



Transcription, Transmission, and Transgression of World War I Battlefield Experience in Three Mid-twentieth-century Canadian Novels

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Abstract. Personal accounts of unutterable and unimaginable war experiences that Canadian soldiers lived through on European battlefields during World War I contrast rather sharply with heroic – yet somewhat emotionally detached (though statistically and technically precise) – reports and accounts of the deeds of Canadian troops in history books and other official documents. Mid-twentieth-century fiction inevitably tried to focus on these encounters with the abominable in order to make it possible for authors (as well as readers) with immediate experience to process psychologically – and make a final closure of – what they endured in the battlefield. There is a surprisingly high number of post-WWII novels published from the 1940s to the 1970s that deal, at least in part, or even indirectly, with topics and experiences linked to WWI. While, as suggested above, the war experience tends to be described with astonishing precision that almost overlaps with diaristic obsession, the psychological treatment of the trauma that had arisen in the war had, on the other hand, a tendency to be neglected. This interesting thematic niche of post-WWII, mid-twentieth-century novels revolving around WWI will be analysed from two theoretical perspectives. The first one – a rather general and decidedly literature-oriented triad of transcription, transmission, and transgression of the battlefield experience – will be a point of departure of the analysis, including some of the classic theories of trauma. This primary triad will be overlapped (yet not necessarily replaced) with the seven stages of grief that psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross developed originally in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. This second theoretical layer will thus both fill in the aforementioned void in the psychological treatment of the issue, and will be also used to assess to what extent individual texts, and their protagonists, were able to transcend their individual psychological scars and traumas.

Keywords: WWI battlefield experience, psychological processing of the battlefield trauma, trauma studies and theories, Kübler-Ross's stages of grief, 1917 and 1944 conscription crises.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore World War I battlefield experience and its representation in selected mid-twentieth-century Canadian novels. The adjectives “post-war,” or “post-WWII” will be avoided, as they appear to be a limiting concept suggesting (1) that the novels in question were written as a direct reaction to the events experienced in World War II, and (2) that these novels were published more or less immediately after World War II,¹ or within the 1950s at the latest. Unsurprisingly, not one of the two aforementioned points is true about novels chosen for analysis in this article. Generally, the novels focusing on WWI battlefield experience spread far into the 1970s, and, although with various intensity and scope, even beyond. This article does not have the ambition, especially for the lack of space available, to become an in-depth analysis of entire decades and numerous novels. This is why, to suggest contours and the primary tendencies of the subgenre of war novel (WWI novel), it will only revolve around three novels, namely *Barometer Rising* (1941) by Hugh MacLennan, *Fifth Business* (1970) by Robertson Davies, and *The Wars* (1977) by Timothy Findley.

Each of the novels analysed in this article deserves a short description in terms of the protagonist(s), the style used, and other features characterizing it. MacLennan's *Barometer Rising*, the first novel that the author ever published, was preceded by two unsuccessful attempts to publish a novel. It focuses primarily on what Canada meant to Canadians in times when the entire Canadian nation was looking for a self-definition of its at least double identity. The novel thus spoke strongly, especially to those who fought abroad, as “[a]ll over the Allied world, soldiers [...] wrote to MacLennan in gratitude for voicing their feelings about their native land” (Cameron 1981, 145). Nevertheless, it also speaks – just like all the other six novels published by MacLennan – about their war experience that may have raised ambivalent feelings, as WWI appears to have contributed strongly to a merger of individual strong regional Canadian identities into a truly Canadian one for the first time since the foundation of Confederation in 1867. The novel's protagonist, Neil Macrae, has to lead a quadruple fight: that for survival on the front, another one to cleanse his name of the war crime he was unjustly accused of, and that for winning the love of his life back into his, as well as the bare survival in the Halifax after the explosion of 1917, allegedly

1 Which, of course, could not have been the case of MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* that was published during World War II, namely in 1941.

the largest man-made explosion until that time. With Halifax being *the* war port of huge importance for Great Britain, the explosion can also be easily interpreted as the implosion of the British Empire's power over a gradually more and more emancipated Canada.

Fifth Business by Robertson Davies is the first part of the Deptford trilogy, taking place in a fictitious yet a typically Canadian community with all the human types making a cross-section of the Canadian society of the time in an almost Balzacian way. Similarly to MacLennan's *Barometer Rising*, the war in this novel appears as if it were a distant event unrelated to Canada, yet it accentuates strongly lifelong consequences in the lives of those who fought in it, condemning them at the same time to be misunderstood by the rest of the society. Its protagonist, Dunstan Ramsay and his central foil, Percy Boyd Staunton illustrate the process of coping with the terrible battlefield experience. A tragic event in the two men's childhoods seems to haunt them wherever they are in the world, just as the war experience does when they get back home. And even though the war is also seemingly distant geographically, the psychological depth of the story complements perfectly the other two novels.

Timothy Findley's *The Wars* is a shockingly detailed account of the atrocities of everyday existence (and survival) in the battlefield or, more specifically, in the dug-outs. The novel's protagonist, Robert Ross, is a natural pacifist, and his love for animals (specifically horses) makes him do a controversial thing: release the horses meant to take part in battles. What is an act of humanity for one is a treason for the others. There does not seem to be a single other character trying to understand this act. This novel's psychological depth and its strength lie in the fragmentation of the story itself, which has to be reconstructed from photo materials available only in the archives. The novel thus also questions the possibility of the accuracy of historical interpretations of the micro- as well as, by extension, macro-history.

As suggested above, these three novels are meant rather to delimit the territory for the mid-twentieth-century war novel in Canada dedicated thematically to WWI battlefield experience. The three novels analysed in this study were thus chosen mainly for their thematic closeness to one another. Despite several decades spanning between MacLennan's and Davies's respective novels, and almost an entire decade between Davies's and Findley's, the three texts tend to have a lot in common thematically, but also in terms of their general approach to the war trauma and its processing, that they could merely pass for one another's contemporaries. Their thematic closeness also makes it possible to draw the first assumptions as far as the general tendencies of the war novel in post-WWII Canada are concerned.

The subject matter of this article, however, seems to reveal two different paradoxes linked to Canada's participation in WWI. The first widely believed

cliché is the belief that both Canada and the Americas were, generally speaking, oases of peace² that were unaltered as much as untouched by the insanities of what was known in its time under the name of The Great War, as hardly anyone was able to imagine back then, even theoretically, that anything of such a scale could ever happen again. Another fixed idea, that of Canada perceived as a peaceful country that rather participates in peace negotiations than in the battlefield, is only true for the decades after World War II. As for WWI, Canada's participation in "England's wars," as Hugh MacLennan puts it – not without critical undertones,³ possibly being part of the "dissent" (cf. Millman 2016) to the official political lines – in his *Barometer Rising* (MacLennan 2007, 74), was thus inevitable considering that Canadians, as inhabitants of a British Dominion, generally felt compelled to enlist.⁴ The difference of perception of Canada as an ally in WWI and WWII, as suggested here, also points to another interesting factor: that of a shift in international recognition of Canada's standing as well as, more importantly, its "coming of age" as a country.

Canada's participation in WWI also reveals another historical paradox: World War I battlefields brought Canadians together. They left for war as New Brunswickers (cf. Cunningham 2018), Labradorians (Chartrand 2007, 24), or Youkoners (Gates 2017). All the soldiers who left Canada, many of them identifying strongly with the regional identities – besides dragging along a life-long trauma of thousands of sleepless nights to survive after the battle for their own lives had been won in the trenches –, came back as Canadians. The role of the catalyst of the war in forging a new, collective Canadian identity in the aftermath of the war has been particularly studied in MacKenzie (2018). René

2 And yet, as MacLennan notes justly in the first part of *Barometer Rising*, "[t]he war had taken control of" the inhabitants of Halifax and the entire Canada "just as it had of everyone else" (2007, 21), i.e. it was not solely a matter of Europe as it may have seemed at first.

3 The same undertones can be observed in recurrent ironic remarks of the narrator in *Fifth Business*, e.g. where reference is made to how Dunstan's mother would have been proud of him had she lived long enough to see him being awarded the Victoria Cross, which Dunstan "humbly" refers to as being awarded "in consequence of [his] three years of *degradation* in the Flanders mud" (Davies 1970, 82; emphasis mine).

4 Interestingly, it was at this point that one of the inner ruptures of Confederation showed in realistic light, with the French-speaking part of the population, especially in Québec, refusing to fight for a King who was not theirs. Moreover, enlistment was voluntary at the outbreak of World War I, but when the numbers of enlistments dropped by 1917, the federal government of Robert Borden introduced The Military Service Act in 1917. Mandatory military duty not only led to riots (e.g. in Montreal) but deepened English–French divisions within Canada. Granatstein (2020, 40) shows this discrepancy in particular numbers, comparing 1.4% of French Canadians joining the armed forces to 37.5% of British-born Canadians. Politically, not only did "the Quebec enlistment failure infuriat[e] many English Canadians" (Granatstein 2020, 41) but also led to doubts about the sense of "the French and the English Canada" to continue as one political unit. Mackenzie King's WWII government was aware of the fact, and even though the WWII conscription crisis was not as acute as that of WWI, "the effects on Canadian unity would be shattering" (Granatstein 2020, 72) had the same measures been applied again.

Chartrand, on the other hand, studies in detail the causes of shifts in Canadian national consciousness, mentioning the importance of the battle of Vimy Ridge not only as “the biggest single advance made on the Western Front since the beginning of the war [...] with relatively low casualties” (Chartrand 2007, 20) but also, and much more importantly, as an “extraordinary effect on the national psyche” (Chartrand 2007, 20). When “the mud-and-blood soup of Passchendaele” (Davies 1970, 73) is added to the equation, Canadians started to realize how significant their contribution in the battlefield was, meaning that, in the new international shift of perception of their country’s merits, they, too, needed to shift their perception of themselves “towards a consciousness of being proud citizens of a fully independent nation” (Chartrand 2007, 20). This moment of a new national pride is, though indirectly, reconfirmed – yet behind the veil of irony characterizing the novel – in Davies’s *Fifth Business*, whose protagonist, Dunstan Ramsay, became “a veteran of Sanctuary Wood and Vimy Ridge” (Davies 1970, 72) before he was twenty.

As far as the theoretical framework is concerned, the primary literature-oriented triad of transcription, transmission, and transgression of the battlefield experience will be overlapped with a more psychology-oriented nomenclature of seven stages of overcoming grief proposed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969. The triad originally started as an alliterated wordplay that was later on developed into concepts that I deemed manageably connectable to the general concept linked to various theoreticians of trauma studies (as shown below). Kübler-Ross’s nomenclature was chosen, first of all, because of its relevance in (practical) psychology, i.e. an element that seems to be almost entirely missing from the literature-oriented triadic approach, and secondly, for its date of publication is close to the end of the three decades covering the period of what I previously referred to as mid-twentieth-century Canadian WWI novel.

2. Theoretical Frameworks to Be (Re)considered

As suggested above, there will be two individual theoretical frameworks overlapping one another. The first one, the triad composed of *transcription*, *transmission*, and *transgression* of the battlefield experience will most of the time deal with the literary aspect of the matter, being constantly compared and contrasted against various theories whose umbrella term is trauma studies. These will be analysed in the rest of this section. The second theoretical framework will try to cover the psychological aspects that do not seem to be *consciously* treated in the novels selected, the only description that can be deemed suitable in relation to how these aspects are treated being haphazard mentions, and no systematic approach being efficiently used. The former will be laid out below,

in the rest of this chapter, but the explanation of the latter will be left for the next chapter on practical applications of both theories in particular texts. The transcription, transmission, and transgression of battlefield trauma relates, as stated above, rather to literature in general and more particularly to how the narrator processes it internally before turning it into a literary text.

From this point of view, transcription could equal the psychological process of *trying to understand* what happened on the battlefield, one happening inside the actual combatants' minds. In case the authors went through that horrendous experience themselves, they most certainly needed to "transcribe" that experience internally, in order for themselves to understand, before they even tried to narrate to the outside world – especially that of the peaceful post-war existence in which it was almost impossible to imagine what everyday survival in the battlefield meant. The best text to illustrate this clash between war and post-war reality is decidedly Timothy Findley's *The Wars* (1970), where the lived, experiential embodiment, as well as various extreme interventions and suffering caused to the human body (see below) goes rather beyond commonly acceptable limits of tolerability (in the sense of being too much). The details, their precision make this novel oscillate close (if also not beyond) other limits, those separating the novel (or fiction) from a documentary, or factual, novel (i.e. non-fiction).

As far as theoretical approaches to be used are concerned, Cathy Caruth's (1996) trauma theory appears to be the ideal choice. This widely accepted theory has, however, some limitations that exclude it from application on the texts studied in this article. While the concept of the belatedness of trauma can most certainly be agreed with without any reservations, the idea that trauma as such prevents its direct linguistic representation in literature has the potential to raise some objections, as even pauses and silence do carry a meaning in linguistics as well as in literature. While trauma is undeniably linked to its "unspeakability," it is, on the other hand, one of the primary functions of literature to try to describe even the most unspeakable, or the most abominable, and the novels studied in this article seem to articulate the abominable and the unspeakable in a rather "talkative" – and telling – manner.

As for the transmission of the battlefield experience, the word "transmission" as such must be first explained, as its understanding in the frame of this article differs rather substantially from Marianne Hirsch's (2012) concept. While Hirsch takes the perspective of the offspring of WWI combatants who both symbolically and literally re-live the experience of their (great-)grandfathers, the perspective that the novels analysed here share is one of those very combatants looking back at their own battlefield experience, and subsequent terror-induced trauma. Hirsch's concept, though appearing as applicable at a first glance, must be – for the purposes of this article – dropped, for transmission is understood here as a(n unconscious) method by which narrators process their experiences to make them

understandable to others. Additionally, transmission should also be understood in its temporal aspect, as an inner, lived battlefield experience is being transmitted into the post-war world, one seemingly “untouched” by said war experience in its immediacy, i.e. a world in which all of the accounts were either processed through the media (hence *mediatized*) or in, and by, literature (i.e. *mediated* in an artistic manner).

As for the third stage, that of transgression, a viable option seems to be, at least initially, Dominick LaCapra’s (2001) concept of “acting out” as opposed to “working through” traumatic experiences. As much as the dichotomy is justified as a (rather practical) method to be used, and applicable to all of the texts studied in this article in its own manner, it also proves insufficient from the point of view of its dichotomic character that makes it impossible, in terms of the goals of this article, to follow the entire process of coming to terms with the battlefield trauma in all of its nuances, merely reducing it to a process having merely an initial and a final stage, with no gradual “evolutionary steps” in between.

Caruth’s, Hirsch’s, and LaCapra’s approaches have been initially considered as possible perspectives of analysis of the novels chosen. Yet, they have been gradually disproved – some of them in part, some of them completely – in this chapter. This leads, on the surface at least, to a “void” in the three theoretical concepts of transcription, transmission, and transgression. Yet, the three notions appear to be devoid of any meaning only on the surface. Even when the three trauma-theory-related concepts have been disproved, these still do have a meaning (meaning mostly extraliterary, almost a purely linguistically defined one), and will be analysed against the backdrop of Kübler-Ross’s notions to find out whether they fit those and, if so, how.

3. Practical Applications of Kübler-Ross’s Nomenclature to Selected Texts

Overcoming these issues is decidedly the central goal of working through battlefield trauma. Yet, the triad in question does not provide a structured set of clearly identifiable stages of a psychological process through which individuals concerned might move towards genuine transformation. By this argument, I am trying to point towards another issue, namely underestimation of the psychological part of the entire process as such. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’s stages of dealing with grief proposed in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying* seem to be a path to be followed, as this theoretical approach offers, quite naturally, a vision of a future amelioration to which there is a path that, if followed, leads the person concerned to that much-desired goal, or final state.

While Kübler-Ross's concept may appear not to be connected sufficiently to the issue of dealing with a war- and battlefield-induced trauma at a first sight, it certainly does appear so at a second glance. The updated model comprises seven stages: (1) shock (often accompanied by disbelief), (2) denial, (3) anger, (4) bargaining, (5) depression, (6) testing, and, finally, (7) acceptance. Before the model was updated, stages (1) and (6) as listed above had not been part of it. Yet, they complete the entire scheme adequately. Another point to be made is the fact that, unlike the theory of trauma, this sequence of individual steps to be made or followed is a combination of both static and dynamic stages. In this very aspect, this sequence may be paralleled with the classic scheme of drama, where the original – and static – status quo is disturbed, and then the dynamic parts must interfere in order to restore a new – and again static – reality, a new “status quo.” It is in the same way that stages (1) and (7) can be regarded, with the dynamic stages (2) to (6) leading to the restoration of a new “status.”

3.1. Shock and Denial

Fifth Business by Robertson Davies seems to be an illustrative example of characters remaining at the stages of shock and denial. Although the war experience does not appear to be, at least at a first glance, the central theme of the novel, it is simultaneously not one that could be easily ignored. Actually, it is exactly the ignorance of war as a topic that shows the depth of the wound taken (but it is, of course, a chosen authorial stance, too). Dunstan Ramsay, the novel's seemingly side-lined and overshadowed protagonist and narrator, stated regarding the battlefield experience, “I write of *this* now as briefly as I may, for the terror of it was so great that I would not for anything arouse it again” (Davies 1970, 73; emphasis mine), only to deny his own words a mere page later, where he details what trying to crawl forward in deep mud looked like, stating in a horrific yet almost scientifically detailed and accurate simile that it “was like swimming in molasses, with the additional misery that it was molasses that stank and had dead men in it” (Davies 1970, 74). The strong tactile and olfactory imagery seems to function on multiple levels, especially that of providing the readers – and especially those whose war experience was not immediate but a mediated one only – with an extremely strong and unforgettable mental image (in comparison to the “dry numbers” that statistics of the history books provide).

This very same quote also illustrates the first two stages in Kübler-Ross's scheme: the shocking images from the latter quote make the character in question, and most likely all of the readers witnessing that situation through this strongly picturesque and sensory description, deny the fact. The denial may, of course, take on various forms. The classical denial would be a mental process of a deliberate decision to take in some of the horrendous reality. Although some soldiers refuse

to talk about their experience (after the fact), their bodies may speak for them (in the situation itself, as well as in its aftermath). Such a denial may also lead to physical immobility and remaining in that state (“Robert sat frozen” (Findley 1977, 28)). The unacceptable reality may reduce one’s mind “to a small, protective shell [...] hoard[ing] the barest essentials of reason” (Findley 1977, 176) for, in such situations, as Neil Macrae’s experience confirms, one has “no time to be frightened” (MacLennan 2007, 9), even when explosions are dashing to the ground, and physical injuries make one experience an unthinkable pain. When the danger is over, the fear returns. And yet, “[s]ometimes fear could be forgotten, but never too long” (Davies 1970, 69). When it did return, the soldiers affected may have suffered from all kinds of fears: one could be “frightened of death, of wounds, of being captured, but most frightened of admitting to fear and losing face before the others. This kind of fear is not acute, of course; it is a constant depleting companion whose presence makes everything grey” (Davies 1970, 69).

Living – or rather surviving – in the trenches (especially at Vimy, or Passchendaele, and other places in Flanders where the front never moved more than a few inches every now and then) meant that the initial shock was acting on the soldiers’ psyches for prolonged periods of time, making itself literally inscribed into the conscious as well as the subconscious minds of combatants, making all of them never forget the horrendous experiences, and also making them suffer through countless sleepless nights after they have come back. For only when they come back, and “suffer in the silence” (or momentarily the sensory sensitivity to louder sounds that Dunstan Ramsay was afflicted with), the peace around them makes them burst into anger, one that they need to get rid of in order to be able to survive, yet knowing that these might stay in their minds for ever.

3.2. From Anger through Bargaining to Depression

As far as anger is concerned, it is a defensive response. Yet, it must be highlighted that it is a natural – and also an inevitable – part of the entire process. Kübler-Ross’s extended theory confirms this claim, stating, “[a]nger is a natural reaction to the unfairness of loss” (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2005, 16). As anger may be directed outward or inward, it may cause a lot of damage to an individual internally, as well as to the society around them externally. On the other hand, it may be used as a driving force with transformatory effect. Both of these stances seem to be present in Hugh MacLennan’s *Barometer Rising*, in which novel’s plot the tension truly does not stop rising till the final lines. While the end is known for a dramatic climax depicting the Halifax Explosion, one of the largest man-made explosions in the known (and recorded) history of mankind and a historical fact whose details are known to Canadians, that same tension, on the microscale, is reflected in the “microhistory” experiences by Neil Macrae, who is accused by

his own uncle, Colonel Wain, of committing a war crime in his battle unit, where the final outcome remains unknown.

Neil has to endure his situation with “clenched teeth” (MacLennan 2007, 184), knowing rather too well – in Angus Murray’s words – “just how high the cards are stacked against [him]” (MacLennan 2007, 161), meaning it will be difficult to prove his innocence. It is an inner battle, too, as “the scene of that afternoon had recurred to Neil’s mind so often that every detail of it had seared itself into his consciousness” (MacLennan 2007, 184). Dunstan Ramsay, as a former combatant, does not seem to be driven by anger at all. Yet this is only a first impression. What complicates things is Dunstan’s intellectual pride and sarcasm. All the suffering and the injury seem meaningless to him, although he is rather angry at the society (and God!) to have allowed such terrible things to happen; i.e. not angry because of his physical injury and disfigurement. There is, however, some anger initially in Robert Ross in *The Wars*, yet that anger, similarly to Neil Macrae’s, is used by either of the two protagonists as a force driving them to action. They are almost ideally complementary to each other, as Neil needs to act as much undercover as he can, but Robert is free to act.

Secondly, there is a stage called “bargaining.” By psychological definition, bargaining includes attempts to make a meaning out of the horrendous experience. People who are at this stage usually try to “rewrite” the actually lived experience by means of constructing alternative endings. This is what Findley’s narrator in *The Wars* (but not the protagonist!) does all the time, trying to find various interpretations of fragments that are at their disposal in the form of the photo materials and some written documents found in the archives. This process is hindered by the incompleteness of the archival materials, and some other minor factors. Paradoxically, the inevitable incompleteness of the historical material gives Robert the freedom to act as he wishes. Not that he may have known back then that his life story would be somewhat tentatively mapped out one day in the future, but rather – when the matter is considered from the point of view of a historian trying to reconstruct the past in the most credible way – from a perspective where history, however hard it tries, is at odds with reality. This means to say that Robert’s contemporaries refused to speak about what they considered to be an act of treason back in the time, but he was truly able to rewrite these expectations by acting in absolute freedom, meaning in ways unexpected by, and incomprehensible for, his contemporaries. When compared to MacLennan’s *Barometer Rising*, *The Wars* reveals a significant difference between the two novels: Angus’s cold anger makes him incapable to even start the stage of bargaining – and he appears to have skipped that stage to merely end up in full depression –, but Neil still has the chance, as long as he is able to control his temper and anger, and waits for the right moment to come.

Dunstan from *Fifth Business* is another case that can be qualified at their stage of bargaining. His bargaining takes on a slightly different form, when in his conviction (and, simultaneously, deformation) commands him to see his sanctified idol, Mary Dempster, behind all the miraculous events both in the battlefield and after the war. In other words, Dunstan – besides rewriting his identity (changing his name from Dunstable to Dunstan, i.e. a journey from the psychological and moral confinements of his original (micro)society of Deptford to a person whose independence is gradually yet constantly growing through self-knowledge) – tries to rewrite his life story, too. When he survives one of the most difficult missions in the battlefield, he takes it as yet another miracle caused by Mary Dempster.

As for depression, it seems to appear in all cases only in its hidden form, meaning that it is not manifested on the outside, and is masked behind some other, “better-looking” personal qualities. From Penny’s point of view, Angus Murray appears to be a wise old man, as “failure had made him wiser and more philosophical” (MacLennan 2007, 162). Despite the dissenting voices around them, he intended to marry Penny, possibly believing that by marrying her, he would be undertaking almost an act of charity, as she had a daughter and he was convinced that by marrying her, he would give her life a meaning and a status. But, after he discovers that not only is Neil alive but also back in town, he surprisingly starts advocating for the two, and even helps them, thus ceding “his place” to this “stubborn, imaginative, violent man” (MacLennan 2007, 269), “violent” meaning rather “ardent,” or “impassioned” than the literal meaning, as he realizes that Penny’s “calm [...] energy [...] would annihilate him” (MacLennan 2007, 269), but herself as much. And suddenly, when tables are turned rather unexpectedly, Murray appears as an elderly person, one who “had given up the fight long ago” and “was now content to understand life, and to leave its control to others” (MacLennan 2007, 162). Thus, by saving Penny by not marrying her, he falls into a true depression that cannot be hidden any more: there is no catching up with life for him at such an advanced age.

All in all, when individual protagonists of the novels studied are compared, the outcomes for the stage of transmission are the following: (1) in *Fifth Business*, it is not Boy Staunton who seems to have always been the successful “have-it-all-and-get-it-all” compared to Dunstan. And even though Dunstan is rather invisible (or, to say it better, *he* deems *himself* invisible) and plays the role of “Fifth Business” as he defined it himself at the beginning of the novel, it is he who has the greatest potential, especially because of his natural talent for introspection and self-reflection; (2) in *Barometer Rising*, it is not Angus but Neil whose chances are the highest to step over the last threshold and aspire to transgression in its two forms: testing and acceptance; and although age and the long-term experience linked to it seem to be Angus’s advantage, it is him who

proves to be the “weaker” one; (3) quite surprisingly, a comment can be made on Richard Ross, whose transcription, the “*post mortem* legacy,” may truly be the strongest because it was done without him looking back at the consequences, without him trying to take into consideration the society’s norm; briefly: it was all done in freedom.

3.3. Testing and Acceptance

While Angus Murray of *Barometer Rising* was criticized above for freezing in time, and basically not being able of any further evolution, he must be mentioned as a potential illustration of the stage of testing. Being the penultimate stage in the entire process, this is part of the entire seven-stage process where the individual in question starts their gradual re-engagement with the world. Another definition could be “trying to manage life after the loss” or in this case the terrible – and lifelong-defining – battlefield experience. Angus is literally on the verge of recreating his normal life but his stakes are too narrowly focused, making him persuaded that marrying Penelope would solve all issues that he had in his life.

Another example is, here again, Dunstan Ramsay from *Fifth Business*. Coming back to his native town, Dunstan, being accustomed to play “the vital though never glorious role of Fifth Business” (Davies 1970, 15), gradually takes on more roles. Besides that of a teacher, he plays that of “Friend of the Family” (Davies 1970, 153; capitals in the original) for the Stauntons or that of a war hero, which deed is officially confirmed by the King himself. And yet, being officially recognized “as a genuine hero” (Davies 1970, 87) by the King, Dunstan is one that does his best “neither believing in [his heroism] too obviously, nor yet protesting that [he] was just a simple chap who had done his duty when he saw it” (Davies 1970, 87). The world, and this role in it, among the many other roles that are a possibility, is a theatre stage to him (for he “had never seen any theatre more elaborate than a troop show” (Davies 1970, 85)), and he is merely one step from a revelation of the hidden mechanisms that rule “the cruelties of the theatre of life” (Davies 1970, 22).

Yet, seeing through those would mean having acceded to the last of the seven stages proposed by Kübler-Ross’s nomenclature, that of acceptance. The only protagonist to have truly achieved this final stage appears to be, rather surprisingly, Robert Ross in Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*. Given his family background in his childhood, Robert is deeply attached to animals. Participating in the fights seems to be beyond his limits of being able to comprehend the sense of such actions. He does follow the orders without hesitation but feels no compassion for those who issue them, sending many men to death. His unbreakable bond to animals makes him “commit” an act of absolute freedom in the otherwise confined atmosphere of

orders issued, and to be fulfilled. Interestingly, this act of freedom offers a double interpretation.

The first interpretation is that Robert committed a war crime, a treason aimed against his fellow combatants; these, whenever asked, they would simply “look away” (Findley 1977, 10), or “[o]ther times they say: ‘that bastard!’” (Findley 1977, 10) but will not say more than that, making a rather unreliable⁵ historical source out of themselves. Even Marian Turner, who is rather talkative a witness, concludes: “And the story of the horses is something I’d rather never have known had happened” (Findley 1977, 16). The second interpretation is only Robert’s own, one that will – given the barrier of silence lying around this “story of the horses” – never be officially recognized, or even admitted as an alternative explanation. Looking at that situation through an absolutely unbiased prism, Robert releasing the animals, thus trying to save them from a terrible death in the battlefield, is the ultimate manifestation of a humane attitude. He does not wish to be limited by anything, and, in a situation where many others would have capitulated – and much sooner than the situation reached its climax –, Robert chose to act regardless of the consequences, even if these include losing his own life.

Conclusions

This article has dealt with the theme of World War I battlefield experience in selected mid-twentieth-century Canadian novels. Out of the relatively numerous war novels, three have been chosen. While *Barometer Rising* by Hugh MacLennan shows the views of the 1940s on the subject matter, the other two – *Fifth Business* by Robertson Davies and *The Wars* by Timothy Findley – offer another perspective on views connected to WWI battlefield experience through the prism of Canadian novels of the 1970s. While this choice may appear to be rather poor in number, it has several advantages.

First and foremost, the three novels delimit the time frame within which it is worth studying WWI battlefield experience from the point of view of novels that look decades back, aspiring to a greater degree of objectivity than novels published much earlier on. Secondly, the time difference between 1941 and 1970, the dates of publication of the selected novels, offers a chance to contrast these novels one against the other. This article is admittedly limited in its length,

5 As far as the unreliability of historical sources, even photographs – supposedly capturing the truth as it is –, can be “blurred[, e]ven though the figures freeze” (Findley 1977, 12). They cannot be real(istic), as “[i]n paintings – and in photographs – there’s never any blood” (Findley 1977, 49), while it most certainly is there, along all the suffering, in the battlefield, and even outside the battle.

and broader (or consecutive) articles and studies will be necessary in order to provide a picture as complete as possible in the future.

Speaking of limiting factors, there are some “external” ones that will also need to be addressed in the future. The first of the two main issues in this sense is the overlapping topicality, i.e. there are novels in which either WWI or WWII appear as topics. While this issue has solutions, other factors – such as the linguistic barrier that prevented some of the French-Canadian novels on the topic from being published and, consequently, being widely known in the “English Canada” – seem to be making the topic more difficult to tackle. In particular, while Gabrielle Roy’s *Bonheur d’occasion* (1945) was almost immediately translated into English as *Tin Flute* (in 1947), making both the author and her novel well-known in the English-speaking parts of Canada, some other French-speaking authors were not as lucky to be translated, remaining in the gap mutually separating the French- and the English-speaking worlds of Canada.

Until at least the early twentieth century, Canadian literature – written both in English and in French – needed to relate itself, from the position of a cultural periphery, to one of the respective “mother countries,” i.e. Great Britain or France respectively. Comparing the war novel in Canada to its European and American counterparts may thus seem close to impossible, and yet, the very appearance, timing, and character of the war novel as shown in this article are proof in themselves of the ability of Canadian literature to catch up with trends in other literatures. Nuancing the relationship between Canadian and other “grand” literatures of the world would, yet again, be enough material for an independent study. Two additional points merit mentioning, however: While the majority of the war novels do not seem to have the same potential of immediacy that, say, Henri Barbusse’s *Le Feu* (1916) had in French literature, their temporal distance from the events themselves gives them, on the other hand, the advantage of a greater degree of “objectivity.” And even though the Canadian war novel has not (yet) reached the same notoriousness as, for example, Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) or Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), it certainly does show the potential to analyse war-related topics with mastery that is far from being inadequate to these (and other) famous novels.

As far as the achievements of this article are concerned, they are at least twofold. First of all, several theories related to trauma studies were proved not to be relevant for the selected novels, and also under the selected criteria, as they proved to be rather descriptive. This is why the original triad of transcription, transmission, and transgression as more general – and decidedly literary-theory-related – ones were transferred to the next part of the article to test their potential to overlap with more practical psychology-oriented categories suggested in Kübler-Ross’s nomenclature. And even though that nomenclature is not developmental in its core either, it still has more potential for change, or at least for being able to

observe a change in the developmental status of individual protagonists who can, in a non-static manner, pertain to multiple categories in one novel, thus proving the individual novels' ability to capture progress in what the trauma-studies-related theories seemed to keep in an immutable stasis.

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