Degree Project
Level: Master’s

Titanic Forces

Trauma, Eros and the Death Drive in Sebastian Barry’s A Long Long Way

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Subject/main field of study: English (literature)
Course code: EN3063
Credits: 15 ECTS
Date of examination: January 7, 2019

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Introduction

The First World War served as a slaughterhouse for both Britain’s gilded elite and its desperately poor. As 21st century recollections of the pre-war period remind us, the country at that particular time reflected both the long Edwardian Summer and influenza epidemics, romantic idyll and “city slum[s] where children were dying of rickets” (Wilson 2014). Most germane to this thesis’s purposes was the looming Irish promise of violence that threatened to ravage the nation with civil war as the tensions over Home Rule escalated. Political independence from England and the right to self-determination, had been a stated aim since the 1870s and was once-again gaining traction with the attempted passage of the Third Home Rule Bill, which between 1911 and 1914 passed Parliament three times but was voted down twice by the House of Lords (Bartlett 373). Upon Parliament’s third passage of the bill the Unionists in the northern counties founded the Ulster Volunteers, men who were determined to fight against Home Rule at all costs, and they numbered in the tens of thousands and were willing to take up arms. They were opposed by the Irish Volunteers, republicans who demanded independence for Ireland and who were equally willing to use violent means to secure their goals. The stage was set for a bloody and violent civil war as the British government struggled for a partition solution that would grant Home Rule to some of Ireland while allowing the Ulster counties to retain the constitutional link with the Crown (Bartlett 374). Just as tensions became unbearable, the onset of the First World War allowed both the British and Irish leaderships to pause, and to pass legislation postponing the consummation of Home Rule until after the war, making promises to both sides and, seemingly, momentarily, releasing the pent-up tension (Bartlett 375).
It is within this milieu that Sebastian Barry decided to set his 2005 novel *A Long Long Way*, the story of Willie Dunne, a naïve and young Catholic Irishman who is ignorant of politics and the historic conflict of his people. Willie comes of age at the start of the war and within the first few chapters he is bundled off to Belgium to be baptized in the chaos of trench warfare as Barry lays bare the ways in which tragedy first educates and then annihilates Willie as he attempts to navigate the savagery of men and war. Willie, as constructed by Barry, is a blank slate. He knows nothing of his history, of love, of conflict and is therefore ripe for a close reading, and Freud—in particular his later work on the basic instincts and their relation to war trauma—is an ideal companion for the exploration of Willie’s inner world and the reasons behind his dramatic disintegration.

In her text *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth has written the seminal work on the intersection of trauma and literature. For Caruth, studying trauma mirrors the study of literature insofar as both require the use of figurative language to describe that which cannot be comprehended directly (4). Caruth characterizes trauma as “a wound of the mind that is defined by its very unassimilated nature” (4) and it is the unassimilated aspect that causes the traumatic wound to haunt the victim both with “the reality of the violent event” but also with “the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (6). This duality is at the heart of Caruth’s observation that traumas function both as a “crisis of life” and a “crisis of death” whereby the subject attempts to both acknowledge that the violent source of their trauma did not destroy them while also acknowledging the improbability, and the distinct lack of agency found, in their own survival (18). Caruth ties her work to Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* by acknowledging that individual traumas are revisited by the traumatized as “an endless testimony of the impossibility of
living” (64) and the “incomprehensibility of survival” (66) and this paradox can serve as a trauma-focused formulation of Freud’s death drive, or the self-annihilating dimension of the psyche.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud seeks to understand the peculiar case of soldiers, returned from war, who are compelled to revisit the traumatic events of the battlefield in their minds. For Freud, the pleasure principle was the foundational drive of all organisms insofar as the psyche acts to limit excitation and relieve neurotic tension in an effort to maintain mental stability (*Beyond* 2). The pleasure principle is driven by libidinal energies and is most often characterized by love and the pursuit of “ever larger unities” (Freud, *Beyond* 36) with other organisms and is informed by an “economic motive” that always seeks to increase the “yield of the pleasure involved” (Freud, *Beyond* 8). Within this framework Freud struggled to explain the soldier who, in nightmares, revisits “the situation of his accident” creating only “neurotic unpleasure” and in so doing disregards the pleasure principle entirely (*Beyond* 5). Freud was unable to explain why these traumatic experiences often led to suicide or other self-destructive habits for the traumatized individual long after they were safe and secure from the danger that originally frightened them. From this conundrum Freud identified a second principle that acts alongside the pleasure principle which he dubbed “the death drive” and which, in its own conservative nature, seeks to limit tension by seeking an earlier inanimate state, a state Freud identified with an “initial state from which the living entity . . . is striving to return” (*Beyond* 31). Freud concluded that all organisms are instinctually driven by these two countervailing forces: Eros, the pleasurable drive towards psychic unity, and the death drive, or the drive towards an inanimate origin.
The setting of a war, with its heightened stakes, is an ideal place to dramatize Freud’s instincts at their most diametric and while no one has seemingly studied Barry’s novel in this fashion, Wyatt Bonikowski has conducted a study of Rebeca West’s *The Return of the Soldier* through such a lens. West’s novel focuses on returning soldier Christopher who is suffering from shell shock (what we would term PTSD in modern times) and which manifests a kind of amnesia that causes him to think he is 15 years younger than he truly is. Christopher returns from the war to find that the “dream of returning home to stability, wholeness and union . . . is impossible” (Bonikowski 95) and throughout the text the female protagonists struggle with Christopher’s trauma, attempting to cure his amnesia by understanding the circumstances of his psychic regression. Freud wrote that the death drive is an instinct towards a return to inanimate existence where the accumulated tensions of life are nullified (*Beyond* 32). In the arena of war trauma, the death drive can link self-preservation with a wish for death in a paradox that is only resolved through a return to an earlier state which Christopher’s amnesiac regression literalizes (Bonikowski 42). As West’s novel concludes, Christopher is “cured” of his amnesia if not his trauma and chooses to return to the front “to face his imminent death” (Bonikowski 103) epitomizing the death drive’s disregard for self-destruction in an effort to resolve traumatic energies. Bonikowski’s analysis is instructive when examining Barry’s novel because the same push and pull between the desire for unity and the need for the reduction of overwhelming psychic tension are at war within Willie Dunne and the inevitable rush towards self-destruction that marked Christopher’s return to the trenches helps illuminate the death of Barry’s protagonist.
Another scholar who examines the intersection of war fiction and traumatized soldiers is Jeremy Mackinnon. Mackinnon’s dissertation stakes a wide purview but in his study of Pat Barker’s novel *Regeneration* he focuses on the themes of alienation and silencing, both of which are valuable for analyzing Barry’s text. Mackinnon notes that “soldiers returning to the civilian sphere often feel estranged from their own societies” because they possess a frame of reference for the world that is fundamentally unknowable to those who have not experienced war (22). This dislocation from home inevitably leads to a kind of silencing, either physical or metaphorical, whereby the soldiers are unable or unwilling to articulate their experience and this causes them to “turn upon themselves in the absence of any other expressive space” (45). For Mackinnon, the behaviour of characters in Barker’s text “characterize[s] repression” as “an unwillingness to confront consciously the memory of traumatic experiences” (47) and this observation conforms with Bonikowski’s similar observation that “soldiers returned from the First World War estranged and alienated from a home that could not accept them” (95). In other words, the soldier’s reality of existence has been permanently altered by the crucible of war and the “fantasies” of home life are no longer recognizable or desirable; a motif that highlights the discrepancy between the illusions of war held by civilians and the realities of war experienced by veterans which shatters the myth of “the progress of civilization” (Bonikowski 99). Bonikowski also investigates how this theme is highlighted in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and it is in its commonality in post-war fiction that the trope of the alienated soldier becomes a useful tool for Barry to engage with in his fiction.

Much of the research into the character of Willie has tended to focus on Willie’s role as a tool for reigniting debates surrounding the mythology of Irish
independence—as can be seen in DeMott, Phillips or Mikowski—and so while Willie has been the prior subject of analysis he has never been examined through a Freudian lens as a character in and of himself, separate from some larger political motivation. It is in the Freudian tradition of Bonikowski and Mackinnon that this thesis pursues a close reading of Willie Dunne. Like Woolf’s and Barker’s protagonists, Dunne is subjected to the traumatizing forces of the First World War but rather than present the shell-shocked soldier in his final stage Barry has elected to narrate the development of the traumatized character, providing a laboratory in which to reflect on Caruth’s conceptualization of trauma and Freud’s ideas on the instinctual drives as they manifest in Willie’s story.

In Willie Dunne, Barry has created a traumatic archetype whose experiences throughout the novel dramatize Freud’s accounts of war neurosis and the stages and dimensions of a traumatized ego struggling to survive. Paired with Barry’s omniscient narrator the novel permits a close study of the evolving war trauma of one young soldier and how the traumatic upheaval of Ireland during the period of the First World War compounds and complicates the struggle. Dunne’s trajectory in the novel, from ignorant boy to seasoned soldier, is paralleled by contemporary historical events such as the 1916 Easter Rising and while Dunne is subjected to the horrors of trench warfare he also undergoes an education in the politics and violence of the Irish fight for Home Rule. A close psychoanalytical reading of Barry’s novel reveals how the text narrates Dunne’s psychic evolution as he is led through traumatic event after traumatic event and how Barry’s lyrical narration provides intimate access to the thoughts and feelings of a character undergoing traumatic disintegration. Bonikowski and Mackinnon point the way in using Freud’s ideas of libido, trauma, Eros and the death drive as a means for
understanding the motivations and actions of Willie Dunne and it is through the lens of trauma theory and the attendant Freudian instincts that sense can be made of Willie’s death and the inevitability of this outcome within the larger system of traumatic upheaval that the First World War represented.

**Willie Dunne as Traumatic Archetype**

In his study of Rebecca West’s novel *The Return of The Soldier* Wyatt Bonikowski notes that Christopher, the titular returned soldier, is possessed of an amnesia that “protects him from the pain of time’s passage” (116). At the beginning of the novel Christopher has returned from the war already suffering the consequences of trauma. Septimus Smith, the shell-shocked soldier in Virginal Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* is likewise introduced to readers in a traumatized state, suffering the consequences of the exposure of the psyche to industrialized war. For both Christopher and Septimus these traumatizing experiences occur outside the scope of their novels as the authors present their traumatized characters as finished products. In *A Long Long Way*, Sebastian Barry takes an alternate approach with his protagonist Willie Dunne. With Willie, Barry begins the novel with a foreboding statement of Willie’s birth—“he was born in the dying days” (1)—and his young life is fast-tracked to the start of the First World War. What Barry shows of Willie’s life before the war is pastoral—he sings for his mother; his father bathes him—and while his young life is visited by tragedy through the untimely death of his mother, he is not a traumatized figure. Rather, he is an innocent who is unfamiliar with war or politics and who loves a girl named Gretta. At the outbreak of the war he feels compelled to sign up simply to defend the lives of “women like [Gretta] being killed by Germans in Belgium” (Barry 13) and insists that “we have
to know our minds” when Gretta scoffs at his poor reason for joining the war effort. The irony is that Willie does not know his own mind and while he heads off to war the narrator states that “Willie knew nothing”, especially of how he would be “milled by the mill-stones of a coming war” (2). The contrast then, when compared to West’s and Woolf’s novel, is that in Barry’s text trauma is not experienced off stage. Each step in the milling process is narrated so that the trajectory of Willie’s traumatization can be traced and his ultimate fate can be understood in the context of that trauma and the effects it has on his psychic equilibrium.

Implied in Caruth’s definition of trauma as “a wound of the mind” (4) is the idea of escaping physical danger while still bearing witness to it and this definition describes Willie’s experience throughout the novel in that he is consistently surrounded by massive, industrialized violence that puts his life in jeopardy. When Willie first makes his way to Belgium he is part of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers and is given his first taste of trench warfare where “the biggest thing there was the roaring of Death and the smallest thing was a man” (Barry 24). Barry, narrating Willie’s internal thoughts, writes that the bombs “did everything except kill him immediately, as he half expected them to do” (Barry 24) and instead of dying, Willie must spend his time “shivering like a Wicklow sheepdog” dressed in “his share of fear” (Barry 24). These events, which spare Willie, emphasize the “paradoxical structure of indirectness in psychic trauma” (Caruth 62) whereby the absence of physical harm is translated into fear by the psyche; a translation that causes the psyche to suffer “it would seem, because it is not directly available to experience” (Caruth 63). Willie is similarly adjacent to fear-producing tragedy when the Germans first use mustard gas on the allies and he is
“possessed of an utter fear of this dark and seemingly infernal thing creeping along” (Barry 45) that causes him to panic and run. Later still, Willie witnesses “a lad from Aughrim” have his eye blown out by a sniper’s bullet “not three feet” away (Barry 67). He is forced to cradle a dying young man who has been shot in the streets of Dublin (Barry 97) and is party to a near suicidal push on a German fortification that consists of “mind-exploding explosions of shrapnel” (Barry 170) and noises “beyond the scope of any noises he had heard” (Barry 181). Caruth writes that Freud characterized the consciousness as a “little fragment of living substance . . . suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies” (63) and the overwhelming nature of the events Willie endures, in terms of the magnitude of their violence, penetrates his mind’s defenses. All of the “stimuli come too quickly” and cause a “breach in the mind” (Caruth 64) and it is this breach that is given the name trauma.

Bonikowski notes that medical doctors treating First World War veterans realized that the shell shock soldiers were experiencing was “not related to a punctual event, such a shell blast, but rather to the cumulative stresses of war experience” (20) and Willie’s experience subjects him to atrocity after atrocity which bequeaths him, in Caruth’s terms, a “legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience” (60). This incomprehensibility is not simply at the scale of the violence but at the improbability of survival. Caruth asserts that trauma is defined by just these kinds of “unassimilated” events where through no virtue of their own one person lives while another dies and the very capriciousness of the outcome “haunts the victim”, not simply for the “reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (6). The repeated traumas that Willie endures embody this notion insofar as he
survives the violence but the implications of the experience, his descent into self-annihilation, is not manifest fully until the end of the novel. For Caruth, survivors enter an “oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life” (7), because knowing one survived entails wrestling with “the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one’s own life . . . an endless testimony to the impossibility of living” (64). The oscillation between life and death will come to define Willie’s lived experience as the novel progresses.

Margaret Higonnet, in her study of the intersection of trauma studies and literature, writes that many medical studies of trauma in the post First World War period focused on the occurrence of so-called “silent men” or traumatized soldiers who were unwilling or unable to communicate their “confrontation with death that civilians can never understand” (101). Jeremy MacKinnon echoes this theory of the silencing effects of war trauma when he asks if there is “something about the nature of war trauma which inhibits its representation” and silences “those who desperately need to tell their story” (3). As presented by Barry, Willie is not silent in the traditional sense, especially early on when he has yet to fully experience the horrors of war, but he is inarticulate and unable to express himself. A device that Barry uses in the novel is that of the “letter home from the front” and he includes in the novel a number of letters Willie addresses to his father, Gretta and his sisters. The third person narrator notes that Willie “tried to write the inside of [his] head” but inevitably failed to express himself (Barry 43). Likewise, when Willie is trying to communicate his feelings to Gretta the narrator writes that “it was difficult for him to explain to her why it was so, because it was difficult to put into words for himself” (Barry 13). These examples do not simply highlight Willie’s inability to express himself; they also demonstrate Barry’s narrative innovation
with regards to communicating the trauma of war: while the soldier cannot speak, a poetic and lyrical third-person omniscient narrator can speak on his behalf. For example, when Willie, plunged back into the confusion of war after a furlough in Dublin, experiences the war “like a huge dream at the edge of this waking landscape . . . catastrophe to turn a soul to dry dust” (Barry 101) these are not Willie’s words nor even Willie’s thoughts; they are the observations of the narrator standing in to poetically communicate the horror of the moment. This pairing, of eloquent narrator and inarticulate character helps evade what Higonnet calls “the instability or . . . inexpressible nature of trauma” that arises from the “opposition between combatant and noncombatant” (104), while effectively communicating the characteristics of trauma, specifically the nature of the “supremely private phenomenon” (MacKinnon 4) of the experience of trauma.

MacKinnon identifies a second marker of trauma in literature that he calls “somatic expression” and this term encompasses all manner of tics, tremors and otherwise involuntary bodily movements. Early on in Barry’s novel, after a German artillery bombardment kills an Irish supply line, Willie is sitting in relative safety and he looks at his hands, “these hands of eighteen years”, and notes that they “were shaking slowly, but he was not causing them to shake” (Barry 30). Freud defined repression as “preventing elements of the subject’s psychic experience from entering consciousness” (Beyond 33) and MacKinnon notes that for Freud repression was analogous to a defense, the body studiously avoiding an unbearable conscious confrontation. Barry’s narrator, in his assigned role, draws attention to the disconnect between Willie’s conscious thought and the underlying turmoil of Willie’s subconscious when he states that “Willie was not thinking of the killed supply party exactly. But his hands were” (Barry 30). Willie’s conscious
self, the one that is studiously avoiding thinking of the experienced horror, is cast as distinct from Willie’s body which does not have the benefit of repression and thus manifests the incremental expression of Willie’s trauma.

The gulf between the conscious mind and the body grows throughout the novel. In a later scene Willie is forced to kill a German soldier in hand-to-hand combat and after the episode he is confronted by an officer far behind front lines. It is a safe place but Willie “starts to tremble, not from any emotion he knew of” and is forced to put his “rattling” hands in his jacket to calm himself (Barry 118). When confronted by the officer to account for his behavior, which eventually includes “incongruous and peculiar weeping”, Willie’s only excuse is “terror, sir” (Barry 120). The escalation in symptoms reaches a culmination near the end of novel, when Willie, running through a forest, is knocked unconscious when “a huge noise ate him like a whale” and he wakes in hospital room, a “rattling room it was and he was strapped” (Barry 272). Willie is hospitalized because, while he miraculously survived the explosion that killed many of his fellow soldiers, the “shell exploding so near had done something to his engine, and he couldn’t stop his head jerking about, and his left arm had a mind of its own” (Barry 273). In this scene Willie is fully somatic and Barry’s narration serves to narrate Willie’s calm, internal observation of his flailing condition while Willie himself begs—“please, -please, -please . . . will – will you – hold me?” (Barry 277) —to one of the many nurses who supervise the patients. When the narrator describes Willie’s detached assessment of his own “chin jutting and turning . . . eyes darting and darting” (Barry 277) there is a clinical quality in Willie’s description that obscures the personal struggle roiling inside of the character himself, a struggle that is only exposed with his strangled pleas for help. MacKinnon writes that the traumatized
soldier will “resort to bodily expressions not because he is completely incapable of speaking, but rather because he cannot articulate his need for physical intimacy through the discourse available to him” (33). Willie does, in the most heartbreaking way, express his need but doing so is a massive struggle to communicate “traumatic feelings . . . at a conscious level” so that “they may cease to function as traumatic sources of signification” (MacKinnon 39). When Willie finally speaks and gains the human contact he craves—“his own body was suddenly, strangely at rest” (Barry 277)—he temporarily bridges the gulf between his conscious mind and the vast reservoir of his repression; rewarded, if only momentarily, by the cessation of his symptoms.

A third dimension of both the medical and literary trauma, especially that related to experiences of war, is that of emerging foreignness. In his study of Woolf and West, Bonikowski identifies the trope of the soldier who returns from the battlefield to find “a home that has become strange” (3). Bonikowski’s work examines this tendency in both post-First World War fiction and the writing of the medical doctors who treated the traumatized and he writes that the “soldiers had the tendency to hold the public in contempt for its lack of knowledge about the war” (Bonikowski 5). He attributes this to the idea that soldiers had “been penetrated by war” and the “soldier feels as if it inhabits him, unlike those at home” (Bonikowski 3).

Barry plays with this trope by having Willie’s home literally change its character while he is away in Belgium with the political realities of Ireland serving to amplify his sense of estrangement. Over the course of the years Willie is away at war, the Easter Rising of 1916 occurs in Dublin and while Willie is horrifically present for the actual Rising he is absent during the fomenting of the radicals and
during the aftermath of the Rising wherein nationalists turn on those Irish who had volunteered to fight in “England’s war”. Willie, as politically naïve, does not grasp what has happened but only experiences the waving and cheering crowds when he first departs for Europe and the sneering, rock-throwing boys who curse him as a “Fucking Tommy” on his final furlough (Barry 253). Bonikowski writes that soldiers returning from the war experienced a “strict division between the world before the war and the world after, a world now emptied of its old values and conventions, forever changed and unrecognizable” (18) and through a literal transformation of Willie’s home Barry heightens the corrosive effect this has on Willie. This tendency of home to be “strange” extends to Willie’s family, specifically his father, who interprets one of Willie’s letters as expressing sympathy for the revolutionaries. When Willie returns home his father receives him in a manner that is “chill and strange”, with his “deep voice corrupted by anger, sounding like the terrifying voice of a stranger” (Barry 247). Willie’s father dismisses him angrily from the family home for his perceived sympathies and Willie is left to wander the streets and sleep in a “dosshouse” as he awaits his return to the front. In so doing, he perfectly encapsulates Bonikowski’s observation that “soldiers returned from the First World War estranged and alienated from a home that could not accept them” (95), not simply because his battlefield experience sets him apart from non-combatants, but because his broadening political beliefs and the evolving political climate of Ireland work to compound his alienation from family and homeland.

Willie’s own incomprehensibility at his father’s reaction grows out of his experience of camaraderie on the front line, wherein unionists and nationalists fought and died alongside one another, setting aside their political enmity for the
sake of survival. Here again Barry has co-opted the language of trauma to double Willie’s misery as Willie has been “penetrated by the war” both psychologically and politically. On his return home he feels anger, if not contempt, for the public’s “lack of knowledge about the war” not simply about the uncommunicable horrors of battle but also about the fact that “it’d a funny dark world out at war . . . it brings your mind to think a thousand thoughts, a thousand new thoughts” (Barry 247). As the narrator notes on behalf of Willie, “Dublin was no longer a city intent on the war” (254) and all the fellow “sad soldiers back from the war” that share Willie’s dosshouse are “ghosts . . . just wisps and scraps of paper . . . no longer a human person” (251) who had their personal tragedies intersect with the traumas experienced in Ireland as it underwent its own violent transformation.

Through exposure to unrelenting episodes of violence, the transformation of his home into a foreign and unknown place, his inability to express his experiences to those who are closest to him and the physical manifestation of his repressed fears Willie Dunne embodies both the clinical and literary characteristics of the traumatized soldier. The changes in his character are incremental, occurring slowly over the course of the novel, but the continued pressure put on Willie’s psyche results in an accumulation of “neurotic unpleasure” that fuels the dueling forces of Freud’s Eros and the death drive and each instinct seeks to silence that trauma in its own way.

**Eros and the Need for Ego Unity**

The literary theory of trauma arises out of Caruth’s analysis of Freud’s text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and as Freud’s text indicates the First World War introduced significant difficulties to Freud’s theory that egos are primarily driven
by the need for pleasure, which he related to the “quantity of excitation that is present in the mind” (Freud, *Pleasure* 2). The seeking of pleasure is powered by libidinal energies insofar as the libido causes excitation of the psyche, which increases tension and these tensions must be “bound” in order to be released. As Bonikowski notes, this libidinal energy is not exactly a “biological instinct” yet it motivates both conscious and unconscious thought as well as “bodily experience” (41) while also “present[ing] a danger . . . by threatening to increase tension” (40). To bind these energies means to either express them or sublimate them by directing the “frenetic energy of sexual excitement” (Bonikowski 43) to non-sexual purposes. This release of libidinal energy is the experience of pleasure (Bonikowski 40) while the increase in excitation is given the name of unpleasure. The two counterparts represent a “psycho-social relation to conditions of stability and instability” (Freud, *Beyond* 2) wherein homeostasis is preserved through the “reunion of tension and maintenance” (Bonikowski 43) or the building and discharging of energies. Freud called this theory the Pleasure Principle and named the drive within an ego to seek pleasure “Eros” after the Greek word for love and considered it a “life instinct” that motivates ego existence (*Beyond* 36). Freud takes the theory of Eros further in *Civilization and Its Discontents* where he claims that Eros contains two “strivings”, one “for individual happiness” and “one for human fellowship” (Freud, *Discontents* 77). It is the interplay between these two definitions of Eros that is most relevant to Willie’s behavior in the novel.

Simple libido, that is sexual energy, serves as a motivating force in Willie’s actions as he is described as lusting after Gretta throughout the novel. When Gretta is first introduced in the novel the narrator comments on her “small, thin, fiercely pointed” breasts and the impact they have on Willie’s erection (Barry 8) and while
on reprieve after the mustard gas attack he visits a whorehouse in Amiens for his first sexual encounter (Barry 62) which he then reprises with Gretta at the end of his furlough when she pulls him into “the greeny dark” (Barry 78) to consummate their relationship. Sexual energy is clearly a drive for young Willie and may even be responsible for his desire to volunteer for the war if his inchoate excuse to Gretta to protect “women like her being killed by the Germans” (Barry 13) is to be believed.

Notwithstanding his literal sexual excursions, Willie’s experience of Eros, or what Cathy Caruth calls the “crisis of life” (7) that accompanies traumatic experience, is best exemplified in Freud’s second, “human fellowship” definition, as it is in episodes of human fellowship that Willie seems to derive the most “individual happiness”. For Freud, part of the experience of Eros is what he termed the “oceanic feeling” which is “an ecstatic breaking down of the boundaries between the ego and the world, traceable to the ‘unlimited narcissisms’ of infancy” (Freud, Discontents xv). An example of Willie’s ecstatic infancy is linked with bath time as a child where, at “six o’clock every evening prompt”, young Willie would be washed in an enamel bath by “the big fire in the sitting-room” and when the bath was complete he would be lifted out by his enormous father and left to rest on his father’s broad chest, on “the silver buttons” of his father’s police uniform, while his mother toweled him dry (Barry 6). When Willie returns from the front, his uniform filthy and his body infested with lice, his father greets him, sets a bath and bathes Willie, using a fine comb to pick his nits in a reenactment of their old ritual (Barry 74). For Willie, the episode was “not a thing you would see in real life” and his father “had a faraway look . . . like it was all years ago and otherwise . . . and he was a little kid” (Barry 74) and “for all that he was glad of his
father’s arms around him . . . strange and comforting as it was” (Barry 75). The wistfulness father and son share epitomizes Freud’s two strivings for happiness and fellowship, while the collapsing of temporal boundaries and the scene demonstrates Freud’s point that Eros possesses a quality of “being indissolubly bound up with and belonging to the whole of the world outside oneself” (Discontents 4).

The familial scene of bathing is mirrored later in the novel when Willie and his fellow soldiers partake in an abandoned but functioning bathhouse in Belgium where each are given their own tub where “the water touched them like a mother” (Barry 127) and the shared splendor of the experience was “perfected by the show of bonhomie and common knowledge” (Barry 128). Even more than being bathed by his father the scene in the bathhouse literalizes Freud’s belief that Eros demands that “we must sacrifice part of our sexuality and sublimate it into a brotherly love” in its efforts to “preserve the living substance and bring it together in ever larger units” (Discontents 4). Such scenes serve to offer hope to the novel’s characters that it “was still possible that they might be ordinary, loving, imperfect fellas again, in some other guise of peace” (Barry 132) despite having been “submerged in a killing sea from which no one might emerge” (Barry 130).

The Freudian sense of “brotherly love” heightens throughout the novel. Barry alternates scenes of horror with scenes of camaraderie in an effort to highlight the strength of the bond Willie forms with his fellow soldiers and to alleviate the relentless descriptions of violence. These friendships go beyond simple world building because they also serve, as Maria Fengler writes, the “sense of shared experienced and shared identity beyond and above the differences of political opinion” between “the Home Rulers, unionists and those without political
convictions” (217). Barry most deliberately highlights this coming together of Irishmen during an episode in the novel where a boxing match is being put on to entertain the troops. Everyone is excited to attend, regardless of political conviction, because “everyone felt the passion and rightness and the poetry of the contest” (Barry 191) and “everyone went to the fight because a fight without death . . . seemed to a man’s mind like a bird singing in a verdant wood” (Barry 192). The battle in the ring is between a Catholic and a Protestant fighter and despite “an exchange of murderous blows” and “pungent remarks” traded between factions, there is a “horror-struck happiness” that puts an “introspective spell over them” (Barry 198). When the Catholic wins there is thunderous applause from all sides, a “hero of hundreds for a day”, which in its Freudian fantasy of Erotic unity captures a united Ireland in a way that is never to be.

Despite the positive feelings of brotherhood that arises among the men who experience the fight, the boxing episode is also the fertile ground in which Willie’s “thousand new thoughts” (Barry 247) find purchase. It is these very thoughts that drive Willie and his father apart later in the novel, sundering the connection forged through the aforementioned bathing scene. As the scenes of unity pile up on another, such as Joe Kielty’s fervent exhibition of Irish dancing for the enjoyment of English soldiers, or the fact that when William Redmond, brother of Home Rule leader John Redmond, is killed in battle it is “Ulster accents eased him into death” (Barry 228), Willie’s Erotic compulsion to internalize “this united Ireland . . . never to be” (Fengler 217) carries within itself some darkness, not unlike the trauma that these scenes have him escape. If the purpose of Eros is, as Freud writes, “to gather individuals, then families, then finally tribes, peoples and nations into one great unity” (Discontents 58), one must also acknowledge that “love is
something like an oceanic aggressiveness which threatens to shatter civilization” 
(*Discontents* xvi) and in Willie’s experience of Erotic episodes there sleeps a seed of his undoing.

One of the ironies that Barry writes into his novel is that, while Willie struggles to communicate, he is a gifted singer. When Willie was a small boy and his mother was still alive she used to sit him down and have him sing “some song of the Wicklow district” while she “wondered in her private mind at the power of mere words . . . how they seemed to call up a hundred vanished scenes, gone faces, lost instances of human love” (Barry 5). Through Willie’s mother Barry is demonstrating the way singing might serve as the ultimate form of unity for Willie, Eros personified. Willie is moved to sing throughout the novel and in each scene save one it precipitates the oceanic feeling. In the scene at the abandoned bathhouse Willie sings to his fellow soldiers and they join him in a “melody that brought from their own memories colored hints and living sparks of the past”, which these soldiers, mired in the “toxic wasteland” of the present, treasured as a means to catch “glimpses of the beloved faces left behind, shadows or arguments unfinished and regretted, the sense of youth not vanishing” (Barry 130). Songs for these men are a means to express what is most special to them, a way to “form a bridge from one soul to another” and a prayer “that could not be sundered, that could not be violated, that could not be rendered meaningless even by slaughter, the core inviolable, the flame unquenchable” (Barry 134). Like the bath, singing is a memory device, one that calls back to times before the war, to before the period of trauma as a means to salve the ego in the present but it also strives in the present, to build Freud’s brotherly love. Early in the novel Willie recounts the story of Christmas 1914 when German and allied soldiers sang “Silent Night” to
one another across the trenches and played “a bit of football” and exchanged “black sausages and plum puddings” (Barry 16). This scene is on Willie’s mind at the end of the novel because when he is pinned down by hidden German emplacements he hears “Silent Night” being sung “from the German section” and while he thinks it is sung from an “ironical frame of mind” (Barry 288) he lifts up his voice and “sang back to his enemy”, who promptly shoots him dead (Barry 289). This is the final culmination of Willie’s Eros, with its need to break down “the boundaries between the ego and the world” and its instinct to push “organic substances into ever larger unities” (Freud, Beyond 36).

Bonikowski writes that Eros, with its role as the binder of libidinal energies is not so different from Freud’s other basic instinct—the death drive—with its desire to unbind energies in an effort to return to earlier states of being (42). Throughout the novel these examples—such as the bathing, the fighting, the dancing, and the singing—are positioned by Barry as means to summon the wistful past to supplant the horrific present; Eros as life preserver for those individuals who have been traumatized by war. But for Willie, all of Eros’ outreach, the sexual liaisons, the camaraderie, the rejection of political differences, and especially the singing, all of this comes to ruin: Gretta finds out about the prostitute and marries another man; Willie’s father rejects him for his politics; and a sniper ends Willie’s life for having the temerity to sing on the battlefield. Throughout the novel Eros is presented as a reprieve but carries with it a silent destroyer and it is through an examination and appreciation of the death drive and its intrinsic duality with Eros that Willie’s fate becomes inevitable.
The Triumph of the Death Drive

It was in the aftermath of the First World War that Freud was forced to acknowledge the insufficiency of his theory of the libido as an all-encompassing explanation for human behavior. Shell-shocked soldiers returning from the war threatened the integrity of this theory insofar as the soldiers revisited their traumatic experiences, typically through nightmares, for seemingly no psychic benefit. If, as Freud wrote in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, pleasure was the outcome of the libido binding the “quantity of excitation that is present in the mind” (Beyond 2) and unpleasure was the failure to bind these psychic excitations, what can one make of this so-called “war neurosis” that tortures the soldier from within without any benefit (Bonikowski 39)? What force is counteracting the efforts of the libido to repress or transform these experiences into something manageable? Faced with such a contradiction to the primacy of libido Freud introduced a second primal drive to the ego, a silent instinct that he called the death drive, which not only explained the “symptoms of soldiers but also in those repeated events in people’s lives which seem to possess them with a ‘malignant fate’ or ‘some daemonic power’” (Bonikowski 13). The death drive “opposes the libido in a dualistic struggle” (Bonikowski 44) and while the libido “endeavored to reunite through the sexual instincts” (Bonikowski 44) the death drive seeks to “cancel itself out” by returning the ego to an “inanimate substance” (Freud, Beyond 32), the raw material from which life itself arose. Broadly, if one considers the purpose of the libido to reduce tension inside the ego then one can consider the death drive to be the extreme version of such an effort; through death all ego tension is relieved forever. The question Freud and other scholars asked was what
could lead to such a dramatic overreaction and the conclusion they came to was that it was caused by trauma.

As detailed in the first section of this thesis, throughout the novel Willie Dunne is systematically traumatized by his experience in the war. Over the course of the war Willie begins to embody the characteristics of the traumatized soldier, be it the reluctance to communicate his experiences of war, somatic expressions of trauma in the form of unconscious shaking, flailing and stuttering and the alienation and disconnection from those who left behind at home. Freud envisions the psyche as surrounded by a protective shield that it uses to filter and regulate stimuli so as to ensure that the ego is not overwhelmed by the external world (Bonikowski 39). However, frightening events pierce the psyche, it becomes overwhelmed by external stimuli, which cause a “breach in the mind” (Caruth 64). Once breached the psyche “can do nothing but repeat the destructive event over and over again” (Caruth 65) because the possibility of destruction now informs one’s anxiety and since anxiety arises from within the psyche the ego no longer has any defenses since “no protective shield exists to guard against internal excitation” (Bonikowski 39). Barry narrates this piercing of Willie’s ego throughout the novel. For example, after the gas attack the narrator comments that Willie “couldn't shake off the feeling of being knackered, knackered somewhere deep in himself—something going wrong, in the very center” (Barry 58); or after Willie witnesses an Irish rebel killed during the Easter Rising when it is written that “the truth was he was weary in his spirit. It was emptying out and thinning and he felt less than ever he did” (Barry 148); or after Willie returns from his disastrous second furlough and considers that “at the center of his body he thought something had perished . . . he feared he would slowly hollow out, the rot taking
him inwardly ring by blackened ring.” (Barry 253). Time and again Willie is shown to be suffering from the corrosive aftereffects of trauma through an expressed annihilation of his internal self, an annihilation that swells up from within and occupies Willie’s mind for no pleasurable outcome, simply anxiety and sadness which the libido cannot obviate.

Willie is not the only character in the novel to succumb to the death drive due to trauma. Barry introduces the character of Jesse Kerwin on Willie’s return to Belgium after this first Furlough. Kirwan is a Redmond Volunteer, meaning he is an ardent supporter of Home Rule and an Irish nationalist. Kirwan meets Willie on the transport and discusses politics with him only to discover that Willie is a “poor gobshite” that does not understand the political ramifications of the Easter Rising that they both just endured (Barry 89). For Kirwan, fighting in the war is a means to ensuring Home Rule for Ireland and his willingness to align with England’s army is entirely contingent on England keeping the promise of Home Rule. Later in the novel word reaches the front line that the rebels responsible for organizing the Easter Rising have been executed and Willie is sent for by Father Buckley at the behest of Kirwan (Barry 147). Kirwan’s psychic tension has been amplified by the execution of the political figures in which he had placed so much trust “I’m told he got upset when they started shooting those fuckers in Dublin” (Barry 152)—and in this excited state he began agitating and campaigning against the idea of Irishmen continuing to fight in the war. For his sedition he was “locked up and waiting court martial” (Barry 145) and Willie comes to speak to him, to try and talk him out of his destructive path. Their conversation takes places in a prison cell and Kirwan declares that “an Irishman can’t fight this war now” while he “started to shake . . . continued to tremble . . . maybe he was even sobbing a little”
When Willie asks why he simply cannot keep his mouth shut and go along, Kirwan says “I came out to fight for a country that doesn’t exist” (Barry 157), after which he shuts down, withdrawn into his own internal trauma at the betrayal of his beliefs. Barry’s narrator notes on behalf of Willie that Kirwan “had made a trap for himself in the wood of his own heart. He was the snare, the rabbit and the hunter all in one” (Barry 159) and in Kirwan’s fate Willie’s is reflected, how trauma can pierce the psyche and empower the death drive to commit to self-destruction in order to reduce psychic excitation. In Kirwan’s case this is prompted by the violent dissolution of the project of Home Rule he had dedicated himself to and the traumatic breach this event caused in his psyche. Kirwan is executed the following morning and buried in a military grave in a fashion that foreshadows Willie’s grave. If, as Freud asserts, the death drive is an instinct of the ego to return to an inanimate state then Kirwan’s future, to “be blown out of his resting place and scattered across the bombed earth, blown and scattered again, till every morsel of him was entirely atomized and defunct”, (Barry 161) personifies the very heart of inanimacy.

Willie is no less haunted by his traumas than Kirwan. The episodes of Erotic unity discussed above have only a temporary effect on his disposition before he is dragged back into darkness. For example, after the boxing match his “easy thoughts” are “quite abruptly . . . rinsed by a queer pain, all the words in his brain were swamped by a black ink and obliterated, he dug himself as deep as he could into the shallow mattress, his teeth chattering, and wept”. In this darkness he dwells on his belief that “the war would never be over . . . he would always be there. The tally-sticks of deaths would be cut from the saplings for ever more. The generals would count the dead men and mark their victories and defeats and send
out more men, more men. For ever more” (Barry 203). Willie finds that “it was difficult for his head to love and think of the future” and that “all manner of human hope were now forbidden on the earth” in this “terminus of all lives and wishes” (Barry 235). It is in this cavalcade of human misery in which the death drive finds its final blossoming: the desire to return to the source of suffering. Freud writes that the traumatized “subject may find pleasure . . . precisely there where he suffers, and not insofar as he suffers in one place in order to derive enjoyment in another” (Bonikowski 43) because the subject adopts a “primary masochism in the same place as primary narcissism”, an aggressive, self-destructive libidinal impulse intent on a self-destruction that will silence the overwhelming psychic load (Bonikowski 44). Willie exhibits just this desire to return to the front after he recovers from his somatic flailing in the hospital. The narrator has Willie feel that “it was almost a jaunty, happy thing to go back to his regiment” even “though they were planted in a spot so evil” (Barry 242). This desire is fueled by his traumatic sense of alienation that “he knew he had no country now . . . the words of Jesse Kirwan had penetrated deep into the sap of his brain and he understood them” (Barry 286). Willie has come to identify completely with the war, with the place of his suffering and hopes that “perhaps they would all dig in again and be at this for another thousand years. This would be their country for ever more” (Barry 288).

Most fatally, Willie has come to identify not just with the war itself but with the enemy and he wonders in his final moments that “maybe their country too had changed behind them and was no more, was another country altogether” (Barry 285). Willie sees in the Germans others who “had walked right out to the edge of the known world and had fallen off into other realms” and others who could understand that he “had no country, he was an orphan, he was alone” (Barry
It is in this lowest ebb that diminished Eros makes one last attempt at unity, to regain stability for the living substance, to attempt to repair the breach in Willie’s psyche. Yet he is a man so ruined by trauma, so desperate to silence his internal pain, that he has come to see his enemy as his ally, a comrade in this traumatic hellscape, and such confused, corrupted thinking informs Willie’s ill-fated decision to sing “Silent Night” with “the strange enemy that lay unseen” and for one last moment “share a tune that was still true” (Barry 289) before the death drive is granted its inanimate state.

**Conclusion**

Willie Dunne, a seasoned Irish soldier, dies singing to a German sniper. No amount of critical analysis surrounding the politics of the post-Rising Irish cultural landscape helps to explain this outcome. It is with an understanding of the literary tropes of trauma and Freud’s struggle to resolve his theories of ego pleasure with the self-destructive impulses of returning soldiers that Willie’s narrative arc throughout Barry’s novel finds a fertile context.

In *A Long Long Way* Barry puts Willie Dunne through a meat grinder, exposing him to horror after horror and narrating each episode with a poetry designed to “slay the hearts of simple men” (Barry 132). Each episode of violence penetrates deeper into Willie’s psyche, inculcating a trauma that will fester until its darkness consumes him. Cathy Caruth writes of trauma’s oscillating “crisis of life” and “crisis of death” wherein the impossibility of survival, of having endured supreme violence, is met by a diametric sense of the impossibility of living, an equally extreme appreciation for the capriciousness of existence. In the novel this binary manifests itself as Willie is whipsawed from tragedy to elation that sees him
bear witness to horror and then participate in scenes of joyful communion with his family and his fellow soldiers. Willie’s personification of this communion is his singing voice which raises high and often for the pleasure of his trenchmates, his late mother and his own self. All these scenes collectively, and the singing in particular, reveal how Freud’s “living substance” strives to join with the world in a greater union and to push back against the horrors of the battlefield, to rebuild a psychic unity fit to survive the First World War. It fails.

Each moment of Eros, of erotic unity with the other that seeks to diffuse the mounting ego excitation that threatens Willie’s psychic stability, is undone by the seeds of suffering that come to occupy the very core of Willie’s psyche. These seeds eventually flower into Willie’s annihilation as Freud’s death drive asserts its supremacy. For Freud, the death drive represents the ego’s ultimate solution, a self-destructive gambit to silence unbearable psychic turmoil and Willie is so ruined by internalized trauma that he unconsciously pursues these extreme measures. In the end Willie is wracked by somatic expression, convinced that the world he has known is no more, and is only able to identify with war and warriors. He returns to the battlefield and in his darkest state employs his one gift to the world, his singing voice, as a tool of self-destruction. He sings to his enemy, foolishly seeking fraternity, and in so doing fulfills the will of the death drive: an end to all tension and a final return to inanimate nothingness.
Works Cited


Wilson, An. “August 3 1914: the countdown to cataclysm.” *The Telegraph*