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# Art, Nature and the Negotiation of Memory in J. L. Carr's *A Month in the Country*

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**Abstract:** The present article analyses J. L. Carr's novel *A Month in the Country* (1980) in the light of an approach to traumatic experience as paradoxically relating destructiveness and survival. This view of trauma – already present in Freud and further elaborated in more recent theories like Cathy Caruth's – accentuates the possibility of constructing a new story that bears witness not only to the shattering effects of trauma but also to a departure from it. From this perspective, the author deals first with the role of art as a survival aid to the novel's traumatised protagonist, explaining how his restoration of a medieval mural helps him work through his troubled memories of the Great War. Repetitions and doublings link the two central characters, their discoveries and their recovery, creating layers of meaning that, it is argued, call for a 'palimpsestuous' reading, in Sarah Dillon's sense of the term. The author then focuses on the regenerative power of nature in the novel, relating its use of the pastoral to the frequent recourse to it in Great War literature, and interpreting Carr's text in line with critical approaches that reject escapism as the main trait of the pastoral mode. Finally, the protagonist's retrospective narration is discussed as a creative act that is also an aid to the survival of the self.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Cathy Caruth approaches trauma as not merely a shattering of the self, but also as “fundamentally, an enigma of survival” (1996: 57–58). Here as in later works she draws on Freud's theories in order to deal with

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result into a pathology, but it is not devoid of creative possibility, of the possibility of a “parting” from it couched in the language of the life drive. Birkin’s story of survival eventually becomes the survival of a story, and so, of the possibility of *creating* something not only out of the loss of the character’s pre-war self due to the experience of combat, but also out of the loss of the narrator’s self as a consequence of the passing of time. It is to counteract the latter that the older Birkin rescues a simple but evocative episode of his past and gives it narrative form.

As Bollas puts it, “the trauma of time passing is unconsciously managed by screen memories, which become underground wells in the deserts of time. Once tapped [...] what was partially erased by the trauma of passing time is restored through free association to screen memory” (1995: 141). “[T]app[ing]” can be related here to narrative (and, in the light of the author’s foreword, not only to Birkin’s narrating his story, but also to Carr’s writing the novel). Loss follows loss, in the novel as in life, but new meanings are produced through the creative energy that comes with the very act of (discursive) retrieval of the past, especially of those intense experiences that Bollas sees as condensed in screen memories, and that one may at least try to revive through stories that make them available for the self’s present, and the self’s future. As “underground wells in the deserts of time”, to use Bollas’ words quoted above, they can help heal the wounds caused by those more traumatic episodes inhabiting the past. This involves, as Carr’s novel shows, a fight that may well be a flight, the flight to survival.

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