes a real trip to Maya’s farm and a real trip with Maya to the ruins of Escobar’s Hacienda Nápoles, but both of these trips are couched in fantasy language that suggests that they are journeys of the soul as much as they are journeys of the material body; and the results bear this out: as Yammara is to some degree made psychologically whole due to the journey, it is for him a journey of the soul.

Within the frame of Yammara’s journey to Maya’s farm, there is another story: that of the young

Ricardo Laverde and Elaine, which happened decades earlier. Yammara and Maya help each other piece this story together, and they tell it to each other. This act of communal narrativization is exactly what Shay and Herman recommend for the trauma therapy: in a safe place and aided by a sympathetic listener who will bear witness, through reconstructing the story of one's past, one reasserts authority over one's memory and therefore over one's identity. Not only will I show the many ways that the story of Ricardo and Elaine is also the story of Yammara and Maya, but, in addition, I will show that the fictional elements of that story are just as important in terms of psychological therapy. Theoretical grounds for the fiction as therapy argument will rely on examples from the Introduction, such as Brian Doerries, Tim O'Brien, and Charles Segal. In this chapter I argue that Yammara's reconstructing, through a mix of fabrication and reporting, the story of Ricardo Laverde is a strict parallel of Odysseus' reconstructing, through a mix of fabrication and reporting, his own fantastic journeys in Books Nine through Twelve of the *Odyssey*, which make up the "apologoi," the account he gives of himself to the Phaeacians on the island of Scheria, his last sojourn before returning to Ithaca. Charles Segal, many years before, and William Race, in a very recent article, both argue convincingly of the psychologically and physically therapeutic effects of Odysseus' stay with the Phaeacians. I make the same argument for Yammara. The journey helps him heal enough to return to society. The story he tells of himself while in the middle of that journey, his apologoi, helps him heal enough psychologically to reassert authority over his own memory, his own identity.

Finally, I will highlight the fictionality and literariness of Yammara's apologoi by, among other methods, pointing out the trope that Vásquez uses both throughout that story as well as throughout Yammara's larger frame narrative (the narrative discourse of the entire novel, barring the first two pages). This trope, one that I will call a metonymical connection, is a linking device that ties together key plot points with themes at work throughout the novel, which are postmemory, prosthetic memory,

and traumatic therapy through communal narrative, demanding that the reader associate them.

## 2. Restorative Journeys

Yammara makes two journeys in the narrative, both of which are shown by the text to be restorative. The first is the trip to Maya's farm, and the second is the trip he and Maya take together to Hacienda Nápoles. In the following section I will demonstrate that the first trip, Yammara's trip to Maya's, is thematically and structurally based on Odysseus' visit to the Phaeacians, and that the second trip, the one that he and Maya make to Hacienda Nápoles, resembles the kind of experiential museum visits that Shay and others recommend for trauma therapy.

Regarding the first trip, Yammara's trip to Maya's, in the next sub-section I will demonstrate the many thematic parallels that Vásquez makes between Yammara's journey to Maya's farm and the journey that Odysseus makes to Scheria, the island of the Phaeacian people in Books Seven through Twelve of the *Odyssey*; the structure of the journey in Vásquez overlaps loosely with Homer, much like Joyce's *Ulysses* structure is loosely based on Homer, and the thematic and symbolic parallels resonate strongly, as I will demonstrate. Before I do that, however, it is worthwhile to review the work of a few scholars, some very recent and some older, on the question of the Phaeacian island of Scheria: is it a halfway house that helps to restore Odysseus in body and mind for his reintegration in society and the reclaiming of his former identity, or is it another road block for Odysseus on his way home, one full of bad hosts who will either harm him or delay him further? If the parallel is to hold, I must first establish that Scheria is therapeutic for Odysseus before I make the argument that Maya's farm and Hacienda Nápoles are therapeutic for Yammara. Here I will go into more detail than I did in the Introduction, when I focused mostly on Odysseus' apologoi, which is only a part of his healing sojourn in Scheria.

As William Race notes, scholarship in English "has been dominated by the 1969 article by

Gilbert Rose, 'The Unfriendly Phaeacians,' which stresses the underlying hostile environment of Phaeacia" ("Phaeacian Therapy in Homer's *Odyssey*" 47). Arguing against this interpretation, Race picked up on a therapeutic element in the Phaeacian episode that he justifiably claims Shay missed (47): "that Alcinous [the Phaeacian King and Odysseus' host] and Odysseus conduct themselves much like therapist and patient" (48). The therapy consists of many facets, helping Odysseus "regain his strength (through food, drink, clothing, and hygiene), self-confidence (through besting the Phaeacians at sports), and identity (through narrating his past actions that brought him to this point)" (49); he points out textual evidence of the salutary effects of the therapy, when later Odysseus on his return to Ithaca from Phaeacia "at last slept calmly, having forgotten all he had suffered" (*Odyssey* 13.90-92 qtd. in Race 60).

Much earlier (1962), in various forums, Charles Segal argues along the same lines as Race (although Race neither cites Segal nor relies on his arguments for support, which I find odd) that Odysseus' visit to the Phaeacians was the transitional phase of a rite of passage and purification that helped make Odysseus fit for reintegration into society. In "Transition and Ritual in Odysseus' Return," Segal focuses on various measures that the Phaeacians take to help Odysseus convalesce, such as hygiene and sleep. The bathing ritual is prolonged (77), and Segal noting that the Phaeacians are a people "addicted to the comfort of warm baths" (73); significantly, on his departure they make him a parting gift of a tripod and cauldron, "implements regularly associated with bathing" (73). In terms of sleep, Odysseus gets his first decent nights' rest under Alcinous' roof (68); before that, he had been "the man of alert wakefulness who has learned not to trust sleep" (Segal 68). In contrast, on his return to Ithaca, Odysseus slept so soundly and in such security aboard the Phaeacian ship that he needed to be awakened (*Odyssey* 13.187).

On the traveling in general throughout the *Odyssey*, Segal notes: "The poem's transitional

situations are reinforced by a number of recurrent themes or motifs that are well known in almost every mythic journey: the crossing of water, the changing of clothes, the sharing of food” (“Transition” 66); and, most importantly, Segal stresses symbolic rebirth: epic transitions in general, and Odysseus’ stay among the Phaeacians in particular, are both characterized by the “mythical pattern fundamental to the epic of quest, namely, the cyclic alternation of life and death; the rediscovery of life after a period of sterility, darkness, and imprisonment; and the ultimate victory of life over death, of order over disorder” (67).

In another article, “Phaeacians and the Symbolism of Odysseus’ Return,” Segal reiterates how Odysseus is afforded many opportunities to reclaim his former identity and health, through athletic competition, bathing, resting, and feasting, and storytelling, but Segal’s chief focus here is on the storytelling, the *apologoi*, which I will argue later is an opportunity that fiction affords him for psychic healing to take place. As Segal puts it, the fantastic, fictive aspects of the *apologoi* are precisely what enables “the hero’s contact with and integration of the unconscious potential of the self” (17). In a later section, “Fictionality,” I will elaborate on how Yammara’s reconstruction of the story of Elaine and Ricardo Laverde, told as a frame story within the larger frame of Yammara’s own retrospective narrative, just as Odysseus’ *apologoi* is a story told within the larger frame of his adventures, is shown to be therapeutic for both Yammara and Maya in Vásquez.

As for the Yammara’s second journey, the one that he and Maya make together to visit Hacienda Nápoles, Escobar’s former exotic menagerie, I will show how that is restorative as well by comparing it to contemporary forms of experiential trauma therapy done at sites of remembrance, such as the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., or experiential museums, such as the Holocaust Museum.

## 2.1 Journey to Maya's

In this section I will examine the many parallels between Yammara's journey to Maya's and Odysseus' sojourn with the Phaeacians. If we accept Race's claims that the Phaeacians restore Odysseus to health in mind and body, a symbolic rebirth, through food, clothing, hygiene and constructing his identity through storytelling, then let's look at how that formula works for Yammara.

In terms of the journey itself, Yammara's trip down from the high plateau of Bogotá to the sea-level of Maya's farm is told in a dream language, the remoteness of the place and the dangers that he faced are greatly exaggerated. As he passed through clouds so thick that water accumulated on his windshield, obliging him to turn on his windshield wipers (96). The road was narrow and windy; he observes of the traffic jam that delays him that "a truck with a broken axle can be lethal on a two-lane road without guardrails" (97). The terrain and landscape reminded him of a celebrated plane crash there in the 1940s, as if the voyage were taking him back in time as well; the contiguity of the crash and the storm give a heightened sense of danger to the prose, making a loose comparison with the storm at sea through which Odysseus passed before reaching Scheria. He passes through more exaggerated danger on his walk up to Maya's house, concentrating on the rocky terrain so as not to "break an ankle" (99) or "scratch his face" (99) on the low hanging branches. His return trip to Bogotá is shrouded in hyperbole as well, comparing his "perilous" journey along the "one direct route between La Dorada and Bogotá" (253) with similar voyages made by adventurers and pioneers, who arrived "from London, from New York, from Havana, from Colon or Barranquilla" (253) from the sea, which alludes of course to the sea-change in Yammara as well as to Odysseus' journey across the sea.

Maya is a loose conflation of the sea nymph Calypso, who waylays Odysseus for seven years, keeping him as her love slave, and Nausicaa, Phaeacian king Alcinous' daughter, who becomes enamored of Odysseus when she finds him helpless and washed up on the shores of Scheria. In terms

of standing for Calypso, Maya works as a beekeeper, nurturing the hive, producing the best honey in the region (101); the food that Calypso eats herself and lays before Hermes when he comes to visit are nectar and ambrosia (Manis 88), which is always described as either a type of honey or a mixture that includes honey. Her farm is so remote that she notes that no one comes to visit her, nor is she willing to spend even one night in Bogotá (101); even one of the local boys who gave Yammara directions to her place, asking to hitch-hike in exchange for the information as he was “going wherever you’re headed, don” (98), declines the ride when he finds out that where Yammara is headed. In the *Odyssey* Calypso’s island is described as remote “even for the gods” (Manis 88), and Calypso comments to Hermes that it is extremely rare for her to receive visitors.

In terms of standing for Nausicaa, or the Phaeacians in general, there are many parallels as well. That Yammara’s trip is a symbolic death and rebirth is suggested by the many explicit Christ parallels: Yammara sets out from Bogotá on Good Friday, which is the day of Christ’s death, and leaves Maya’s place to return on Easter Sunday, which is the day of Christ’s resurrection, or as Yammara puts it: the day on which Christians “celebrate or commemorate the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified two days before (more or less at the exact same time that I started my first conversation with Ricardo Laverde)” (214) – another detail that is far from coincidental.

Their first meeting is couched in fantastic terms. Fog still clouds his vision, and the figure of Maya, who is wearing a bee-keepers helmet and clothes, is described twice, in language the exaggerates once again his exposure to danger, as a “monstrous” figure. When he calms down after she removes the mask, she offers to take him with her to tend the bees, and literally dresses him in a bee-keeping suit; later she leaves Laverde’s old clothes for him to change into the next day, clothing him a second time – all in keeping with proper form for a host to a traveler in an epic; the Phaeacians clothe and bath the naked Odysseus. In an episode of extended description that has nothing to do with the plot

and seems tangential to any theme, Yammara watches her work and describes it as “watching the best show in the world: someone doing their job well” (102). But when one considers that in this skill she resembles the Phaeacians in their skills at shipbuilding, referred to many times by Homer, the confusion for the scene’s inclusion vanishes (Manis 108).

The next step, according to epic tradition, is to treat the guest to a proper meal. Maya does not disappoint: “Maya took me with her to her house and surprised me with a lechona that her employees had spent the entire morning preparing for us” (104). A lechona is an elaborate Colombian meal that features roast suckling pig and generally requires eight to ten hours of time to make. In Phaeacia Odysseus was treated to a feast for which the first animals slaughtered were “eight boars” (Manis 118).

At the end of their day together, after having kept him up all night telling her his story, which is the very same thing that Alcinous does to Odysseus, Maya leads him to the guest house, where he sleeps soundly until the middle of the afternoon. This is the first instance in the novel of Yammara sleeping soundly, and the reader is reminded of this fact by the continuity in the narrative discourse, only one section earlier, of Yammara’s conversation with Aura in which she admonished him for being the cause of their daughter need to sleep with the light on (129). He awakes disoriented and has a “fantasy” (129) of Ricardo Laverde wearing the very shirt that he dons. The discourse of delirium draws attention to the fantasy of the scene.

Then there is the sex. The next night on returning from their visit to Hacienda Nápoles, which I will discuss in the next section, Maya is the one who makes the overtures to Yammara, a Calypso seducing an Odysseus. Even his failure at the sex act is a parallel with Odysseus’ attitude toward Calypso: in the scene just before he sets out, he sleeps with her one last time, but he does so without a full heart. The moment in the narrative discourse when the reader expects a description of the sex act is filled with a strange metaphor, completely out of context of the situation, but that, when considered in



light of the *Odyssey* parallels that I see, communicates a much deeper meaning: “In the half-light her tight nipples took on a deep violet hue, a dark violet like the red that divers see on the bottom of the sea. ‘*Have you been beneath the sea, Maya?*, I asked her, or at least I think I asked her. ‘*Down in the very depths of the sea, deep enough to where the colors change*’?” (241). A sea change, just like one of the many that Odysseus undergoes in his adventures, especially after leaving Calypso and after leaving Scheria.

One more indicator in the text frames Yammara’s quest as one that is in search of restoration, and puts Maya at the center of that quest. It comes much earlier in the text, at a moment that could be seen as the symbolic beginning of Yammara’s quest to investigate Laverde, a quest at which the visit to Maya’s is the center. When Yammara first visits Laverde’s former apartment, he meets Laverde’s former landlord who is named Consuelo, which translates literally as “comfort” or “consolation.” The allusion is at first oblique because Yammara always refers to her in the text as “Consu,” the short name for Consuelo, so the reader does not at first find herself reading the word “Consuelo”; but it is reinforced by contrast a few lines below where he first writes about “Consu” because he uses the word “desconsuelo” (73) as a descriptor or something else. Nevertheless, Consu occupies a pivotal position in the reconstruction of his story because she both gives him the recording the black box recording that Laverde pursued and serves as the connection between him and Maya, Laverde’s daughter. Maya even refers to her with her full name, “Consuelo Sandoval,” giving her as the only reason besides her parents’ probate lawyers that she has for returning to Bogotá (102). “Consuelo” ‘consolation,’ then, is the literal and figurative reason that both Maya and Yammara make their journeys.

The journey to Laverde’s apartment is rendered in the same kind of dream and fantasy rhetoric as the drive to Maya’s. Yammara claims that the neighborhood is someplace that is already outside time, as if it were preserved in some way from transformation. As opposed to the rest of Bogotá, “a

mobile and changing city” (70), Laverde’s neighborhood is one of the few places that “exist outside of time, that remain immutable while the others are transformed” (70). But then Yammara undermines this claim with the sentence: “Here reality adjusts itself [...] to the memory that we have of it” (70). That the neighborhood exists in reality as he described it or not is ambiguous. It could be that the place happened to remain as he remembered it, and his phrase “reality adjusts itself [...] to the memory” is slightly ironic. Or it could very well be that this neighborhood’s immutability only exists in his imagination, a part of the reconstruction of his trauma that he carries out of himself. It could be that all of the narrative discourse that follows is a transcript of what he entered in his diary after the question mark (68), like Scheria, and like Odysseus’ apologoi at Scheria. And just as Race and Segal argued of Odysseus’ sojourn with the Phaeacians, one of the main reasons for it is Consuelo, consolation.

## **2.2 Journey to Hacienda Nápoles**

The journey that Yammara and Maya take together, by the end of the book, is the capstone of their mutual therapy in that it helps them both close the tragic stories of their respective pasts, both figuratively, as they visit the place emblematic of violence that is now officially a place of peace, the symbol of the government's victory over Escobar's violence, and literally, as this place is the one that they, coincidentally, visited on the same day as children, before they knew how their fates would intertwine. Now, they return to the same place, their stories are brought to a close together, almost all of their questions answered.

Their journey allows them to approach with a quiet resolution the realization that they will never answer the question with which they had both been obsessed throughout the book: “What exactly did Laverde do to get himself assassinated?” After their trip, they learn that they will never have enough detailed knowledge to answer this question, but the answer’s importance has diminished for

them: “And now, what does it really matter?” Maya says to Antonio. The journey reveals for them that hitting the ground truth of the traumatic event is a fool’s errand because it is not going to give them the answers that they need to rebuild their lives. Answers to questions like “How exactly did it happen?” or “What exactly did Laverde do that got me shot?” – answers similar to the knowledge gained when arriving at the details of the etiological traumatic event – are not the answers that their, nor any trauma survivor’s, attention is best directed at finding out.

This truth is illustrated by a shortcoming in their investigation at Hacienda Nápoles that suggests symbolically the point that the text emphasizes explicitly time and again: there is always some piece of information that is going to remain veiled to you; fixating on that is not going to help you. This piece of veiled information at Hacienda Nápoles was Escobar’s boarded up mansion, which could be argued is the *very center* of the story: Escobar, even though he was far from the only narco-trafficker, is still the symbol of narco-trafficking and its violence repercussions in Colombia; his house marks the epicenter of the phenomenon. But, characteristically for the text at this point, Yammara and Maya are denied complete access. When Maya asks the guard if they can get into the mansion, Yammara says that he “felt as if she took the words out of my mouth” (235); the guard refuses permission to enter, but says that they can “take a walk around and peep in through the windows” (235). Just as the ground-truth of the information of what Laverde did to get himself shot is inaccessible, veiled, so it the contents of Escobar’s house *literally* veiled, as Yammara and Maya are forced to peer through “dirty and broken” (235) windows that block their full vision.

When they made their return trip to see the ruins of Hacienda Nápoles, Escobar’s menagerie that they had coincidentally visited on the same day in their youth but not together, Yammara is struck by the “unexpected solidarity” (235) that “suddenly unified them” (235): “this place had been for both of us a symbol of the same things” (235).

The solidarity they experience is similar to the solidarity that visitors experience at memorials and sites that commemorate collective trauma. For instance, an essential aspect of Shay's trauma therapy for his Vietnam veterans was an annual trip together to the Vietnam memorial in Washington, D.C.. This trip was indispensable because in it coalesce all the essential elements of PTSD therapy: communal retelling, public recognition, proper mourning rituals, and visceral, physical experience. The veterans make a trip together, as Yammara and Maya did, to a place of public commemoration for past injustices and cultural trauma, the mere fact of which restores some sense of justice to the afflicted, are allowed to mourn together giving each other mutual support, at a site that is experiential: the veterans touch the wall with their hands, touching the names inscribed there of their fallen comrades, making a literal connection through time and space with the trauma of the past, a postmemory. According to Shay, the therapeutic value of this one trip alone is worth months of group therapy.<sup>66</sup>

The "unexpected solidarity" that "suddenly unified" (235) Yammara and Maya here is the same thing, and it occurs at a strategic point in the narrative, culminating their mutual restorative sojourn together in Maya's farm, showing symbolically that some answers will always remain veiled, but suggesting all the same that the effort to reconstruct the story that will reintegrate their present with their past is not in vain for all that. It is the key to their psychological healing.

Yammara's claim that his traumatic symptoms have been overcome suggest that his and Maya's

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66 While it is beyond the scope of this study, there is a vast literature on experiential sites of cultural trauma healing. For more writing on war memorials' use as cultural and individual psychological therapy, see, in addition to Shay's books, the following: Marita Sturken's *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (1997), in which she analyzes the influence of experiential responses to cultural trauma such as the Vietnam Memorial and the AIDS quilt on US culture. Jay Winter writes on the intersection of history, memory and cultural trauma. His book *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (2014[1995]) and article "Sites of Memory and the Shadow of War" in Erll et al. (2010) speak to the function that public monuments to the Great War throughout Europe served to commemorate that tragedy in the respective national consciousnesses. A good part of Landsberg's book is dedicated to how technological innovations shaped the experience of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.. I select these particular books from the large amount of scholarship on memorials because they discuss the therapeutic function of memorials that Vásquez captures Hacienda Nápoles doing for many Colombians, and certainly for Maya and Yammara: the physical journey to the site with a sympathetic listener, partner in suffering, allowed them to come to their own terms with their respective traumas.

attention is best directed at constructing a coherent story of their own selves from the obtainable bits of information about their past and telling that story to each other, each an empathetic listener for the other, the act of telling and listening itself constituting a part of the testimony of the trauma. It is the act of constructing and telling that I will analyze in the following section.

### **3. Narrativization**

A restorative journey is only one aspect of the recipe for therapy. Another is that the story needs to be reconstructed from one's memories and translated into a coherent narrative. As Shay puts it: "Creating art has far greater potential for healing trauma than consuming art as a reader, listener, or viewer – as valuable as these are. I believe that a trauma survivor gets more out of composing and performing his own poem, which may not be a masterpiece, than he would hearing Homer himself perform his masterpiece" (*Odysseus* 244). As Yammara puts it: "Putting it into words is what we do to calm ourselves" (213).

The following section with focus on how the text shows that this act of "putting it into words" or "creating art" as therapeutic. First, I will discuss the importance of an audience, an essential element to the event of a narration. Yammara and Maya constitute each other's audience, each serves the role of the worthy listener for the other. I will address the importance of this in the "Communal retelling" sub-section. Next, in the "Fictionality" sub-section, I will deal with the degree to which the fact that the story is constructed, finely-wrought, even made-up, is important to its effectiveness at both rendering the traumatic memory and reintegrating it coherently with normal memory. I will make more explicit comparisons to other self-consciously stylized fictional texts about traumatic experiences, such as Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (2000[1969]), Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun also Rises* (2006[1926]),

and Homer's *Odyssey*, to show how Vásquez is draws on a broad tradition of literary representations of traumatic memory as well as protagonists' attempts at psychological healing and identity reconstruction through storytelling.

On communal retelling, although Yammara's symptoms may have been caused in part due to his perceived loss of control of his surrounding world, he claims that his recovery may depend on his simultaneous resignation to fate's capriciousness and firm resolution to exert control over what remains within his power to affect: "To fight against its [fate's, destiny's] effects is all that I can do: to repair the damage it does and to extract the most advantage from its benefits" (213). And even though the knowledge of the "chain of circumstances that has converted us into what we now are" (214) is something that "we all know quite well" (213), it is still confounding when "someone else brings the revelation to us" (214). This is the awareness that can sooth Yammara because he is not alone in reconstructing the story; he does it with an empathetic listener and coauthor. And the fight to repair the damage was something that he and Maya do together, Maya's words filling telling parts of the story "that the documents didn't confess [note again the metaphor to the sacrament, which is conducted in the presence of someone else, and that fact that this narrative reconstruction is taking place on Easter Day, the day that Christ was reborn (214)], or better said I organized the documents' content, I gave order and meaning and filled in some empty spaces" (214). This process of mutual reconstruction and retelling of their shared history is what sets Yammara on the road to psychological recovery.

And even more significantly for my thesis of narrative trauma therapy, regardless of the degree to which the narrative refers to reality, Yammara adds that he filled in the gaps in his story with stories that Elaine not only related to Maya, but also stories that Elaine had invented. Maya explains that Elaine felt compelled to invent many details concerning Ricardo because Maya was left bereft of a father as a small child; Elaine wanted to give her daughter a life-like character in whom to believe. But

notice how Maya describes the process: “It started with my father. She invented him completely, or better said, he was her invention. A novel, if you follow me, a novel of flesh and blood [Vásquez here is sustaining the Christ metaphor, the “Word made flesh” that he started earlier on the page], my mother’s novel. She did it through me, of course, or for me” (214). And so Yammara has full awareness that the story he reconstructs for himself might be as full of fiction as it is of reality, but that knowledge does not deter him from putting the story together, nor does it decrease its therapeutic efficacy. He feels compelled to remain with Maya until the story is completed, compelled to tell it years later when he is reminded of it in the news because the telling of it will give closure to that period of his life, a period marked by trauma that by then he claims he has “overcome” (14).

The nexus of the metaphors of religious, trauma and falling objects become more developed when Yammara describes the reason that he doesn’t disclose to Maya that he is already married and has a child. He wants, somehow, to keep Aura and Leticia pure from what he perceives as the “contamination that I had suffered one afternoon in 1996 and whose causes I have just started to understand now, whose unanticipated intensity began to appear now like a falling object appears in the sky” (216). In attempting to save his family from the “plague of my country, of its troubled recent history: to save them from all that has pursued me and all of my generation” (216). Yammara casts himself again like the Christ in the preceding paragraph, a Christ to whom he is connected metonymically through sharing this Easter day for their sacrifice and rebirth, and to whom he compares himself metaphorically as the sacrificial lamb, one who bears away the sins and pestilence plaguing the others so that they can remain pure. The metaphor is even sustained into the next page, and through which Laverde (the Christ figure two pages back) and Yammara (the Christ figure in this metaphor) and are connected once again metonymically and transgenerationally through the discourse with Maya. Here’s how it works.

Maya is telling Yammara of a conversation she had with her father when she was a young girl during which she first became aware of death. On the ranch Maya had by chance come across, as she puts it and thus makes the metonymy with Yammara and Christ, the “*sacrifice* [my italics] of a Holstein cow,” (216) which, understood from the context, refers to nothing more than a routine slaughter. To soften the blow Ricardo used the euphemism “its time was up” (218). A few years later while Ricardo was serving his prison sentence, Elaine used those same words in a lie to Maya, preferring to leave her daughter with the fictional story of a dead but honest father rather than the real story of a live but incarcerated, drug-running criminal for a father: “his time was up” (218) is what Elaine finally said to Maya when she could no longer stand Maya incessant questioning about where her father was. This phrase thus makes a metonymy between Laverde and the object of a sacrifice, which is connected through a previous metonymy with Yammara (they were both compared metaphorically with Christ); so the two characters are connected in the discursive rhetoric, albeit through many filters (cow-sacrifice-Christ-Yammara), just as they are compared structurally in the narrative discourse through other devices, albeit never directly but through other filters (transgenerational traces like photographs, Maya, and physically through the bullet). Here Vásquez’ rhetorical devices mimic the structural connections that he has made, and the glue that holds them all together is the fact that they revolve around traumatic events.

Maya’s trauma is even made more acute by the lie of Laverde’s death. The details of Ricardo’s “time coming up” that Elaine invented were that he “got lost in the sky” (218), that his plane crashed into the sea. This is revealed to the reader late in the narrative discourse, after the reader already knows that Elaine herself perished in a plane crash a few months before. This means that Maya suffered a double tragedy through the story of the plane crash: first, she believed the fiction that her father’s plane had crashed; second, she actually loses her mother to a plane crash. Either way, by things falling from



the sky she was left bereft of parents, both real and imagined. The memory of her father was something that she had to maintain only privately because her mother would never allow guests to speak of him in the house in fear that they would give away her elaborate lie; thus Laverde existed for Maya in a memory devoid of outside reference, a private memory that could not be made public without risking its own annihilation. Her talk with Yammara gives her the chance to safely recover that memory.

### **3.1 Communal telling**

Shay holds that communal telling is an essential part of the traumatic cure – that the story be told to a sympathetic listener who can share in the emotions, and see the reactions in the face of the others. He contends that this was one of the primary advantages, in terms of psychological therapy, of the Athenian tragic theater’s architecture that allowed audience members, who were all seated in sections that were determined by their military unit (Doerries), to view each other’s faces throughout the performance and note the emotional reaction that was taking place. This affective element was just as important to bringing about the end of catharsis as the cognitive elements, such as the content of the play being performed. Regarding catharsis, Shay and other scholars argue that it, in addition to meaning purgation of either an impurity or of pity and fear, can refer as well to a moment of sudden insight and clarification “removing obstacles to understanding, the psychological equivalent of producing clear water from muddy water” (Shay, “Birth of Tragedy” 2; Palaima, Interview). For insight and understanding to take place, Shay exhorts that “Combat veterans and American citizenry should meet together face to face in daylight, and listen, and watch, and weep, just as citizen-soldiers of ancient Athens did in the theater at the foot of the Acropolis” (194).

On a smaller scale such as group therapy, finding a trusted and reliable listener is just as

important to healing. “To achieve trust, listeners must respect the narrator. The advice that veterans consistently give to trauma therapists is ‘Listen! Just listen!’” (*Achilles* 189). The victim must be “permitted and empowered” (*Odysseus* 243) to tell the story, and the listener “must also be strong enough to hear the story without having to deny the reality of the experience or to blame the victim” (*Achilles* 188): “When trauma survivors hear that enough of the truth of their experience has been understood, remembered, and retold with enough fidelity to carry some of its truth – no one who did not experience their trauma can ever grasp all of the truth – then the circle of communalization is complete” (*Odysseus* 244). The “circle of communalization” to which Shay refers is part of his and Herman’s theory that there needs to be a social forum for the victim’s story, some kind of collective recognition that both solicits and permits the victim’s testimony. I will touch on more aspects of this need for testimony and a public forum later. For now I want to focus on first element that constitutes an event of storytelling – the necessity of the worthy listener. Maya and Yammara play this role for each other.

In each other Maya and Yammara find someone who can empathize with the posttraumatic symptoms that the violent years of their youth caused. As Maya says: “These are issues of our generation, I imagine. The issues that affect those of us who grew up in the eighties, right? We have a special relationship with Bogotá, one that is far from normal” (102). After sharing their mutual experiences of living through the traumatic period, they both agree that they were affected in the same manner. Unsure of whether Yammara felt less vulnerable compared to Maya and Elaine, two women living alone, she asks him if he felt the same way: “It was exactly the same” he says. Then in an action that Shay insists is essential for therapy in communalizing the trauma, she “turned her head to look at me” (230), meeting his gaze, something happens several times during their visit (230-236). Yammara’s response shows indicates the significance of this moment they share: “I then said to her some words

whose scope I wasn't able to determine: 'I understand you perfectly' (230).

Contrast this scene of recognition in a worthy listener with the scene much earlier in which Yammara completely failed to communicate his traumatic experience to Aura, to whom he wanted to say: "There is no common ground between us,' I wanted to add that 'there is no way that you can understand. No one can explain it to you, least of all me.' But these words wouldn't take shape in my mouth" (61). For Yammara, Aura is example of the wrong kind of listener, one who in Shay's words is not "strong enough to hear the story without having to deny the reality of the experience or to blame the victim" (*Achilles* 188). Aura had been trying in all good faith to reason with him that his symptoms had no basis in fact, that Bogotá was no longer "a city at war. There aren't bullets flying through the air wherever you go" (61). Aura fails to perceive that for Antonio, for all sufferers of PTSD, the past and present simultaneously co-exist in their consciousnesses. On the other hand, Maya, a Bogotá native whose posttraumatic symptoms no longer permit her to remain there overnight (101), understands this. Vásquez is particular about mentioning the fact that Yammara and Maya meet each other's gaze many times throughout their mutual retelling of their stories, an action that I maintain is similar to PTSD victims' need to gauge the transmission of affect in their listener, to judge the emotional as well as the cognitive impact of their story on the listener.

In his moment of intimacy with Maya, Yammara conflates therapy, eroticism and mere accompaniment: "Maya's company had become indispensable to me, as urgent as ridding her of her sadness. I thought that the two of us were alone in that room and in that house, alone yet with a shared solitude, each one of us with our pain in the depths of our being but mitigating it at the same time by means of the strange arts of nakedness" (241). Companionship (her indispensable company), mutual safe treatment of each other's vulnerability (he allows her to touch his scar while they are naked together and abides her learning of his impotence), eroticism, and therapy (his her ridding her of her

sadness, mitigating the “pain in the depths of our being”) are here presented as all of a whole, as if their intimacy fulfilled all of these needs at once, and the fulfillment of one depended on the simultaneous fulfillment of the others. Once again, this is Shay’s and Herman’s formula for PTSD symptom therapy.

Yammara remarks again on their codependency for therapy a few pages later. “Was it for my benefit, Maya Fritts,” he asks himself rhetorically, “or perhaps you discovered that you could use me, that I alone would allow you this return to the past, that no one else would elicit these memories, or listen to them with such discipline and dedication?” (244). The ability to listen “discipline and dedication” are the hallmarks of a worthy, empathetic listener, the very sort that Shay holds is indispensable for PTSD therapy.

The communal therapy certainly benefits Maya as much as it does Yammara. It is her urgent request that Yammara tell her in “all possible detail” (106) of his last days with her father. She has been gathering bits of information for a long while in an attempt to piece together a coherent narrative of her father’s life; things like photos, letters, legal documents, ticket stubs, etc..., that are “without importance,” as she concedes, but then adds, “having them tranquilizes me” (107). Yammara’s piece will finish the story for her because he is one of the few people to have had contact with Laverde since he was released from prison, and of course he was present at Laverde’s death. Maya’s attempt at recovery from the trauma of the loss of her father at a young age and the tragic death of her mother is to try to construct a coherent narrative of her own. But she needs the physical presence of Yammara as well to not only finish the story but to empathize with her as well. He is “of her generation” and understands the cultural trauma of the violent days in Bogotá as well as the psychological help that he can offer her as a listener. Yamarra says:

People of my generation tend to do these things; we ask each other about how our lives were when these things happened [the violence of the drug wars], almost all occurring during the

eighties. These things defined us or reshaped our destinies even before we had the chance to realize what was happening. I have always believed that, in assuring ourselves that we are not alone, we either neutralize the consequences of having grown up in that decade or mitigate the continual feeling of vulnerability. (227)

Aura, who arrived in Bogotá in 1994, “would live forever in ignorance of what we who were here say and heard” during the previous decade (35), could not be this kind of listener for him.

### 3.2 Fictionality

In this section I will discuss fiction’s value in terms of psychological therapy. Yammara attests to this affect on him as he himself helps construct a story made up of many fictional parts. As I wrote in the “Why Fiction” section of Chapter Two, the structural freedom that literary discourse can utilize as well as fiction’s psychological distancing from the material at hand give literature a privileged position in representing, interpreting and even perhaps serving as therapy for trauma. But in this section I would like to focus on the ways in which Vásquez structures a therapy for his characters’ Yammara and Maya in which its aspects as fiction, or invention, closely resembles that same criteria as Shay recommends for trauma therapy. As I have outlined in the Introduction, Shay’s models for communal therapy are the Athenian theater, which, among many other reasons, was therapeutic precisely because of its fictionality as opposed to its mimesis. I turn to other famous post war texts such as Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children’s Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (1969) and Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (2006[1926]) because Vásquez makes conspicuous allusions to them at key points in his characters’ reconstruction of their traumatic memories, and I will demonstrate that in each of these texts the characters emerge as psychologically whole according to the

success of their ability to articulate their trauma. I will also show that the story of his own traumatic memory that Yammara reconstructs and retells is highly stylized and literary; it is not that he is lying about things, but like Vonnegut, O'Brien and Odysseus, he is molding the shape of his discourse to better reflect the nature of his traumatic memory and construct a meaning out of it. The way that Yammara writes about his trauma is Vásquez' testament to literature as a privileged discourse for trauma.

### 3.2.1 Vonnegut in Vásquez – Somewhere a Dog Barked

Vásquez gives the reader a strong textual indication that three-fourths of the narrative in the novel is the product of his narrator's attempt at trauma therapy through narrative fiction. Yammara's psychiatrist gave him a journal in which he could ask himself questions (66), like "how to recover, how to leave off lying to yourself, how to have a life again, to be on good terms with your loved ones" (67); that it is *his* story is indicated by the underlined letter "Y," for "Yammara" that his psychiatrist wrote for him on the first page, literally joining with him on the process of narrative therapy. Yammara pronounces himself utterly incapable of keeping a diary, though, and claims that the only thing he was able to write on the next page was a question mark. Then he goes to bed. The very next line in the novel, which is separated from the text following it by some extra spaces, forcing the reader to pause over the line, is, out of all context with that narrative that preceded it, an allusion to Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*: "Somewhere, in the depths of the night, a dog barked" (68). The narrative thread picks up after the allusion, implying that the rest of the book might be nothing more than an entry in Yammara's notebook following the question mark – a narrative fiction to answer the questions that his psychiatrist told him to answer: "how to recover," "how to have a life again," etc....

The phrase "somewhere a dog barked," along with slight variations on it, is used in several

places throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (1969), stringing together metonymically the incidents when one of the characters is either living through a traumatic event, having a posttraumatic flashback, or reintegrating the traumatic memory into his normal memory through narrative. The structure of the novel was described by the author himself as “telegraphic schizophrenic” (Vonnegut qtd. in Vinke), and the claim that it is governed not only by the fragmented logic of traumatic memory but by the need to heal through narrative reconstruction is asserted by critics as well (Vees-Gulani 2003; Pulcini 2011; Krekorian 2012; Deresiewicz 2012). As William Deresiewicz notes, the narrative discourse jumps back and forth in time, but the jumps always originate from and come back to the central trauma of protagonist Billy's prisoner of war experience, an etiological event of cataclysmic scale: Billy emerged (just as Vonnegut had in reality) from a slaughterhouse where he was being held as a prisoner of war to the post-apocalyptic remnants of the German city of Dresden after its fire-bombing by the Allies.

The US had carpet-bombed the city near the end of World War II, and the death toll calculations range from 35,000 to 135,000 in two days (“The Bombing of Dresden”). Deresiewicz goes on to point out that the Billy's most pronounced PTSD symptoms, his conviction that he had been abducted by aliens, did not start immediately after his traumatic experiences in World War II, but rather twenty years later after the trauma of being the sole survivor to a plane crash – an event so essential to the plot of *The Sound of Things Falling*, the hypertext. Along these same lines, Susanne Vees-Gulani writes that the *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the product of what Vonnegut referred to as “a process of twenty years [...] of living with Dresden and the aftermath” (Allen 163, qtd. in Vees-Gulani 175). The novel's narrator, who speaks as if he were actually Vonnegut – the only sign that the voice might not be autobiographical is that the narrator speaks in the Chapter One instead of in a Preface or Introduction - claims that he had been trying to write about Dresden for twenty years, and had thought that it would be

easy because “all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen” (10). In words that parallel almost exactly those of Yammara on his own trauma, he states that he had difficulty articulating the event: “But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then [...] And not many words come now, either” (10). Along those same lines, Vonnegut himself said that the traumatic memory of Dresden behaved just as many theorists would predict, eluding conscious recall (Shay 1994, 2002; Herman 1992; Caruth 1995): “one of the characteristics about this object [the book] was that there was a complete blank where the bombing of Dresden took place because I don’t remember [...]. There was a complete forgetting of what it was like” (Allen 94). In short, it is straightforward to argue that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a palimpsest, as Gérard Genette used the term, for *The Sound of Things Falling* by using the same psychiatric approach to analyze it. The scenes of image of the dog barking will be serve to structure my section because they link together all the essential aspects of the story as traumatic memory.

In the first instance, the barking dog scene in Vonnegut falls in the middle of a discourse on the incongruity of what some characters imagined war might be like with its traumatic reality. One of the characters, Weary, is daydreaming that his relationship with his comrades in World War II will resemble the friendship struck up between the characters Athos, Porthos and Aramis from Alexandre Dumas’ adventure novel *The Three Musketeers* (another use of literature as recourse to articulate a traumatic experience). The dog barking interrupts the reverie and brings him back to the real world, just as the tree limb did that hit him on the helmet. That scene is immediately followed by Billy, the main character, falling into a PTSD flashback: “This was when Billy first came unstuck in time. His attention began to swing grandly through the full arc of his life, passing into death” (37); that delirium is followed by another flashback of childhood trauma, a near-drowning experience, when his father taught him to swim by the “sink or swim” method of throwing him into the pool and letting him



struggle for himself: “His father was going to throw him into the deep end, and Billy was going to damn well swim. It was like an execution” (38). That Billy becoming “unstuck in time” is of thematic importance to the novel is attested to by its position at the beginning of Billy’s frame narrative that starts in Chapter Two: “Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time” (24), as well as its frequent repetition in connection with his traumatic flashbacks (at least seven occasion in Chapter Two; one occasion in Chapter Seven).

The dog barks again just before Weary’s illusions are dashed once again, as the other two companions, whom he imagined saw him as an indispensable member of the “Three Musketeers,” abandoned him and Billy behind German lines, where they were soon captured. For his part, Billy “was having a delightful hallucination,” that was interrupted by his companion Weary “about to beat the living shit out of him” in a vengeful rage for having slowed the group down so much (41).

In the third instance, Billy hears a dog barking in the distance just before he the narrator tells of Billy’s abduction by the aliens of Tralfamadore when their spaceship landed in his backyard (60). Vees-Gulani and Deresiewicz argue that the notion of Tralfamadore is a fanciful fiction Billy created for himself to psychologically cope with the world after a mental breakdown from PTSD symptoms for which he checked himself in to a psychiatric ward three years after the war (Vees-Gulani 179; Deresiewicz). The narrator confirms that Billy was suffering from some kind of mental breakdown: “The doctor agreed: He *was* going crazy” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 78). Even though that the doctors held to their diagnosis that his symptoms stemmed from the early psychological trauma of his father’s throwing him into the pool, both Billy and the narrator are convinced that the PTSD symptoms come from the war. Of Billy’s roommate, Rosewater, a soldier who had similar symptoms, the narrator says:

He and Billy were dealing with similar crises in similar ways. They had both found life

meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war. Rosewater, for instance, had shot a fourteen-year-old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier. So it goes. And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the fire-bombing of Dresden. So it goes” (Vonnegut 79).

Incidentally, “so it goes,” like the dog barking, is another phrase used to connect metonymically traumatic events throughout the novel; Jerome Klinkowitz calls them “linking devices” (Klinkowitz 78). While “so it goes” is employed with much more frequency than the sound of the dog barking (105 times to about seven times), it operates in the same way, metonymically linking trauma in all of the frame narratives together (the first frame - the narrator uses it in to describe events that happened to himself in Chapter One; the second frame - the events that happened to the main character Billy starting in Chapter Two through the rest of the book; and the third frame - the events that happened to Billy in his imagination, the science-fiction story he tells himself, throughout the discourse). The “linking devices” show the connection between Vonnegut, the narrator (the teller of Vonnegut’s fictional story), Billy, and his fictional story.

This complex mix of fiction and autobiography recur time and again in trauma narratives. In this case, Veas-Gulani explains why in language very similar to that which Doerries uses to describe the reasons Greek tragedians turned to myths instead of to contemporaneous events: “The text implies that because the horrible consequences of the bombing of Dresden truly happened but are too far removed from normal experience to be easily reported, they can neither be completely fictionalized nor simply repeated through an eyewitness account. The novel thus becomes a mixture of autobiography and fiction that simultaneously bind Vonnegut to and distances him from the text and its implications” (180). The same exact statement could be made about Vásquez and *The Sound of Things Falling*, Vallejo and *Our Lady of the Assassins* or Jaramillo Agudelo and *Crossed Letters* – and, of course,

Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, O'Brien, Hemingway, Robert Graves, and all the other great writers who take up the theme of war trauma.

Moreover, it is fiction that might be the most effective form of therapy in this case, just like the other novels I have written about. It was Rosewater who “introduced Billy to science fiction, and in particular to the writings of Kilgore Trout” (78), who soon became “Billy’s favorite living author” (79). Both Rosewater’s and Billy’s chosen method of psychological coping, with renewing their sense of meaning in the world, is almost word-for-word what Shay and Herman advocate to the PTSD victims whom they treat: “So they [Billy and Rosewater] were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help” (79). And a few lines later, Billy overheard Rosewater say to a psychiatrist, “I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful *new* lies, or people just aren’t going to want to go on living” (79). Reading with this motivation in mind, it becomes unequivocally clear, if it was not before, that the aliens from Tralfamadore that abducted Billy were a complete fabrication that he invented for himself; the alien-abduction story was based on the science fiction writings of Kilgore Trout (in whose books the visitors from outer space were “shaped very much like a Tralfamadorian, by the way” [84]), that Billy concocted in order to psychologically cope with normal life after trauma. He re-invented *himself*, the story of his own past, made up of his memories, and his *universe*, the way he had of understanding the world, pre-trauma. Compare Billy’s predicament to Yammara’s trying to see himself and Aura before the accident, in his mind’s eye, but he failed to do so. The chosen path of therapy for both men was to reconstruct the story of themselves and their universes, the result of which was necessarily a complex blend of autobiography and fiction, but was nevertheless a story that could be told as narrative and therefore reintegrated with normal memory.

Another dog barked when Billy first entered the prisoner of war camp in Dresden, which piles two traumatic events, a massacre and prisoner of war experience, on top of each other (65). In the final

instance, the dog barks when Billy first meets the writer Kilgore Trout in person, which is an event that intermixes his worlds of autobiography and fiction, confronting Billy with the living proof of the creator on whose ideas Billy based his own fiction that allowed him to cope with his traumatic symptoms. Furthermore, the scene just before this meeting was one in which Billy was in the throes of a traumatic flashback, the narrator's temporally disorienting discourse, narrating in one breath that Billy was a prisoner in Dresden, in the other breath that Billy was at home arguing with his daughter about his posttraumatic hallucinations of his alien abduction, those that prompted the very writing of the novel (123).

In summary and to support my claim that Vásquez was alluding to Vonnegut in his effort to make a transtextual bridge between two works that grapple with trauma in similar ways, I will briefly restate the structural and thematic similarities between the two novels. Both are written about twenty years after the authors lived through their traumatic events: Vonnegut experienced the Dresden bombing in 1945 and published *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969; Vásquez lived through the violent Escobar years in Bogotá from the mid-eighties to the early nineties and published *The Sound of Things Falling* in 2011. The characters in each novel experienced another traumatic event subsequent to the earlier traumatic period that sent them into acute PTSD symptoms: in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, although it was brewing in his mind, Billy doesn't begin his alien abduction story nor his intense flashbacks until he survives a plane crash in 1968 and loses his wife who died of an accident while he was convalescing (Deresiewicz); in Vásquez, Yammara is shot (the event that triggered the PTSD symptoms, which were latent since the mid-eighties) because he befriended Laverde, who was killed because he was investigating with wife's death in a plane crash. The dog barking, which is the very same symbolic linking device that Vonnegut uses to metonymically connect his discourses on trauma, a process the Vásquez mimics throughout his novel but with different devices, is the one that Vásquez uses for an

allusion. In both novels time is shuffled, or “unstuck” in Vonnegut’s words, in what might be considered a postmodern, fragmented structure, but what I and others argue is an attempt at the mimesis of the nature of traumatic memory (Vees-Gulani 2003; Deresiewicz 2012; Krekorian 2012; Heberle 2001); the trauma survivor can be thought of as living with the trauma in a continual present, flashbacks intrusively invading his conscious thought (Herman 1992; Shay 1994, 2002; Caruth 1995; van der Kolk 1996), which is exactly what happens to both Billy and Yammara in multiple instances throughout both novels.

Finally, their therapy involves reasserting authority over their own intrusive traumatic memories by reconstructing narratives of their own past, their own selves, and their own universes: Billy did this at least twice, the first time in the psychiatric treatment center in 1948 when he started to read Kilmore Trout on the advice of Rosewater (“they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe” (79)), the second time when he invented the alien abduction story after the plane crash and his wife’s death (78); Yammara and Maya join together on this quest, which at least Yammara claims has been partially successful; in fact, to tie the whole transtextual bridge together, it will be remembered that the line “Somewhere, in the depths of the night, a dog barked” (68) in Vázquez occurs immediately after he began writing in the journal that his psychiatrist gave him specifically for PTSD therapy; although initially Yammara writes nothing more than a question mark, claiming that he cannot continue, the narrative thread picks up after the question mark, which implies that the rest of the book, almost the entire narrative discourse, no less, might be nothing more than an entry in his diary. And of course, the transtextual thread leads back to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a mix of fiction and autobiography that Vonnegut, an author whose characters are some of the most “traumatized and emotionally damaged” in contemporary fiction (Broer 3), claims he writes for himself to deal with the psychological aftermath of traumatic experiences.

### 3.2.2 Yammara's Apologoi – Ricardo Laverde and Elaine Fritts

In this section I will make tighter comparisons between Odysseus' apologoi, the story within the story of the *Odyssey*, and what I call Yammara's apologoi, the story within the story within the story of *The Sound of Things Falling*. Highlighting the literary qualities of Yammara's apologoi – its fictionality and conspicuous artistry – make the parallels tighter when one recalls Glenn W. Most's observation that the very formal, symmetrical structuring of Odysseus' apologoi attest to it as a work of fiction (15-16; see also my note 38). Recall that the entire narrative takes place within the frame that Yammara sets for himself on the first page of the novel: in 2009 he feels compelled to tell the story of events that happened to him over a decade earlier. So the whole narrative discourse that follows can be described in the words Segal used to describe Odysseus' apologoi: "remembered experience, inwardly formed and transmuted" (23), or better yet, "a voyage of the soul [...] a formed and crystallized whole which cannot be communicated literally or objectively" (24). That he tells a version of events that happened to him is not strange. But why, then, within that frame, is there another framed narrative of the story of the young Ricardo and Elaine? Why is the construction and telling of that story particularly therapeutic for him, as in many places throughout the text he claims it is?

For instance, in reconstructing the story of Laverde with Maya, he "forgets even himself" (138); I take him to mean he "forgets" his own self-consciousness, the awareness of his subjectivity and the focus on his suffering, because he goes on, in religious language that sustains the Catholic confessional metaphor of this conversation, to describe the forgetting as "an unceremonious annulment of the real world, that absolute sequestration of my conscience," adding that "I came to the conclusion that nothing similar had happened to me since my youth" (138). And he adds, significantly for my take on the theory of therapy through narrative reconstruction, that he was only able to recognize that escape

from his self came later, after he had reconstructed the story “during the hours that I passed with Maya to fill in the gaps left by the letters, for she told me everything that the letters didn’t tell nor even hint at” (138). In each other, they find not only an empathetic listener but an empathetic writer as well; they help each other tell their own story to each other.

But, still, why the framed story of Ricardo and Elaine? Why might that be therapeutic? Is the story simply present in the text to show how Yammara puts together the pieces of the puzzle as to why he was shot. That cannot be the answer because even though in the end the central question of that inquiry – what, exactly, Laverde did – is still left unanswered, Yammara still claims that he has overcome his psychological troubles. So the therapy can’t rest completely on his detective work, which falls short at the denouement because he never finds out what Laverde did. Rather, the answer to why constructing, telling, and listening to stories is therapeutic lies elsewhere – somewhere that Doerries, Segal, and O’Brien have glimpsed – in the distance away from the teller. The remote temporal and imaginative distance Ricardo and Elaine are from Yammara allow their story to serve that purpose for him.

But, on the other hand, is it so far away from the teller? As I have argued in previous sections, throughout the text and with various devices such as metonymy and contiguity, Vásquez continually conflates the characters of Ricardo Laverde and Antonio Yammara, either connecting them or melding them into once composite entity. If this assertion holds, then it is easy to see Yammara writing himself into the story of Ricardo and Elaine. Not only is their story Yammara’s story because it fills in all the gaps in the story of why he was shot, but also because of how much Yammara writes himself into the character of Laverde. It is Yammara’s apologoi, and Laverde is to Yammara what the “Odysseus” of books nine through twelve is to the Odysseus of book eight who is telling the story to the Phaeacians. If this assertion is too far fetched, let’s look at just some of the Yammara/Laverde blending in the novel

to bolster it.

Here is one that is made through metonymy. A connection is established between Yamarra and Laverde when two mediated events, both key to Yammara's fate, happen to Yammara almost simultaneously: the news of Laverde's wife's death (Yammara sees news of the plane crash on television on his way to the sonogram appointment), and confirmation of the health of Yammara's child during the sonogram. The rhetorical devices used in the paragraph that follow create a metonymic connection between the two events. Aura's smile, "beneath the electric radiance of the screen" (41) is something that he will "never forget as long as I live" (41). In contrast, that which he claims he *will* forget, Laverde, is repeated five times in the paragraph by the anaphora "I don't remember" that begins each sentence telling of the absence of memory of any thoughts he may have had concerning Laverde. The whole construction is a repetition of the pattern established in the following sentence: "I don't remember having thought of Ricardo Laverde there, during the sonogram, when Aura and I listened, perfectly stupefied, to the sound of a too-rapid heart beat" (41); it is the anaphora of "I don't remember" followed by something not remembered about Laverde, which, in contrast, is followed immediately by something remembered about Aura and Leticia.

I will elaborate later on how Vásquez uses the metonymical connection to underline themes in throughout the novel – in fact I will argue that it is the formal device essential to the thematic structuring of the novel. But here allow me to point out the powerful irony established here that elevates this scene and this trope to one of central importance in the novel. Along the same lines that Paul de Man argued on Proust in *Allegories of Reading* (1979), I observe here that while Yammara makes one connection with metonymy (the Yammara/Laverde identity connection), he *does not mean what he says* while he is making that connection; hence the powerful irony. He says that he will remember Aura's smile and that he has trouble remembering Laverde, but, conversely, throughout the



course of the novel, he becomes obsessed with remembering Laverde to the detriment of remembering Aura; there is even a time when he says that he tries to remember his relationship with Aura before the accident but couldn't (136). And this obsession is precisely what happens with intrusive, traumatic memories. They invade the victim's consciousness and memory whether he wants them to or not. So here, in sum, there is a scene in which Vásquez' structural trope (the metonymical connection) that dominates the novel is at work melding the identities of Yammara and Laverde in language that mimics an intrusive, traumatic memory. The reader is forced to dwell on it because what it claims is so incongruous with the rest of the story: part of the tragedy is that he remembers Laverde and forgets Aura, despite what he claims – in fact, it is the opposite of what he claims.

But if we return to the Yammara/Laverde cohesion, we will find a more explicit evidence that does not rely solely on metonymy. In the brief moment of confusion just before he is shot, he slips into a delirium thinking that Aura "had Elena's name, or I imagined Elena with the face and pregnant body of Aura" (49) as if his sense of self is shifting between him and Laverde. This echoes the parallel structure that Vásquez sets up between Laverde-Maya and Yammara-Leticia as they pass on their traumatic symptoms to a subsequent generation, discussed above.

Later, there is another metonymical linkage, as Yammara's narrative discourse describing his daughters Leticia watching television immediately follows the first phone message that Maya left him – the parallel construction is Laverde's daughter Maya's interaction with a machine (recording device) followed immediately by Yammara's daughter Leticia's interacting with a machine (television); thus are Yammara and Laverde interposed, one over the other. In another instance, immediately after hanging up the phone with Aura, the last conversation he has with her in the book, he turns to the letter that Elaine wrote to her grandparents. Mediated, the phone in the one case and the letter in the other, connects him to both women.

At Maya's farm when Yammara dons a shirt that he imagines belonged to Laverde, he has an intrusive vision: "I got caught up in the fantasy that the shirt might have belonged to Ricardo Laverde, and imagined him with the shirt on; in the image that I fashioned, for some strange reason, he looked like me" (130). My English translation here, due more, I hope, to syntactical differences between English and Romance languages than to my own ineptitude, does not do justice to the Spanish original. Vásquez writes "en la imagen que me figuré" (130); "me figuré" is the first-person conjugation of the reflexive verb whose infinitive is "figurarse," which means "to imagine," "to figure." Vásquez chooses a reflexive verb here because it allows for ambiguity in agency: somewhere between a passive and active construction in English; it could just as well be translated as "the image I imagined" (active), as "the image that I found myself imagining" (between active-passive), which is not quite the same as "the image that was imagined for me" (passive) but still not as active as "the image I imagined." In any case, the reflexive syntax (he uses another reflexive verb, "paracerse," for "looked like me" (130)) that governs the mood of the whole phrase reflects the ambiguity of the subject. Yammara sees himself melding into Laverde.

As Yammara first reads the story Maya gives him of the young Ricardo and Elaine, he experiences the uncomfortable realization that "the story in which my name appeared nowhere seemed nevertheless to speak of me in each of its lines" (138), as if this story made up a part of his identity, or it was a case of postmemory where he is influenced by events that happened to a previous generation.

Notice also the track of their journey on their trip together to Hacienda Nápoles. They leave Laverde's ranch, Villa Elena, over the exact path that Laverde and Elaine had taken many times before, and they drove in the exact same Nissan car that Laverde and Elaine had traveled in when they themselves were young, almost thirty years before; in fact, the car was the first gift Laverde gave to Elaine that was purchased with the money he earned from the drug trade (225). Maya and Yammara's

path went under a military aircraft training ground, and they heard the planes pass over their head, planes that represent the legacy of Laverde's grandfather. Once again, in this instance Yammara and Laverde are interposed one over the other in time as well as in space.

Therefore, if one is willing to accept my theory of the blending of the Yammara/Laverde identity, one may also be willing to accept my theory that Yammara is writing and telling his own apologoi by telling the story of Laverde and Elaine. The psychologically therapeutic advantage is that the character is far enough away from him to lend it a fictive quality: just like the Greeks tragedians wrote about mythic Oedipus instead of their contemporaneous Marathon, so does Yammara write about mythic Laverde instead of contemporaneous Yammara.

On the other hand, if one is not willing to accept my theory of the blending of the Yammara/Laverde identity, Yammara's apologoi of Laverde and Elaine is still far enough away from his own story to give him the protection of fiction (since it is not about him at all, in point of fact), but close enough to him to be essential for him to tell (the story explains why he was shot, and how drugs came into Colombia, which are connected plot strands). And even though most of this story is put together from objective sources like newspaper clippings and interviews, there are still holes that need to be filled in with...fiction.

Most of the letters and diary entries that Yammara and Maya use to reconstruct Laverde's story are written by Elaine's hand, not theirs, and most of them are translated from the original English into Spanish: thus despite that two additional layers of mediation, that of redactor and that of language, are placed between Yammara and Laverde's biography, the fact that Yammara is forced to translate the letters gives him more agency as the writer of his own story. He is not merely assembling and arranging facts to make a coherent narrative, but also writing part of the story himself, although both acts might be considered by Vásquez, who is a declared disciple of Jorge Luis Borges, as equally

creative. Borges' famous short-story, "Pierre Menard, author of *The Quixote*" (1939) proposes that even the result of a mere transcription of a text is itself a completely different text – the translator is, to a degree, the author. Even more challenging is Borges' praise of Samuel Henley's English translation (1785) of William Beckford's novelette *Vathek* (1782), originally written in French, that "the original is unfaithful to the translation" ("Sobre el "Vathek" de William Beckford" 315 – my translation). In so far as it has been taken to mean that translations are superior to originals, Borges' quote has been taken out of context by subsequent theorists. Here he was referring to the superiority of some, as he claimed, "untranslatable" (315) English words like "uncanny," to describe supernatural horrors; regardless, this comment, when taken in the context of Borges' critical and creative oeuvre, serves to foreground the creative contributions of the translator.

So Yammara might be seen as the Borgesian creator as well as the redactor of the story, a story that fits into his autobiography. But the time, space, language and subject matter are far enough removed from him that it gives him the kind of psychological space to identify with it, as the many Laverde/Yammara parallels throughout the text suggest he does.

In the sections that follow, I will elaborate on these points by highlighting certain tropes that Yammara resorts to in the telling of his story that call attention to its literariness, its quality of being constructed, its quality as fiction. I will focus on the entire frame story, not just the reconstruction of the Elaine and Ricardo story that is framed within the larger discourse, because the trope he uses throughout melds the two together, highlighting the literariness of both. The Elaine and Ricardo story is special in that it resembles the *apologoi* in Odysseus' tale, a story within a larger story that is made up of fact and fiction, but the larger discourse is another *apologoi* with another frame (that of Yammara in 2009 retelling the events that happened to him starting in 1996).

### **Metonymic connection between major events**

One aspect of the retelling that supports my claim of that Yammara's narrative is stylized, self-consciously literary, and consciously constructed is that all the traumatic events in the narrative are connected together metonymically by highlighting the victim's experience of the sharp contrast between sounds and silence while the event is happening. I must be careful here to stress that I am not claiming that the literary quality of the narration somehow impugns the authenticity of the story – a question that for my purposes is neither here nor there. The literary quality of the story helps get at the story for the dual purposes of psychological therapy and faithfulness in representing a traumatic memory.

The idea is similar one that Gabriel Riera posited in a chapter on Argentine writer Juan José Saer's novel *La pesquisa* 'The Investigation' (1994), but with a slightly different objective. Riera held that literary language might come closer to articulating "the real, the unsayable other" (116), arguing along the lines of Levinas that the ethics of writing ought to be judged in some way by the degree to which the writer approached the "real," or the "other": "saying the unsayable," from its title. For my purposes I am interested in the ways that Yammara uses the distance of fiction to safely approximate his own encounter with the "real," which is his traumatic memory, not because it is ethical in the sociological sense, which is how Riera uses Levinas, but because it is presented as effective in the individual psychological sense. The mechanics are the same for both Saer and Vásquez, however, regardless of the aim. Riera notes that Saer uses a technique of "treating the language of prose with a series of *poetic* procedures (the rectification or isolation of certain words, the intensifying expansion of a recollection, the lengthening of the phrase or the phrasing of variations" (120), as well as his text's utilizing "literary forms that do not seem to fit well within its project, such as the detective story in its

closed form” (123) in an attempt to approximate the articulating of the unsayable.

In the section below I will demonstrate that Vásquez does the same thing as Saer does, as do all the other trauma writers whom I mention. Yammara’s narrative discourse is rife with poetics tropes and techniques that draw attention to the literariness of the prose, which says what cannot be said in any other way. Yammara’s narrative is a self-conscious reconstruction of events and memories, and the process of reconstructing the narrative, regardless of the style in which is it written, is what is shown in the text to be psychologically therapeutic – partially therapeutic for Yammara at best, but still therapeutic for all that.

Vásquez uses three key devices to string together metonymically the key themes in the novel: trauma, what I have called postmemory and prosthetic memory, and trauma therapy through narrative construction and retelling. The first device is a metaphor or series of metaphors that contrast loud, disruptive, traumatic sounds with serene silence; I will call refer to this device as the sound/silence metaphor. Taken up obviously from the sound/silence metaphor explicitly referred to in the title *The Sound of Things Falling*, it permeates all of the traumatic events that Yammara narrates. The second device is metaphorical, too, but it consists of metaphors in which the subject is made to realize that control he exerts over circumstances is to some degree illusory and can be easily overpowered by outside forces; examples are an airplane crash, maturing into adulthood, chance encounters with death, and running drugs. The destruction of the illusion of control is a key element in Shay’s theory of complex-PTSD, and I will show how this aspect contributes to Yammara’s PTSD symptoms in the text. The third device is the image of the phallus, which, in its various forms (indigenous statues, dildo, police baton, etc...) appears in key scene in *The Sound of Things Falling*, and is used in ways that cause the themes of postmemory, prosthetic memory, trauma and narrative retelling to inhere in those key scenes. Let us turn to them individually.

### 3.2.3 Sound and Silence

First let us consider the traumatic events that center both the plot and the theme of the novel because of the way they connect the characters: the scene of the plane crash on which Elaine died, the scene of the shooting that killed Laverde and injured Yammara, and the Santa Ana plane crash that injured Laverde's father Julio and killed several bystanders. In each event complete silence and extremely violent noise are both juxtaposed and contrasted. In the case of Elaine's plane crash, the inhuman scream of the pilots is abruptly cut off by the end of the recording: "The noise sounds and then the recording stops" (84). Yammara watches Laverde listen to this recording in the silence of the recording booth; later Yammara himself listens to it alone in the silence of Consuelo's kitchen. In the cases both of the gunshot and the plane crash at the Santa Ana flight show that injured Laverde's father, the silence that the victim perceives just as the event happens is violently disrupted by a noise just after (120). When shot Yammara writes that he and Laverde fell to the ground "two bodies without a sound" (49), but immediately after that people started to scream and this "continuous buzzing" filled his ears. Just before the crash during the flight show, Laverde's father remembers seeing the spectator's faces paralyzed with fear, "mouths open as if they were screaming. But there were no screams: the world had gone quiet" (120). Immediately following the silence is the plane crash, the description of which is: "The world exploded, exploded in sound" (121). Furthermore, in this last example the metonymic connection between sound, silence and falling is reinforced subtly but noticeably in the original Spanish because there is a near rhyme between the words "to fall" 'caer,' which is pronounced "caigh-air" and "to be quiet" 'callar,' which is pronounced "caigh-ahr." Just before the plane falls (caer) from the sky, the line in Spanish is "el mundo se había callado" 'the world had gone quiet' (120). Recalling Saer's insertion of poetic devices into prose, here the poetry sustains the Yammara/Laverde connection

as well because the very first line of Yammara's narrative discourse following the flight show story narrator is: "Night was falling" 'La noche estaba cayendo' (123).

The metonymy spills over into other traumas in the narrative, and thus binds the characters together structurally and stylistically. For example, Elaine chose the church for her wedding based on the "violent shock of the light with darkness and noise with silence" (171) that one experienced on entering it from a high traffic zone outside. And as she looked on the altar, she "thought in the silence and the noise and the darkness and the light" (171) that it somehow looked familiar to her, "as if she had read of its description in some novel" (172), which is a comment that alludes to the literary postmemory process that I hold to be at the center of the trauma discourse through this novel. The Christ figure on the side of the altar that held her attention for the longest, that Ricardo said was one of the best in Bogotá, was named Señor de la Agonía – the Lord of Agony, to complete the metonymical connection here again of noise, silence and trauma.

In another instance later in the narrative, Yammara comments that the most strange aspect of the afternoon he spent with Maya at Hacienda Nápoles was that it was spent in complete silence: "what he looked at we looked in complete silence" (236). And then a metaphor for the deleterious effects of trauma soon follows: "For that was it, our common past, that was there without being there, like the rust hidden from view but that still gnawed away at the car doors, dashboards, wheels, floorboards and steering wheels. [...] As for the property's past, it didn't interest us that much [...] the parties they threw, the violence that was planned there, all that formed a second layer, an adornment" (236). The silence during their journey and the comment "our common past" connects their experience at Hacienda Nápoles metonymically with the other traumatic events of the novel. What lies at the center, "there without being there," like Caruth's conception of an inaccessible traumatic memory, is the sickness gnawing away at the pith, as rust gnaws at the metal, as traumatic symptoms gnaw away at a



subject's psyche.

Then on the way back in the bushes on the side of the road Yammara and Maya saw one of the escaped hippos, which connects Yammara again to Laverde: during the Hacienda Nápoles journey Yammara sees it with Laverde's daughter; whereas before with Laverde himself three years before in the billiard room he watched a shooting of this hippo's ancestors. The connection is strengthened when Maya confirms that some of the only true memories that she has of her father are his comments conveying sympathy for animals (238), which of course are the first words that Yammara can remember hearing Laverde speak, cementing the metonymical connection: "What is going to happen to those poor animals? They are dying of hunger and no one cares at all" (20).

Next, the metonymic stringing together of the sound/silence metaphor carries into the discourse of the methods for trauma therapy as well. In the following example, Yammara's description of his and Maya's mutual retelling sustains the contrast of sound and silence, and in addition subtly mixes a metaphor of Catholic confession; the result is a conceit which combines the sense experience of the traumatic event (silence interrupted by sound) with the cure for it (silence filled with the sound of a confessor): "filling the warm, silent night with words, but without ever looking at each other, like a priest and a sinner in the sacrament of confession" (125).

The rite of confession is believed by Catholics to be literally therapeutic (they believe that the priest has the God-given power to absolve the confessor of his sins) through a process that is a form of psychodynamic cure: one constructs a narrative of one's sins and tells it to an empathetic listener, who, if he is a priest, is also believed to be endowed with the supernatural power to absolve guilt and forgive sins. Shay notes how this form of therapy is particularly effective for those PTSD sufferers who care perpetrators of crimes as well as victims. He urges his patients at the Boston Veterans Affairs clinic, most of whom are Catholic, to avail themselves of this cultural institution – a form of psychodynamic

PTSD therapy that has been available for ages: “If the Church’s ideas on sin, penitence, forgiveness of sin, and redemption are about anything, they’re about the real stuff. What the Church offers is about cruelty, violence, murder – not just the sins you confessed in parochial school” (*Odysseus* 153).

As Catholicism was the Colombia’s state religion until the 1991 Constitution that guaranteed freedom of religion, and seventy-five percent of the population today are still nominal Catholics (“Religion in Latin America”), the confession metaphor is likely to be well understood by Vásquez Colombian readership – many of them are likely personally familiar with the psychologically therapeutic benefits that the rite of confession has to offer. Any Catholic, at least the hundreds with whom I have spoken, after having been confessed their sins and been given absolution, will attest to a feeling of catharsis. With this in mind, I believe that in the passage above Vásquez artfully invokes the metaphor of confession in a description of Yammara’s and Maya’s mutual retelling to emphasize the therapeutic aspects of the exercises – all the while maintaining the sound/silence metonymic connection with the traumatic events, which emphasizes that the therapy is intimately connected with the trauma.

#### **3.2.4 Loss of the Illusion of Control**

Another aspect that all the traumatic events in the novel have in common is the disintegration of the illusion of control as the event occurs. While it might be merely logical that a loss of control would be at the center of a traumatic event, after all, hopelessness and loss of control during the traumatic event are part of the *DSM* criteria for PTSD as well as an essential part of Herman’s formula for complex-PTSD, Yammara strings the traumatic events together with this loss of control metaphor sustained in a highly stylized way. For instance, the Santa Ana crash that injured Ricardo Laverde’s father was caused by the daredevil pilot’s exaggerated sense of his own invulnerability, a foolish belief

that he was competent enough to push the performance of the plane to approach the permissible limit of the laws of physics without crossing that limit, but his loss of control at the most dangerous moment killed him and many others. Much later Ricardo Laverde's downfall came because of his foolishness in believing that he could control his risk running drugs, but of course he had underestimated the extent of the intelligence apparatus of the US DEA. Yammara's and Maya's PTSD symptoms had to do with their experience of living through a constant state of fear from the threat of violence in Bogotá in the mid-eighties, which is a loss of control of one's own surroundings. Yammara drives home this point later in the narrative when he thinks back on his time before the injury when he observes that the period before his injury was a time he felt "still in control of my life" (238).

The billiard scene in the beginning is thus important for this connection, and Vásquez' accord with its use as the subject of the image on the novel's cover reinforces my claim that the metaphor is central to the narrative. On the cover is an image of a man, face shrouded in shadow, which allows him to represent Yammara, Laverde, or both, as their identities are conflated throughout the discourse as well, bent over a blood-red billiard table, cue about to strike the ball. Yammara writes that he has a natural talent at the game, and that he is much better than Laverde (22). But after Yammara was shot he abruptly gave up the hobby without explanation. The obvious implication is that billiards is a game of supreme control over the chain of events that one sets in motion in a confined space; the player's ability to both predict the series of ricochets on the table and to maintain the composure to execute the plan are what determine his success. When one loses the ability to exert control over circumstances in one's life, it is not hard to imagine why one would give up the hobby.

As his time with Maya is coming to an end, just before they decide to take their journey together to the ruins of Escobar's Hacienda Nápoles, which is the trip that capstones their mutual reconstruction of their intersecting trauma narratives, Yammara has intimations of coming to

psychological terms with this loss of control.

Adulthood brings with it the pernicious illusion of control. Perhaps it requires that illusion. [...] And when finally we are hit with disaster we invoke the words that we have learned to use to calm us down: accident, coincidence, sometimes destiny. Right now there is a chain of circumstances, of culpable errors or fortunate decisions, whose consequences are waiting for me as soon as I turn the next corner; and although that I know it well, although that I have the uncomfortable certainty that these things are happening and that they will affect me, there is no way that I might anticipate them or prevent them from happening. To fight against their effects as all that I can do; to repair the damage from the bad and to get as much benefit as I can from the good. (213)

Yammara's careful choice of words, such as the adjective "pernicious" to describe the "illusion" of control, show that he begins to grasp its implications as cause of his posttraumatic symptoms. His next comment shows that he believes narrative has the power to mitigate them: "we invoke the words that we have learned to calm us down" (213). Finally, this decision to resign himself to "accident, coincidence, sometimes destiny" and to limit himself to "fight against their effects" instead of destiny itself marks a turning point in both the story's plot and his recovery. As Vásquez explicitly alludes to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at a crux point earlier in the novel ("In my mind's eye," Vásquez (136) recalls Hamlet's "Methinks I see my father...In my mind's eye, Horatio" (I, 183-185)), it is valid here to compare Yammara's musings are a longer version of Hamlet's own famous prose lines to Horatio in Act V, when Hamlet has come to his own terms with what his attitude toward fate ought to be: "We defy augury. There's a special / providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not / to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not / now, yet it will come – the readiness is all. Since no / man of aught he leaves knows, what is 't to leave betimes? Let be." (5.2 215-220).

I emphasize here the structural, formal, and thematic weight Vásquez places on these lines. They are at the beginning of the final section of the book, delivered in a direct dialogue that seems to connect seamlessly with the retrospective narrative discourse but are really the narrator's inner thoughts; the jolt of the return to narrative discourse that follows it causes the reader to reconsider the musings. This kind of structural highlighting combined with the use of the loss of control metaphor to metonymically string together of the traumatic scenes draws attention to the self-conscious literariness of Yammara's narrative: it is a conscious narrative reconstruction, and a highly stylized and literary one at that – there is even a direct allusion to Hamlet, the most famous story of transgenerational trauma in Western literature.

Take Yammara's Aristotelian recognition scene at the end of his therapeutic journey of discovery with Maya when together they discuss Elaine's tragic end in the plane crash. Yammara's realization and articulation of his strange connection with Laverde ties together in a few lines all of the major themes at work in the novel, which again are trauma, postmemory, prosthetic memory, and recovery through narrative: "And my life? Did my own life not crash in the same moment, was not that sound [the sound of the plane crash and the screams that came just before] the sound of my own fall, that began there without my realizing it? 'What, you too have fallen from the sky?' asks the Little Prince to the pilot who tells his story. And I thought that yes, I have also fallen from the sky, but of my fall there was no possible testimony, no black box [...]" (248). The sound of things falling is the dense metonymical connection of the characters with the events that determine their fate and with each other, the memories of the events and of themselves: in terms of sound, there is the eerie contrast of sound/silence that is present in the discourse of every traumatic event, from the plane crash, to Laverde's murder and Yammara's injury, to Maya's trauma on learning that her father's death had been a lie; in terms of things falling, there is the explicit reference to the Saint-Exupéry novel, which places

transtextual allusion, what might be called literary postmemory, and the art of constructing fiction, at the center of Yammara's consciousness of his own trauma; in terms of prosthetic memory, it must be remembered that the actual sound of the plane crash and passengers screaming is delivered to Yammara and Maya through a *recording* device, a vehicle for the transmission of prosthetic memory, that Yammara very clearly connects with testimony; and finally with the power of narrative to reconstruct a damaged self – the book that the reader holds in his hands is Yammara's memoir of his trauma, which is the answer to the solitary question mark that filled the pages of the diary his psychiatrist told him to write to aid his psychological recovery from the trauma, but the story is something that could only be told after a painstaking reconstruction of the narrative of Self, which in Yammara's case had its origins as far back as three generations (to return to postmemory).

Not only do these lines tie the themes together, but, just as significantly, they precede the lines that tie the plot together, too. When it occurs to Yammara to ask Maya how Ricardo laid his hands on the black box in the first place, we learn that Ricardo got it through bribing someone in the Colombian Aviation administration with money earned through a return to flying illegal deliveries for narco-traffickers; it was either a rival cartel who ordered the hit on him for having encroached on their business or his own employers who killed him as punishment or cover-up. Regardless, he brought this second demise on himself in the same way as the first one: through involvement with narco-trafficking and his hubris at thinking he could control the repercussions. Only this time he didn't hurt only himself and his family; he robbed Yammara of his health and family as well.

### **3.2.5 The Phallus**

Yammara's sexual impotence is a prominent theme in the novel for many reasons. To name a

few, it is both traumatic in itself in that it always threatens to undermine conventional expectations of masculinity, identity, and normal sexual intimacy between lovers, and that in this narrative it is a posttraumatic symptom with physiological causes followed by psychological causes; in a story that is overdetermined by transgenerational trauma and posterity, it calls to question the ability of Yammara to procreate beyond his daughter Leticia, who was conceived prior to his accident; finally, it is a direct allusion to the Jake Barnes character in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, an allusion that sets up one of the many transtextual tensions that I refer to throughout this chapter on the suitability of fiction for traumatic discourse. In this section I draw attention to the formal aspects of Vásquez' treatment of it, how it works just as the sound/silence metaphor and the loss of control metaphor before it to make a metonymic connection between crucial scenes to the novel's plot and traumatic themes.

First, note the metonymic connection between the word that comes to Yammara's mind to describe the phallus that Aura buys them after their having endured three years without sex: "I couldn't avoid that the word "consolador" [comforter], that people sometimes use to refer to this object, came immediately to my mind: Aura as a woman in need of consoling, or Aura as a disconsolate woman" (94). "Consolador," which derives from "consuelo" 'comfort or advice,' or "consolar" 'to comfort or console,' and, as I mentioned before, the name of Laverde's former landlord, Consu (short for Consuelo), the person who started Yammara on his journey to recovery by giving him the recording and serving as the conduit for his acquaintance with Maya. And to risk a crude comparison, the word makes a metonymic connection between two types of mediated experience, trauma experienced through a recording device on the one hand and sex experienced through a prosthetic device in the other hand. Then this is followed by an intrusive prosthetic memory involving, once again, the prosthetic device: note the careful wording that he "couldn't avoid that the word" (94) came immediately to mind; he doesn't say that he thought of the word; rather, he says that he couldn't avoid

it coming immediately to mind, like an intrusive traumatic memory. Furthermore, the metonymic connection is underlined because two scenes are almost juxtaposed in the narrative discourse structure, occurring a few pages within each other. Structurally, one can't help but make the connection between his new acquaintance Consuelo, Laverde's landlord and possessor of the black box (a prosthetic memory), "consolador" 'dildo,' a prosthetic penis, to make his intimate life complete by giving comfort or consolation to Aura, a dis-consolate woman.

Lacan's concept of the phallus as master-signifier and his theory on the gaze bring to light another metonymical connection between these events because of the particular way that Yammara sets the scene. Here is how he describes things when Aura presents him with the dildo: "I looked at it [the dildo] (there, asleep in my hand) and Aura looked at me looking at it" (94). Not only is Yammara experiencing the posttraumatic dissociative symptom of depersonalization, by which he casts himself as somehow outside himself, looking back at himself ("she looked at me looking at it"), but he sets up a triangular intersubjective gaze structure of thwarted intimacy (Yammara, phallus, Aura) that is taken directly from *The Sun Also Rises* and that will be repeated at another crux moment at the end of *The Sound of Things Falling*.

To begin, Yammara's journey of recovery to Maya's farm is connected metonymically to sex as well because the last image Yammara mentions of his apartment and his life with Aura and Leticia before he leaves is the vibrator lying on the coffee table. On returning from this trip, he will find both of them gone and his life significantly changed.

The explicit parallel structure of the Lacanian gaze comes at the end of his visit to Maya's farm. Her wistful comment to Yammara when they are imagining the happiness they might have had together had they met under different circumstances, "It's pretty to think so" (250) is a pronounced allusion to the famous last lines of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. Notice the line describing the policeman



that separates, literally cuts, the dialogue in Hemingway:

“Oh, Jake,” Brett said, “we could have had such a damned good time together.”

Ahead was a mounted policeman in khaki directing traffic. He raised his baton. The car slowed suddenly pressing Brett against me.

“Yes,” I said. “Isn’t it pretty to think so?” (251)

Maya’s line “It’s pretty to think so” is an almost exact replica of Brett’s line, and the mounted policeman in the background raising his phallic baton that literally cuts the discourse between Jake and Brett is a metonymy reinforcing the connecting between Jake and Yammara, two men suffering from posttraumatic symptoms, the most troubling and persistent of which is their sexual impotence. The phallus’ serves the same symbolic function in *El Ruido*. Vásquez structures the crux of Maya’s discovery of her father’s involvement in narco-trafficking (the act that ultimately brings about Yammara’s injury) in a scene that revolves around a gaze at a phallus, with Yammara subsequently occupying the position that Laverde’s other accomplice had occupied before in the very same spot while talking to Maya, another Yammara/Laverde connection superimposed over a Yammara/Jake connection, or in my terms, postmemory superimposed over prosthetic memory.

Here is the Yammara/Maya scene, which parallels the both the staging and narrative structure of the Yammara/Aura scene that I describe above. In her apartment Maya asks Yammara to look at a statue of an indigenous “precolombiano” possessing “an enormous phallus” (252). Maya notes how her father’s associate, who had visited her there years before, “fixed his eyes there, well away from mine; he couldn’t look me in the eyes and tell me what he told me; he didn’t dare. And what he told me was: “And your father wasn’t by any chance involved in strange activities” (253), implying that Laverde somehow made the money to buy the black box recording by working again with the narcos. But when it became obvious that Maya didn’t know anything about her father’s activities, nor that any

knowledge of them would change things, the associate uttered the lines concerning Laverde's illegal activity that recur throughout the narrative: "What does it matter now, anyway?" (253).

It matters, and it doesn't matter. It matters because Laverde's actions have set off a chain of traumatic repercussions that reshape the destinies of Yammara and Maya. What doesn't matter is verifying the ground-truth of exactly what Laverde did. To return to the lessons of Lacan, as I argue Vásquez compels us to do by staging both key scenes around a phallus, it will be remembered that the phallus is the signifier that replaces a lack, or absence. It is put on to replace the object that is lost in symbolic castration. It is that which stands in for the object of one's desire and the impossibility of attaining it in the "real." In the Yammara/Maya scene, and in fact throughout the book, the object of desire for many of the characters was to know exactly what Laverde did to make him an assassination target: "What did he do?" is asked time and again, always accompanied by the assumption that the answer to that question will be the answer and solution to Yammara's and Maya's troubles. But what Laverde did is never revealed, nor will it ever be. It is the lack, the absence at the center of the story, the object that drives and resolves both plot and theme. "What does it matter, anyway?" is the rhetorical question that the characters who have made their separate peace arrive at. What they mean by it is: "I now realize that learning the ground-truth of Laverde's actions is not going to change the consequences of those actions. The only thing left for me to do now is to pick up the pieces of my life and move one. I get it now. Finally." And what, of course, are they looking at during the moment of this revelation? The phallus, which, to zoom out one narrative frame, is also what is "presented" in the narrative discourse to the reader. What the characters and the readers want, the object of their desire, is to finally know what Laverde did. What they are presented with in the place of this absence is the symbol of the phallus, the master-signifier on the order of the Symbolic, which is the order of language and literature.

Even more significantly in terms of my theory of narrative trauma therapy, Maya finally believes in these lines, but her change of heart only happens when she retells this story to Yammara. The very next lines are: “And you know what, Antonio? I think the same thing: what does it matter now, anyway?” (253). But at this point, to understand the metonymic connection between the characters in relation to their trauma, the staging of the scene must be kept in mind. Yammara is occupying the position of Laverde’s associate, gazing at the same phallus the associate gazed at; Yammara and Laverde are connected through mutual contact with the associate/phallus/gaze structure, another mediated connection; and Yammara and Jake of *The Sun Also Rises* are connected in the same manner, a phallus literally cutting off their chance at sexual intimacy.

The phallus is, of course, to return to the subject of Yammara’s impotence with which I opened this section, also the palpable symbol of what Yammara’s lost in the injury that Laverde’s actions caused. The irony of the statement “What does it matter now, anyway” (253) is rife with ironic tension: if there is anyone in the world to whom more details of Laverde’s actions would be of some import, it would be to Yammara, the man who lost his manhood, who is at that moment staring across the room at a symbol of that lost manhood – “How could it not matter?” one might imagine Yammara crying out. But he doesn’t. Conversely, it is at this moment that he makes the decision to return to his former life, to go back to his family and try to pick up the pieces. This is where *The Sound of Things Falling* differs from *The Sun Also Rises*, which ended with the lines so full of disillusionment. In *The Sound of Things Falling*, these lines spur the protagonist on to engage with life again. They signal some degree of success in the narrative restructuring of Self that comes after trauma.

But the point I want to stress is that this moment of clarity of Yammara happens at a synthesis and resolution of all the thematic and plot tensions that were operating throughout the novel: postmemory, prosthetic memory, the varied causes of trauma and its recovery through narrative rather

than a fool's quest for the red-herring ground truth of the etiological event.

#### 4. Conclusion

*The Sound of Things Falling* has occupied the prominent place in my extension of Shay's trauma theory because it synthesizes many different aspects of modern trauma theory in a well-constructed and aesthetically fine literary product. A protagonist suffering from severe symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, caused both from his having experienced a violent attack and from his having lived through a deeply traumatic past, sets about retelling his story, an act which proves to be at least partly psychologically therapeutic for him. In highly crafted ways, using careful structure and certain linking devices, the book demonstrates the profound and complex origins of trauma that reach far back beyond the etiological event.

This text is complex but deceptively so. If read for plot, it is a page-turner. But if read with an eye to synthesize plot and theme, it pays back the effort. First, I had turned to Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory of help me demonstrate the ways that Vásquez shows transgenerational trauma, the transmission of the trauma of the past into the future generations, to be one origin of trauma in Colombia. Vásquez' careful placement of literary allusions to a broad range of works in Western literature dealing with transgenerational trauma universalize this origin – he shows that this has been a recurrent theme in all of literature since its inception, and intimates the question that concerns all literary critics: why we tell each other stories.

As we have also seen, Alison Landsberg's idea of prosthetic memory show other origins of trauma in the modern age: inundation of violent and traumatic stories through various media devices with the result of those memories somehow suturing themselves into the subject's consciousness. That the prosthetic memories that Yammara experiences even dominate his perception of the real memories

during a physically traumatic event for him suggests that those prosthetic memories are just as powerful a cause of trauma as the physical causes are. This illustrates what Shay's point about the trauma of modern warfare: the constant exposure to danger or the threat of danger. As Vásquez shows with Yammara, a Colombian in the eighties and therefore exposed to the same stressors as a soldier in a war, his constant exposure to violence, real or not, was just as traumatic as a gunshot wound.

Finally, the characters in this novel undertake some of the methods for trauma therapy that parallel not only the methods recommended by modern health care professionals, but also great literary works such as the *Odyssey*. Yammara makes multiple journeys; all of them, and each in its own way, allow him to reinscribe his trauma back into his normal memory, rebuilding his own history. At the center of each journey is a retelling, which requires a reconstructing of fragmented, traumatic memories into a coherent narrative, a process that allows reclamation of one's authority over one's memory, and therefore one's Self. I show how this is remarkably similar in form and structure to Odysseus' own apologoi, told to his hosts the Phaeacians during one of his own psychologically therapeutic journeys. These stories, from Homer to O'Brien to Vonnegut to Vásquez, are all characterized by a strange amalgamation of fact and fiction, fantasy and reality; but the important point in terms of trauma therapy, going back to Freud and Ferenczi, is that the story's mimetic accuracy to external reality *does not matter*, what matters is the story's coherence in terms of the reality it creates for itself.

Through this, all of these authors make coherent stories, and for my purposes that fact that they are fictions is what makes them interesting literary material. In particular, Vásquez uses poetic tropes to tie together all of these themes that dominate his work: postmemory, prosthetic memory, and trauma therapy through narrative retelling. The result is a superbly constructed work of fiction that makes a significant contribution to the way we understand trauma not just in Colombia, but in the world.

## CONCLUSION

An article in *Time* magazine titled “Colombia: War Without End” was followed up by a CNN in-depth special report titled “Colombia: War Without End” – the *Time* article was published in 1952, and the CNN report issued in the year 2000 (“War Without End,” *Time* 1952; CNN). Last month, in March of 2015, *Nature* magazine wrote of Colombia in its new feature “Conflict resolution: Wars without end” (Jones). If both I and *Time* are still around in 2052, I will not be surprised to find an article, or at least some kind of media content delivered wirelessly to my brain, about the “war without end” in Colombia. By then I will be an ancient mariner, and, like the one Coleridge writes of, who most certainly had PTSD despite what Young might say, will be of a mind to buttonhole wedding guests and speak of maledictions. ““Hold off! Unhand me, grey-beard loon!”” (1.11) they might protest, but my “glittering eye” (1.13) will hold them rapt. I have no doubt that, by then, much more penetrating literature will have been produced; and that literature will be interpreted well by an approach enlightened by combat trauma theory – an albatross that very well might hang around my neck.

The appellation “war” does not even do justice to the vertiginous conflict in Colombia. Entrenched interests do violence to and displace indigenous peoples. The volume of narcotics

produced has not decreased appreciably even after the billions of dollars injected by the United States helped spill so much blood. Paramilitary organizations simply change their names to BACRIMs, wield the same influence over politics, and continue massacring people in large numbers and with impunity. An acceptable peace has still to be made with guerilla organizations. Violence happens from all sides, and justice and accountability are terms that cannot be pronounced without irony. These are the kind of circumstances that produce constant tectonic shifts in phenomenology, or, to paraphrase Shay, explosions in the cohesion of consciousness, shattered paradigms. It is simple-PTSD plus a moral injury because the capacity for social trust has been lost. These are the reasons I chose this body of work for my study of trauma and recovery.

While I understand that the question of whether literature or narrative reconstruction of traumatic memory is effective PTSD therapy is one for the psychologists, not for the literary critics, I do believe, as I think all who love literature do, in its power to sustain us in a chaotic world. The differences in Darío Jaramillo Agudelo's mental state before and after writing *Cartas cruzadas* would have been an interesting study for James Pennebaker; on that note, Jaramillo Agudelo himself claims that it helped him immeasurably, as I wrote about in Chapter Four. But, leaving that question aside, what the literary critic can do for certain is to judge how narrative construction within the text tends to ameliorate the posttraumatic symptoms of the characters within the text, how trauma suffered by the characters determines the shape of their memories and their actions. The critic can show how the form of the literary work is determined by the implied author's or narrator's attempt to represent traumatic memory, if such a thing can be done – which is another question that I do not think we will have an answer to any time soon. But the process of attempting to do so, I think Shay and Pennebaker have shown, has therapeutic benefits to the victim of a psychological injury. The critic can work from post-Enlightenment views on the construction of the Self and analyze to what extent trauma complicates

maintaining a coherent sense of identity. The critic can take into account the social circumstances that produce a work of art, such as prolonged exposure to violence and political instability, to show how those circumstances might produce a certain mental condition predisposed to viewing the world in a particular way.

Asymmetric wars, civil wars and violent conflicts between non-state actors are the new norm of warfare today. A theoretical model that can interpret literature produced under these conditions will be a significant contribution to the field. By using combat trauma theory outlined by Shay, I have been able to perceive certain aspects of these three Colombian novels that other critics have missed. Fernando's berserk rage, as Shay termed it, or perpetrator-induced traumatic stress (PITS) as MacNair termed it, are new methods of psychological criticism that provide insight into the character. Fernando is despicable; the sicarios are murderers; but there is no reason that they cannot be despicable, traumatized murderers. Understanding the conditions that produce such unadulterated evil is a social and ethical good. Theories on narrative and writing therapy, with the help of Poe, Lacan, and Derrida, helped me to find the protagonist hidden in plain sight in Jaramillo Agudelo's *Cartas Cruzadas*. Juan Gabriel Vásquez's *The Sound of Things Falling* was elucidated by a reading that took into account the different ways that subjects are traumatized in the modern world. Hirsch's postmemory, Landsberg's prosthetic memory, and of course Shay's and Herman's ideas of trauma and recovery provide new ways of analyzing Vásquez's narrator Yammara, and many other famous literary characters who reconstruct their own memories to make themselves whole again, like Billy and Odysseus.

More significantly to my project of literary criticism, I owe just as much a debt to formalist literary criticism as I do to contemporary trauma theory for help in arriving at any insights. Russian linguist Roman Jakobson's writings on the two linguistic axes of rhetoric and grammar, metaphor and



metonymy, ideas that run through William Empson's work on ambiguity, New Criticism and Paul de Man, help me analyze the coherency and style of the narrator's discourse. The metonymic connections that Fernando and Yammara make show that their works are constituted by traumatic memory. The narratology of Gérard Genette helped me navigate through the various shifts in mood, tone, point of view and voice. The disintegration of Fernando's character plays out in the discourse; it is something that can be missed without careful attention to shifts in narrative perspective. The close reading of classical scholars William Race and Charles Segal allowed me to see the possibility that Vásquez was making a transtextual allusion between Yammara's restorative journey and that of Odysseus. The evidence of Phaeacian Scheria and Maya's ranch as halfway house is there in the text, available for formal analysis as well as psychoanalytical analysis. Cleanth Brooks' close reading in *The Well Wrought Urn* (1975[1947]) and Wayne Booth's nuts-and-bolts study of figurative writing in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1973[1961]) both helped me make these connections, and many more throughout the dissertation. In sum, it was the critical tools that I learned through training in comparative literature and literary theory combined with contemporary trauma theory that allowed me to arrive at a novel and insightful method of textual interpretation.

The field of trauma studies is broad, complex and extraordinarily polemical. I include what I call a Brief Genealogy of Trauma to give a cursory accounting of developments over the last century. Leys's study is probably the most effective at showing the irresolvable tension between the various methods of understanding trauma and proposing possible cures. I want to take full account of the objections and criticisms of the methods for which I advocate, a discussion that cannot even begin without knowledge of the genealogy. The content of the first chapter may have seemed even tangential to that of the rest of the dissertation, and this is my apology for the incongruity.

Looking forward, combat trauma theory might be a new way of understanding this particular

literature of Colombian trauma, and I hope literature in general. If the reader has followed me this far, it is worth reflecting at this point the implications that the combat trauma model might potentially have on literary criticism – if the very first lines of one of the foundational texts of all Western literature announces that the theme of that work is the berserk rage of a warrior suffering from PTSD, then what other texts were written with this theme in mind, and how could they be better illuminated using this model?

Colombia, this country that is still determined by trauma and traumatic memory coming out of a context of prolonged violence and terror, might produced texts in this vein that are not only testimony to the injustices and trauma, but are better illuminated by the posttraumatic literary theory as well. I expect to see literary works from other cultures that can be enhanced by the model as well, of course – my sights are on the texts coming from veterans of the war without end against terror. But even in circumstances of extreme violence, it will be difficult to find in other places the combination of traumatogenic factors that have plagued, and continue to plague, Colombia.

## APPENDIX

### DSM-V PTSD Diagnostic Criteria

Copied from the DSM-V section, “Trauma and Stressor Related Disorders”<sup>67</sup>

#### 1. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

##### Diagnostic Criteria 309.81 (F43.10) Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

1. Note: The following criteria apply to adults, adolescents, and children older than 6 years. For children 6 years and younger, see corresponding criteria below.
  - A. Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways:
    1. Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s).
    2. Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others.
    3. Learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend. In cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental.
    4. Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g., first responders collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse).
      - Note: Criterion A4 does not apply to exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures, unless this exposure is work related.
  - B. Presence of one (or more) of the following intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred:
    1. Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event(s).
      - Note: In children older than 6 years, repetitive play may occur in which themes or aspects of the traumatic event(s) are expressed.
    2. Recurrent distressing dreams in which the content and/or affect of the dream are related to the traumatic event(s).
      - Note: In children, there may be frightening dreams without recognizable content.
    3. Dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks) in which the individual feels or acts as if the traumatic event(s) were recurring. (Such reactions may occur on a continuum, with the most extreme expression being a complete loss of awareness of present surroundings.)
      - Note: In children, trauma-specific reenactment may occur in play.
    4. Intense or prolonged psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or

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<sup>67</sup> <http://dsm.psychiatryonline.org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/content.aspx?bookid=556&sectionid=41101771#103438457>

- resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).
- 5. Marked physiological reactions to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).
- C. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by one or both of the following:
  1. Avoidance of or efforts to avoid distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s).
  2. Avoidance of or efforts to avoid external reminders (people, places, conversations, activities, objects, situations) that arouse distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s).
- D. Negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by two (or more) of the following:
  1. Inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic event(s) (typically due to dissociative amnesia and not to other factors such as head injury, alcohol, or drugs).
  2. Persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations about oneself, others, or the world (e.g., “I am bad,” “No one can be trusted,” “The world is completely dangerous,” “My whole nervous system is permanently ruined”).
  3. Persistent, distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that lead the individual to blame himself/herself or others.
  4. Persistent negative emotional state (e.g., fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame).
  5. Markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities.
  6. Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others.
  7. Persistent inability to experience positive emotions (e.g., inability to experience happiness, satisfaction, or loving feelings).
- E. Marked alterations in arousal and reactivity associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by two (or more) of the following:
  1. Irritable behavior and angry outbursts (with little or no provocation) typically expressed as verbal or physical aggression toward people or objects.
  2. Reckless or self-destructive behavior.
  3. Hypervigilance.
  4. Exaggerated startle response.
  5. Problems with concentration.
  6. Sleep disturbance (e.g., difficulty falling or staying asleep or restless sleep).
- F. Duration of the disturbance (Criteria B, C, D, and E) is more than 1 month.
- G. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- H. The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., medication, alcohol) or another medical condition.

*Specify whether:*

- With dissociative symptoms: The individual’s symptoms meet the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder, and in addition, in response to the stressor, the individual experiences persistent or recurrent symptoms of either of the following:
  1. Depersonalization: Persistent or recurrent experiences of feeling detached from, and as if one were an outside observer of, one’s mental processes or body (e.g., feeling as though one were in a dream; feeling a sense of unreality of self or body or of time moving slowly).
  2. Derealization: Persistent or recurrent experiences of unreality of surroundings (e.g., the world around the individual is experienced as unreal, dreamlike, distant, or distorted).
  3. Note: To use this subtype, the dissociative symptoms must not be attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., blackouts, behavior during alcohol intoxication) or another medical condition (e.g., complex partial seizures).

*Specify if:*

- With delayed expression: If the full diagnostic criteria are not met until at least 6 months after the event (although the onset and expression of some symptoms may be immediate).

### **Posttraumatic Stress Disorder for Children 6 Years and Younger**

1. In children 6 years and younger, exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways:
  1. Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s).
  2. Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others, especially primary caregivers.
    - Note: Witnessing does not include events that are witnessed only in electronic media, television, movies, or pictures.
  3. Learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a parent or caregiving figure.
2. Presence of one (or more) of the following intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred:
  1. Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event(s).
    - Note: Spontaneous and intrusive memories may not necessarily appear distressing and may be expressed as play reenactment.
  2. Recurrent distressing dreams in which the content and/or affect of the dream are related to the traumatic event(s).
    - Note: It may not be possible to ascertain that the frightening content is related to the traumatic event.
  3. Dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks) in which the child feels or acts as if the traumatic event(s) were recurring. (Such reactions may occur on a continuum, with the most extreme expression being a complete loss of awareness of present surroundings.) Such trauma-specific reenactment may occur in play.
  4. Intense or prolonged psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).
  5. Marked physiological reactions to reminders of the traumatic event(s).

One (or more) of the following symptoms, representing either persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event(s) or negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event(s), must be present, beginning after the event(s) or worsening after the event(s):

6. Persistent Avoidance of Stimuli
7. Avoidance of or efforts to avoid activities, places, or physical reminders that arouse recollections of the traumatic event(s).
8. Avoidance of or efforts to avoid people, conversations, or interpersonal situations that arouse recollections of the traumatic event(s).
  - Negative Alterations in Cognitions
9. Substantially increased frequency of negative emotional states (e.g., fear, guilt, sadness, shame, confusion).
10. Markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities, including constriction of play.
11. Socially withdrawn behavior.
12. Persistent reduction in expression of positive emotions.
3. Alterations in arousal and reactivity associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by two (or more) of the following:
  1. Irritable behavior and angry outbursts (with little or no provocation) typically expressed as verbal or physical aggression toward people or objects (including extreme temper tantrums).
  2. Hypervigilance.
  3. Exaggerated startle response.
  4. Problems with concentration.
  5. Sleep disturbance (e.g., difficulty falling or staying asleep or restless sleep).
4. The duration of the disturbance is more than 1 month.
5. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in relationships with parents, siblings, peers, or other caregivers or with school behavior.

6. The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., medication or alcohol) or another medical condition.

*Specify* whether:

- With dissociative symptoms: The individual's symptoms meet the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder, and the individual experiences persistent or recurrent symptoms of either of the following:
  1. Depersonalization: Persistent or recurrent experiences of feeling detached from, and as if one were an outside observer of, one's mental processes or body (e.g., feeling as though one were in a dream; feeling a sense of unreality of self or body or of time moving slowly).
  2. Derealization: Persistent or recurrent experiences of unreality of surroundings (e.g., the world around the individual is experienced as unreal, dreamlike, distant, or distorted).
  3. Note: To use this subtype, the dissociative symptoms must not be attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., blackouts) or another medical condition (e.g., complex partial seizures).

*Specify* if:

- With delayed expression: If the full diagnostic criteria are not met until at least 6 months after the event (although the onset and expression of some symptoms may be immediate).

## **Diagnostic Features**

The essential feature of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to one or more traumatic events. Emotional reactions to the traumatic event (e.g., fear, helplessness, horror) are no longer a part of Criterion A. The clinical presentation of PTSD varies. In some individuals, fear-based re-experiencing, emotional, and behavioral symptoms may predominate. In others, anhedonic or dysphoric mood states and negative cognitions may be most distressing. In some other individuals, arousal and reactive-externalizing symptoms are prominent, while in others, dissociative symptoms predominate. Finally, some individuals exhibit combinations of these symptom patterns.

The directly experienced traumatic events in Criterion A include, but are not limited to, exposure to war as a combatant or civilian, threatened or actual physical assault (e.g., physical attack, robbery, mugging, childhood physical abuse), threatened or actual sexual violence (e.g., forced sexual penetration, alcohol/drug-facilitated sexual penetration, abusive sexual contact, noncontact sexual abuse, sexual trafficking) (Basile et al. 2013), being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack, torture, incarceration as a prisoner of war, natural or human-made disasters, and severe motor vehicle accidents. For children, sexually violent events may include developmentally inappropriate sexual experiences without physical violence or injury. A life-threatening illness or debilitating medical condition is not necessarily considered a traumatic event. Medical incidents that qualify as traumatic events involve sudden, catastrophic events (e.g., waking during surgery, anaphylactic shock).

Witnessed events include, but are not limited to, observing threatened or serious injury, unnatural death, physical or sexual abuse of another person due to violent assault, domestic violence, accident, war or disaster, or a medical catastrophe in one's child (e.g., a life-threatening hemorrhage). Indirect exposure through learning about an event is limited to experiences affecting close relatives or friends and

experiences that are violent or accidental (e.g., death due to natural causes does not qualify). Such events include violent personal assault, suicide, serious accident, and serious injury. The disorder may be especially severe or long-lasting when the stressor is interpersonal and intentional (e.g., torture, sexual violence).

The traumatic event can be reexperienced in various ways. Commonly, the individual has recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive recollections of the event (Criterion B1). Intrusive recollections in PTSD are distinguished from depressive rumination in that they apply only to involuntary and intrusive distressing memories. The emphasis is on recurrent memories of the event that usually include sensory, emotional, or physiological behavioral components. A common reexperiencing symptom is distressing dreams that replay the event itself or that are representative or thematically related to the major threats involved in the traumatic event (Criterion B2). The individual may experience dissociative states that last from a few seconds to several hours or even days, during which components of the event are relived and the individual behaves as if the event were occurring at that moment (Criterion B3). Such events occur on a continuum from brief visual or other sensory intrusions about part of the traumatic event without loss of reality orientation, to complete loss of awareness of present surroundings. These episodes, often referred to as “flashbacks,” are typically brief but can be associated with prolonged distress and heightened arousal. For young children, reenactment of events related to trauma may appear in play or in dissociative states. Intense psychological distress (Criterion B4) or physiological reactivity (Criterion B5) often occurs when the individual is exposed to triggering events that resemble or symbolize an aspect of the traumatic event (e.g., windy days after a hurricane; seeing someone who resembles one’s perpetrator). The triggering cue could be a physical sensation (e.g., dizziness for survivors of head trauma; rapid heartbeat for a previously traumatized child), particularly for individuals with highly somatic presentations (Friedman et al. 2011).

Stimuli associated with the trauma are persistently (e.g., always or almost always) avoided. The individual commonly makes deliberate efforts to avoid thoughts, memories, feelings, or talking about the traumatic event (e.g., utilizing distraction techniques to avoid internal reminders) (Criterion C1) and to avoid activities, objects, situations, or people who arouse recollections of it (Criterion C2).

Negative alterations in cognitions or mood associated with the event begin or worsen after exposure to the event. These negative alterations can take various forms, including an inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic event; such amnesia is typically due to dissociative amnesia and is not due to head injury, alcohol, or drugs (Criterion D1). Another form is persistent (i.e., always or almost always) and exaggerated negative expectations regarding important aspects of life applied to oneself, others, or the future (e.g., “I have always had bad judgment”; “People in authority can’t be trusted”) that may manifest as a negative change in perceived identity since the trauma (e.g., “I can’t trust anyone ever again”; Criterion D2). Individuals with PTSD may have persistent erroneous cognitions about the causes of the traumatic event that lead them to blame themselves or others (e.g., “It’s all my

fault that my uncle abused me”) (Criterion D3). A persistent negative mood state (e.g., fear, horror, anger, guilt, shame) either began or worsened after exposure to the event (Criterion D4). The individual may experience markedly diminished interest or participation in previously enjoyed activities (Criterion D5), feeling detached or estranged from other people (Criterion D6), or a persistent inability to feel positive emotions (especially happiness, joy, satisfaction, or emotions associated with intimacy, tenderness, and sexuality) (Criterion D7) (Friedman et al. 2011).

Individuals with PTSD may be quick tempered and may even engage in aggressive verbal and/or physical behavior with little or no provocation (e.g., yelling at people, getting into fights, destroying objects) (Criterion E1). They may also engage in reckless or self-destructive behavior such as dangerous driving, excessive alcohol or drug use, or self-injurious or suicidal behavior (Criterion E2). PTSD is often characterized by a heightened sensitivity to potential threats, including those that are related to the traumatic experience (e.g., following a motor vehicle accident, being especially sensitive to the threat potentially caused by cars or trucks) and those not related to the traumatic event (e.g., being fearful of suffering a heart attack) (Criterion E3) (Smith and Bryant 2000; Warda and Bryant 1998). Individuals with PTSD may be very reactive to unexpected stimuli, displaying a heightened startle response, or jumpiness, to loud noises or unexpected movements (e.g., jumping markedly in response to a telephone ringing) (Criterion E4). Concentration difficulties, including difficulty remembering daily events (e.g., forgetting one’s telephone number) or attending to focused tasks (e.g., following a conversation for a sustained period of time), are commonly reported (Criterion E5). Problems with sleep onset and maintenance are common and may be associated with nightmares and safety concerns or with generalized elevated arousal that interferes with adequate sleep (Criterion E6). Some individuals also experience persistent dissociative symptoms of detachment from their bodies (depersonalization) or the world around them (derealization); this is reflected in the “with dissociative symptoms” specifier (Friedman et al. 2011).

### **Associated Features Supporting Diagnosis**

Developmental regression, such as loss of language in young children, may occur. Auditory pseudo-hallucinations, such as having the sensory experience of hearing one’s thoughts spoken in one or more different voices (Brewin and Patel 2010), as well as paranoid ideation, can be present. Following prolonged, repeated, and severe traumatic events (e.g., childhood abuse, torture), the individual may additionally experience difficulties in regulating emotions or maintaining stable interpersonal relationships, or dissociative symptoms. When the traumatic event produces violent death, symptoms of both problematic bereavement and PTSD may be present.

### **Prevalence**

In the United States, projected lifetime risk for PTSD using DSM-IV criteria at age 75 years is 8.7% (Kessler et al. 2005a). Twelve-month prevalence among U.S. adults is about 3.5% (Kessler et al. 2005b). Lower estimates are seen in Europe and most Asian, African, and Latin American countries,



clustering around 0.5%–1.0% (Hinton and Lewis-Fernández 2011). Although different groups have different levels of exposure to traumatic events (Blanco 2011), the conditional probability of developing PTSD following a similar level of exposure may also vary across cultural groups (Hinton and Lewis-Fernández 2011). Rates of PTSD are higher among veterans and others whose vocation increases the risk of traumatic exposure (e.g., police, firefighters, emergency medical personnel). Highest rates (ranging from one-third to more than one-half of those exposed) are found among survivors of rape, military combat and captivity, and ethnically or politically motivated internment and genocide. The prevalence of PTSD may vary across development; children and adolescents, including preschool children, generally have displayed lower prevalence following exposure to serious traumatic events; however, this may be because previous criteria were insufficiently developmentally informed (Scheeringa et al. 2011). The prevalence of full-threshold PTSD also appears to be lower among older adults compared with the general population; there is evidence that subthreshold presentations are more common than full PTSD in later life and that these symptoms are associated with substantial clinical impairment (Thorp et al. 2011). Compared with U.S. non-Latino whites, higher rates of PTSD have been reported among U.S. Latinos, African Americans, and American Indians, and lower rates have been reported among Asian Americans, after adjustment for traumatic exposure and demographic variables (Beals et al. 2002; Hinton and Lewis-Fernández 2011; Perilla et al. 2002).

### **Development and Course**

PTSD can occur at any age, beginning after the first year of life. Symptoms usually begin within the first 3 months after the trauma, although there may be a delay of months, or even years, before criteria for the diagnosis are met. There is abundant evidence for what DSM-IV called “delayed onset” but is now called “delayed expression,” with the recognition that some symptoms typically appear immediately and that the delay is in meeting full criteria (Andrews et al. 2007).

Frequently, an individual’s reaction to a trauma initially meets criteria for acute stress disorder in the immediate aftermath of the trauma. The symptoms of PTSD and the relative predominance of different symptoms may vary over time. Duration of the symptoms also varies, with complete recovery within 3 months occurring in approximately one-half of adults, while some individuals remain symptomatic for longer than 12 months (Bryant et al. 2011) and sometimes for more than 50 years. Symptom recurrence and intensification may occur in response to reminders of the original trauma, ongoing life stressors, or newly experienced traumatic events. For older individuals, declining health, worsening cognitive functioning, and social isolation may exacerbate PTSD symptoms (Thorp et al. 2011).

The clinical expression of reexperiencing can vary across development. Young children may report new onset of frightening dreams without content specific to the traumatic event. Before age 6 years (see criteria for preschool subtype), young children are more likely to express reexperiencing symptoms through play that refers directly or symbolically to the trauma. They may not manifest fearful reactions at the time of the exposure or during reexperiencing. Parents may report a wide range of emotional or

behavioral changes in young children. Children may focus on imagined interventions in their play or storytelling. In addition to avoidance, children may become preoccupied with reminders. Because of young children's limitations in expressing thoughts or labeling emotions, negative alterations in mood or cognition tend to involve primarily mood changes. Children may experience co-occurring traumas (e.g., physical abuse, witnessing domestic violence) and in chronic circumstances may not be able to identify onset of symptomatology (Scheeringa et al. 2005; Scheeringa et al. 2006). Avoidant behavior may be associated with restricted play or exploratory behavior in young children; reduced participation in new activities in school-age children; or reluctance to pursue developmental opportunities in adolescents (e.g., dating, driving). Older children and adolescents may judge themselves as cowardly. Adolescents may harbor beliefs of being changed in ways that make them socially undesirable and estrange them from peers (e.g., "Now I'll never fit in") and lose aspirations for the future. Irritable or aggressive behavior in children and adolescents can interfere with peer relationships and school behavior. Reckless behavior may lead to accidental injury to self or others, thrill-seeking, or high-risk behaviors (Pynoos et al. 2009). Individuals who continue to experience PTSD into older adulthood may express fewer symptoms of hyperarousal, avoidance, and negative cognitions and mood compared with younger adults with PTSD, although adults exposed to traumatic events during later life may display more avoidance, hyperarousal, sleep problems, and crying spells than do younger adults exposed to the same traumatic events (Thorp et al. 2011). In older individuals, the disorder is associated with negative health perceptions, primary care utilization, and suicidal ideation (Rauch et al. 2006).

### **Risk and Prognostic Factors**

Risk (and protective) factors are generally divided into pretraumatic, peritraumatic, and posttraumatic factors.

#### **Pretraumatic factors**

##### **Temperamental**

These include childhood emotional problems by age 6 years (e.g., prior traumatic exposure, externalizing or anxiety problems) and prior mental disorders (e.g., panic disorder, depressive disorder, PTSD, or obsessive-compulsive disorder [OCD]).

##### **Environmental**

These include lower socioeconomic status; lower education; exposure to prior trauma (especially during childhood) (Binder et al. 2008; Cougle et al. 2009; Smith et al. 2008); childhood adversity (e.g., economic deprivation, family dysfunction, parental separation or death); cultural characteristics (e.g., fatalistic or self-blaming coping strategies); lower intelligence; minority racial/ethnic status; and a family psychiatric history. Social support prior to event exposure is protective.

##### **Genetic and physiological**

These include female gender and younger age at the time of trauma exposure (for adults). Certain genotypes may either be protective or increase risk of PTSD after exposure to traumatic events.

### **Peritraumatic factors**

#### **Environmental**

These include severity (dose) of the trauma (the greater the magnitude of trauma, the greater the likelihood of PTSD), perceived life threat, personal injury, interpersonal violence (particularly trauma perpetrated by a caregiver or involving a witnessed threat to a caregiver in children) (Scheeringa et al. 2006), and, for military personnel, being a perpetrator, witnessing atrocities, or killing the enemy. Finally, dissociation that occurs during the trauma and persists afterward is a risk factor.

#### **Posttraumatic factors**

##### **Temperamental**

These include negative appraisals, inappropriate coping strategies, and development of acute stress disorder.

##### **Environmental**

These include subsequent exposure to repeated upsetting reminders, subsequent adverse life events, and financial or other trauma-related losses. Social support (including family stability, for children) is a protective factor that moderates outcome after trauma (Breslau 2009; Vogt et al. 2007).

### **Culture-Related Diagnostic Issues**

The risk of onset and severity of PTSD may differ across cultural groups as a result of variation in the type of traumatic exposure (e.g., genocide), the impact on disorder severity of the meaning attributed to the traumatic event (e.g., inability to perform funerary rites after a mass killing), the ongoing sociocultural context (e.g., residing among unpunished perpetrators in postconflict settings), and other cultural factors (e.g., acculturative stress in immigrants) (Hinton and Lewis-Fernández 2011). The relative risk for PTSD of particular exposures (e.g., religious persecution) may vary across cultural groups. The clinical expression of the symptoms or symptom clusters of PTSD may vary culturally, particularly with respect to avoidance and numbing symptoms, distressing dreams, and somatic symptoms (e.g., dizziness, shortness of breath, heat sensations).

Cultural syndromes and idioms of distress influence the expression of PTSD and the range of comorbid disorders in different cultures by providing behavioral and cognitive templates that link traumatic exposures to specific symptoms. For example, panic attack symptoms may be salient in PTSD among Cambodians and Latin Americans because of the association of traumatic exposure with panic-like *khy'l* attacks and *ataque de nervios* (Hinton and Lewis-Fernández 2011). Comprehensive evaluation of local expressions of PTSD should include assessment of cultural concepts of distress (see the chapter

“Cultural Formulation” in Section III).

## **2. Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as proposed by Judith Herman in Trauma and Recovery (1992: 121)**

1. A history of subjection to totalitarian control over a prolonged period (months to years).  
Examples include hostages, prisoners of war, concentration-camp survivors, and survivors of some religious cults. Examples also include those subjected to totalitarian systems in sexual and domestic life, including those domestic battering, childhood physical or sexual abuse, and organized sexual exploitation.
2. Alterations in affect regulation, including:
  - persistent dysphoria
  - chronic suicidal preoccupation
  - self-injury
  - explosive or extremely inhibited anger (may alternate)
  - compulsive or extremely inhibited sexuality (may alternate)
3. Alterations in consciousness, including
  - amnesia or hypermnesia for traumatic events
  - transient dissociative episodes
  - depersonalization/derealization
  - reliving experiences, either in the form of intrusive post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms or in the form of ruminative preoccupation
4. Alterations in self-perception, including
  - sense of helplessness or paralysis of initiative
  - shame, guilt, and self-blame
  - sense of defilement or stigma
  - sense of complete difference from others (may include sense of specialness, utter aloneness, belief no other person can understand, or nonhuman identity)
5. Alterations in perception of perpetrator, including
  - preoccupation with relationship with perpetrator (includes preoccupation with revenge)
  - unrealistic attribution of total power to perpetrator (caution: victim's assessment of power realities may be more realistic than clinician's)
  - idealization or paradoxical gratitude
  - sense of special or supernatural relationship
  - acceptance of belief system or rationalizations of perpetrator
6. Alterations in relations with others, including
  - isolation and withdrawal
  - disruption in intimate relationships
  - repeated search for rescuer (may alternate with isolation and withdrawal)
  - persistent distrust
  - repeated failures of self-protection
7. Alterations in systems of meaning
  - loss of sustaining faith

- sense of hopelessness and despair

### **3. WHO Posttraumatic Stress Disorder**

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder as defined by the current version of the World Health Organization's International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-10): 2015. Section V: Mental and Behavioural Disorders; sub-section F40-48: Neurotic, Stress-related, and somatoform disorders (ICD-10, <http://apps.who.int/classifications/icd10/browse/2015/en#/F43.1>; accessed 12 March 2015).

#### **F43.1 Post-traumatic stress disorder**

Arises as a delayed or protracted response to a stressful event or situation (of either brief or long duration) of an exceptionally threatening or catastrophic nature, which is likely to cause pervasive distress in almost anyone. Predisposing factors, such as personality traits (e.g. compulsive, asthenic) or previous history of neurotic illness, may lower the threshold for the development of the syndrome or aggravate its course, but they are neither necessary nor sufficient to explain its occurrence. Typical features include episodes of repeated reliving of the trauma in intrusive memories ("flashbacks"), dreams or nightmares, occurring against the persisting background of a sense of "numbness" and emotional blunting, detachment from other people, unresponsiveness to surroundings, anhedonia, and avoidance of activities and situations reminiscent of the trauma. There is usually a state of autonomic hyperarousal with hypervigilance, an enhanced startle reaction, and insomnia. Anxiety and depression are commonly associated with the above symptoms and signs, and suicidal ideation is not infrequent. The onset follows the trauma with a latency period that may range from a few weeks to months. The course is fluctuating but recovery can be expected in the majority of cases. In a small proportion of cases the condition may follow a chronic course over many years, with eventual transition to an enduring personality change (F62.0).

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