

The Man Who Never Returned From War: Considerations on Trauma Theory and History in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*

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Abstract- *This paper aims at analyzing the effects of trauma and history in Rebecca West's novel The Return of the Soldier (1918) and, more specifically, how men and women got equally affected by trauma in the First War. Chris Baldry returns from the battlegrounds affected by shell-shock disorder and his traumatic amnesia prevents him from recollecting what his life was like before the War. The three women living in his house (his wife, whom he no longer recognizes; Chris's ex-lover, Margaret, who still loves him, and his cousin, Jenny).*

In fact, Chris's debilitated mental health comes as a shock to the three women in his life. The drama lived by these three women grows out of proportion as the psychiatrist, Dr. Anderson, intervenes in favor of recovering his patient's "complete case of amnesia" and leads a trial-like interrogation of Baldry's pre-war life. Their confessions generate hostility, but, rather than dividing the group of women, they promote reflection on the frailty and vulnerability of men.

In symbolic terms, the house where the three women live represents a kind of "laboratory" from which they observe war and formulate their views of it. Through the complex psychological interplay among the women living under the same roof, war is shown from the "home front." It may also be said that the three women act as listeners and, in so doing, they may offer considerable help towards Chris's possible recovery.

Keywords- *English Literature; First World War; Women War Writing; Trauma Theory.*

Rebecca West published *The Return of the Soldier* in 1918, the same year that the First World War ended. Although she described her experience of the war as passive,¹ her novel brings insight to the feeling of distress by non-combatants, more remarkably, women. The consequences of war affected society as a whole:

The monster of twentieth-century total war was not born full-sized. Nevertheless, from 1914 on, wars were unmistakably mass wars... Even in industrial societies so great a manpower mobilization puts enormous strains on the labour force, which is why modern mass wars both strengthened the powers of organized labour and produced a revolution in the employment of women outside the household: temporarily in the First World War, permanently in the Second World War.²

Not only does this passage reinforce the idea of the war effects on women, who willingly or not joined the labor force, it also relates women's job insertion from

1914, simultaneously with the First War. In addition to Hobsbawm's premise of mass labor mobilization, it is my assumption that the psychological impact of war trauma was equally felt by all those involved in war, men, women, and children. The war affected the lives of both civilians and non-civilians alike.

The idea of a tragedy that affected everyone's lives is present on the first page of West's novel. The narrative begins by describing the dead son's story and how Oliver's death affected Chris (his father), Kitty (his mother), and Jenny (his aunt, the narrator), equally. Jenny describes how she and Kitty would constantly revisit the baby's bedroom, which remained intact after five years from his death, and the painful memories caused by this habit:

And along the mantelpiece, under the loved print of the snarling tiger, in attitudes that were at once angular and relaxed, as though they were ready for play at their master's pleasure, but found it hard to keep from drowsing in this warm weather, sat the Teddy Bear and the chimpanzee and the woolly white dog and the black cat with eyes that roll. Everything was there except Oliver. I turned

¹See Higonnet 122. The editor recalls that "West found her passive experience of the First World War more terrible than that of the Second; she later commented ironically, 'because there you were, not in much danger.'"

²Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: 1914-1991*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) 44-5.

away so that I might not spy on Kitty revisiting her dead.³

The description of the baby bedroom's animal *motif* suggests the image of an unanimated forest, whose inhabitants have suddenly been abandoned by their keeper. It suggests that the entire family, who fell into a lethargic state afterwards, felt the traumatic experience of abandonment.

The dead son's episode is presented in the first and in the last chapters, a landmark event that both prompts and interrupts the plot, suggesting a parallel between the dead baby and his wounded soldier father's homecoming. Chris Baldry's appearance is pale and worn-out, and his mental state is affected by delusions and introspection, caused by the war. He somehow resembles a ghost. Chris's traumatic amnesia, as a symptom of shell-shock disorder, leaves him in a state of suspension, in a kind of *limbo*. It seems as though he is "possessed" and that causes estrangement to the women in the house. Such reaction appears recurrently in cases of post traumatic stress disorder and, according to Cathy Caruth, this happens because "... the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event."⁴ Chris's mind is constantly urging him to return to the traumatic battle scenes he experienced during the War, not to return to Baldry's Court or to Monkey's Island Inn, for that matter.⁵ Yet, the three women feel apprehensive because he is not able to verbalize how he feels. In fact, what Chris has experienced in war, and many other trauma victims share that as well, is an "impossible history", that is defined by Caruth as follows: "The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess."⁶

In fact, Chris's debilitated mental health comes as a shock to the three women in his life: his wife, whom he no longer recognizes; Chris's ex-lover, Margaret, who still loves him (and vice-versa), and his cousin, Jenny, who "suddenly was stunned with jealousy." (56). The drama lived by these three women grows out of proportion as the psychiatrist, Dr. Anderson, intervenes in favor of recovering his patient's "complete case of amnesia" (70)

³Rebecca West, *The Return of the Soldier*. (New York: Random House, 2004) 4.

⁴Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995) iv-v.

⁵Curiously, the idyllic place to where Chris desires to return for good had a special importance for Rebecca West's life. Verlyn Klinkenborg reveals, in the introductory chapter to the 2004 Random House edition of *The Return of the Soldier*, that "Her life had been enormously perplexed by her relationship with the married [H.G.] Wells, with whom she used to visit the Monkey Island Inn." (xx).

⁶Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995) v.

and leads a trial-like interrogation of Baldry's pre-war life. Their confessions generate hostility, but, rather than dividing the group of women, they promote reflection on the frailty and vulnerability of men. It is also suggested that the women who were previously supported financially by Chris would have to find jobs in order to maintain themselves, the house and, possibly, Chris, given his ill state. Jenny reveals the discrepancy of what was expected from a soldier in terms of social behavior by early twentieth-century women, and what she actually witnesses based on her cousin's misery. First, she compares the nightmares she had of her cousin on the battleground to the view of war she had from war films:

*Of late I had had bad dreams about him. By nights I saw Chris running across the brown rottenness of No-Man's-Land, starting back here because he trod upon a hand, not even looking there because of the awfulness of an unburied head, and not till my dream was packed full of horror did I see him pitch forward on his knees as he reached safety, if it was that. For on the war-films I have seen men slip down as softly from the trench-parapet, and none but the grimmer philosophers could say that they had reached safety by their fall."*⁷

The film reference here, as Das clarifies, is

The Battle of the Somme (1916), watched by some 80 per cent of the adult population in Britain, introduced many of its audiences at once to cinema and war: it brought home the scale of the war's devastation through images of bombed landscapes, ruined buildings and killed and wounded men.⁸

Either for education or propaganda, British authorities used films to construct the public's view of the First War. As much as the narrator seems impressed with the vividness of these film scenes, she comes across an even worse realization as she wakes up from her nightmares, which makes her change her views on war. She seems to speak for her British comrades as she ponders that:

*And when I escaped into wakefulness it was only to lie stiff and think of stories I had heard in the boyish voice of the modern subaltern, which rings indomitable, yet has most of its gay notes flattened: "We were all of us in a barn one night, and a shell came along. My pal sang out, 'Help me, old man; I've got no legs!' and I had to answer, 'I can't, old man; I've got no hands!'" Well, such are the dreams of Englishwomen today."*⁹

What seems to be a joke at a first glance reveals itself as a nightmare of mutilation. The "dreams of Englishwomen" are, in fact, women's awakening to war's

⁷West 6.

⁸Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) 230.

⁹West 6.

most tragic face - meaning that their men would not necessarily return from war as heroes, if ever.

About the film passage in West's novel, Das calls our attention to the writer's choice of the word "softly" in "on the war films I have seen men slip down softly from the trench parapet..." (6) It reveals, in his words, that "it was the palpable substantiality of the falling bodies that troubled the mind." (231), suggesting the author's familiarity with the frailty of men in the trenches and how her writing evokes "bodily senses, particularly touch, [which] defined the texture of experience in the trenches and the hospitals, and how they inform and shape war writings."¹⁰ Hynes observes with admiration how the novel's narrator "compose[s] her vision out of second-hand images, though she does so vividly." (212), referring to the precision of details she used in order to describe the film, as well as to the views on war formulated by a woman of the time.¹¹

In symbolic terms, the house where the three women live represents a kind of "laboratory" from which they observe war and formulate their views of it. Through the complex psychological interplay among the women living under the same roof, war is shown from the "home front." It may also be said that the three women act as listeners and, in so doing, they may offer considerable help towards Chris's possible recovery. Many trauma scholars have vindicated the importance of having a community of listeners. Anne Whitehead claims that: "The multiplicity of testimonial voices suggests that recovery is based on a community of witnesses. Through the compassionate sharing of the story, trauma resolves itself into new forms and constellations."¹² As the women listen to his story, they may help him symbolize his "impossible story", remember who he was and come to terms with his traumatic experience. This is made possible once compassionate listeners, whose attitude is the reverse of the violence that the traumatic event has inflicted, aid trauma victims by willingly listening to them. Another trauma critic, Leigh Gilmore, ponders that: "Trauma lacks an other who will return the story without violence to the speaker by listening to it carefully."¹³

The three women, despite their perplexity towards Chris's traumatic amnesia, seem to show empathy for his condition. Kitty, in Penelope's fashion, has not abandoned the wealthy property built with her husband's hard work while he went off to war. Regardless of the three women's dispute for Chris's love, as the housekeeper, she is the one who exerts greater power in Baldry's Court. Instead of procrastinating suitors, she handles the husband's cousin and his mistress, with mastery over both.

Another mythical analogy can be made with Margaret, Chris's ex-lover, and the only recollection his traumatic amnesia has not deleted. The way in which she rescues him from his nightmare may be compared to that of a Valkyre, who saves a warrior in a desperate attempt to withdraw him from the battleground and lead him towards a nearest version of the *Walhalla*. The narrator notes:

*How her near presence had been known by Chris I do not understand, but there he was, running across the lawn as night after night I had seen him in my dreams running across No-Man's-Land. I knew that so he would close his eyes as he ran; I knew that so he would pitch on his knees when he reached safety. I assumed naturally that at Margaret's feet lay safety even before I saw her arms brace him under the armpits with a gesture that was not passionate, but rather the movement of one carrying a wounded man from under fire.*¹⁴

Klinkenborg recalls an interesting fact about West's novel:

*In October 1917, when she learned that The Return of the Soldier – her first novel – had been accepted for publication, Anthony [her son with Wells] was already three, incendiary bombs and aerial torpedoes were falling all around her, and West had been reading Tolstoy.*¹⁵

The novel was written by West during the bombings of the First War, approximately a year after the Battle of the Somme. West's interest in this battle is also referred to in the novel by the homonymous film she sees. The novel by Tolstoy, in analogy to the war, was likely to be the *War and Peace* series (1865-1869).

The narrative is set *in medias res*. The story starts with Jenny recollecting the day her cousin headed to "Somewhere in France." (3) and she "recalled all that he did one morning just a year ago when he went to the front." (7). Frank Baldry, Chris's cousin, writes a letter to Jenny describing his meeting with the already amnesiac Chris at a hospital in Boulogne, referring to the city of Boulogne-sur-Mer, in Northern France, where the Battle of the Somme took place. The year they meet coincides with the Somme Offensive: "He turned very pale and asked what year this was. '1916,' I told him. He fell back in a fainting condition." (19).¹⁶ Most narratives of trauma fiction seem to have in common the feature of breaking the narrative chronology and more specifically, of being reiterative. This is due, perhaps, to the fact that such narratives, like trauma itself, are based on repetition. Anne Whitehead explains that:

One of the key literary strategies in trauma fiction is the device of repetition, which can act at the levels of language, imagery or plot. Repetition

¹⁰ Das 230.

¹¹ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1991) 212.

¹² Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004) 88.

¹³ Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001) 31.

¹⁴ West 52.

¹⁵ Verlyn Klinkenborg. Introduction. *The Return of the Soldier*. By Rebecca West. (New York: Random House, 2004) xvi.

¹⁶ West 19.

*mimics the effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression.*¹⁷

West's novel can be said to share an important feature with *War and Peace*: their stories are set after the war has started, and no previous information, or historical background, about the wars they refer to, is given to the reader. According to Ginzburg, the *in medias res* setting confers a unique value on the fictional representation of history. Speaking of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the statement is also valid in relation to West's novel:

*In War and Peace ... all the events prior to the narration (from personal memories to the cultural memory of the Napoleonic Era) is assimilated and left behind, in order to enable readers to gain intimacy with the characters. Tolstoy leaps at filling in the gaps between fragmented, distorted clues of an event (a battle, for example), and the event itself. (My translation)*¹⁸

It is important to observe that Tolstoy's fictional account of the Napoleonic wars, more remarkably the battle of Austerlitz, followed by the final withdraw of French troops - - defeated by both the Army and the cold of Russia - - is retold by over a hundred real and fictitious characters. The time period between 1805 and 1820, when Russian forces, led by Czar Alexander I, fought the Napoleonic armies, is not replicated. Rather, it is reconstructed through imagination.

The raw material for Tolstoy's historical novel - - expansionism, dictatorship and aristocracy in early nineteenth-century Russia - - is filled with theoretical digressions. In *The Return of the Soldier*, the reader may assess historical battles (here, the Battle of the Somme) through a multiplicity of voices. In the case of West's war narrative, the reader has access to the voices of three women inhabiting the same house.

War fictions seem to have a kind of peculiar advantage in relation to traditional historical accounts - - fragments of cultural memory may be recollected in the voices of fictional characters. Ginzburg sees in these narratives the very content of microhistory, as he explains further in his remarks on Tolstoy:

To this kind of leap, this kind of direct connection with reality is set (although not necessarily) on the ground of fiction: historians, who rely on traces, documents, are denied access. Historiographic frescoes, which convey the illusion of an extinct reality, sometimes in a mediocre fashion, tacitly deprive historians of a constructive limit. Microhistory takes the opposite direction: it accepts the limit by exploring

*gnosologic implications and transforms them into a narrative element. (My translation)*¹⁹

A part of historical memory that has not been the main focus of traditional historical analysis - - women's views on war - - is carefully rescued, and fictionally reconstructed, by Rebecca West's novel and, under the micro historical perspective, contributes to a broader understanding of the War. How women were affected by "the monster of war"²⁰ is, paired with the realization of men's susceptibility, an indicator of women's share in the history of the First War as protagonists. In the novel, attention is drawn from "the returning soldier", supposedly the protagonist, in benefit of the three women characters: his love affair with Margaret is undermined by the ex-lover's "motherly" compassion for his condition (81) and Chris's traumatic amnesia is still uncured, which suggests the protagonists' non-return to normal life, or failure to perform his so-called "heroic" task. He wanders around the house and looks at it and its inhabitants with indifference (81) and, as the novel ends, he still remains "every inch of a soldier" (82). By taking the emphasis off Chris and focalizing on the women characters, the readers' attention is immediately shifted towards the three women, their opinions, and their views.

War and its influence on women, as they are described by a woman author who witnessed and wrote about the highlights of the twentieth century (born in 1892, died in 1983) endow West's narrative with more credibility. Hobsbawm, who was born during the First War, in 1917, stresses that "For anyone of my age-group who has lived through all or most of the Short Twentieth Century this [to understand and explain the First and the Second World Wars] is inevitably an autobiographical endeavour."²¹ The recollection of the major events of the twentieth century, by men and women provide, in Hobsbawm's view, the definition of the parts they played in history, as well as of their own history. He states that:

*We are talking about, amplifying (and correcting) our own memories. And we are talking as men and women of a particular time and place, involved, in various ways, in its history as actors in its dramas ... as observers of our times and, not least, as people whose views of the century have been formed by what we have come to see as its crucial events. We are part of this century. It is part of us.*²²

¹⁹ Ginzburg 271.

²⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, "The Age of Catastrophe." *The Age of Extremes: 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996). Hobsbawm refers to the mass wars of the twentieth century, starting from the First War: "The monster of twentieth-century total war was not born full-sized. Nevertheless, from 1914 on, wars were unmistakably mass wars." (44).

²¹ Hobsbawm. Introduction. *The Age of Extremes: 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) iii.

²² Hobsbawm iii.

¹⁷ Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004) 86.

¹⁸ Carlo Ginzburg, *O fio e os rastros: verdadeiro, falso, fictício*. (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2006) 271. Ginzburg's latest book has not yet been translated into English.

War trauma affected Chris's life and it would not have been different with the three women in his life. It may be said that the War trauma became part of those women's lives. West's narrative invites the reader to learn more from the part played by war in women's lives, written by a woman whose life and work have been indispensable for nearly an entire century.

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