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Alice Ferrebe*

* University of Edinburgh

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Alice Ferrebe
University of Edinburgh

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At the end of the Second World War in Britain, the close of conflict was followed by an eagerness to resurrect and politically to utilise a sense of what the experience of total war had meant. The image of a nation pulling together in opposition to evil and adversity informed the social machinations necessary to establish the Welfare State. Later, a country in the grip of the individualistic ideology of Thatcherism turned again to the now well-established myth of total community triumphing over total evil, in literary and filmic representations of World War II itself or of mythic arenas in which these same basic principles could apply. This time, the myths served as comforting nostalgia rather than engines of social change. During the last decade, the First World War has rivalled the Second as a resonant source for recent authors, and the popularity and sales of fictional works by novelists like Pat Barker and Sebastian Faulks suggest a similarly strong identification amongst the modern public. If World War II provided a myth of community to those in need of reassurance, paradoxically the enduring myth of the Great War, one of disillusionment, unnecessary evil and division, is currently attractive to a post-Cold war society anxious about its lack of unequivocal aims and enemies.

In this paper I will examine four works of World War I fiction, two informed by a direct experience of the war itself; Rebecca West's The Return of the Soldier (1918) and Richard Aldington's Death of a Hero (1929), one of the rush of war novels published after a hiatus of around ten years; and two more contemporary novels; Sebastian Faulks' Birdsong (1993) and the final text in Pat Barker'sRegenerationtrilogy, The Ghost Road (1995). The thesis of

disillusionment and futility is apparent in the novels' critiques of a wide range of social dynamics which are implicated to varying degrees in the genesis and aftermath of the First World War. Here I want to focus particularly upon the way in which each novel makes this thesis manifest in its treatment of the pivotal gender relationships of traditional war literature: the heterosexual and the male bond. In a consideration of each novelist's portrayal of the potentialities of these two types of relationship, I shall assess the extent to which the more modern novels revise and depart from the conclusions of the earlier texts.

Richard Aldington's Death of a Hero devotes less than half of its text to a description of its male protagonist's experience of actual combat. The true horror of the novel, and its overriding concerns, lie in the realisation that, far from being an isolated event of unequivocal evil and destruction that disrupted a state of innocence, the war was simply a further manifestation of the abject mess that contemporary society had become. Aldington locates the source of this social decay in heterosexual relationships, or more specifically in the repression and warping of sexual desires within these relationships. The most direct question in the book has nothing to do with the causes and objects of unmitigated slaughter, but is rather: "Does the free play of the passions and intelligence make for more erotic happiness than the taboo system?" (154). The pre-war interest in the work of Freud has, it is recognised, opened a whole new discourse with relation to sexuality and society, but it is a false discourse which couches desire as a sort of virulent sickness, corrupting reason and controlling behaviour. Before Freudian analysis had tightened its grip upon contemporary thought:

> All things were not interpreted in terms of sexual symbolism: and if one had the misfortune to slip on a banana-peel in the street, he was not immediately told that this implied repressed desire to undergo the initiatory mutilating rite of the Mohammedans. (156)

It is all obsessive cant, and the pseudo-sensual liberation of George Winterbourne's young wife, Elizabeth, and her friend Fanny is portrayed as no

more than a "skilful smoke-barrage of Freudian and Havelock Ellis theories" (24) continuing to conceal the deeper recesses of a female sexuality twisted by its long-term repression. The narrator says of Mrs Winterbourne, George's mother:

> The effect of George's death on her temperament was, strangely enough, almost wholly erotic. The war did that to lots of women. All the dying and wounds and mud and bloodiness – at a safe distance – gave them a great kick, and excited them to an almost unbearable pitch of amorousness. Of course, in that eternity of 1914-18 they must have come to feel that men alone were mortal, and they immortals; wherefore they tried to behave like houris with all available sheikhs – hence the lure of 'war work' with its unbounded opportunities. And then there was the deep primitive physiological instinct – men to kill and be killed; women to produce more men to continue the process. (This, however, was often frustrated by the march of Science, viz. anti-conceptives; for which, much thanks.) (19)

The voices of the Suffragettes having faded from social discourse on the post-war achievement of the vote for women, a man writing in 1929 can afford to proffer this portrait of the female population as whores slaving to their corrupted urges. The "cure" for the state of society, then, which will stop the baby machines making babies for the war machines, and break the (female) bond between sex and death, is contraception. Uncannily predicting the circumstances of the rise of the Second Wave of feminism, George Winterbourne attempts to seduce his future wife with this speech:

> Like most intelligent women and a few men, you're indignant at the way women have been treated in the past and at the wicked mediaeval laws of this country. You want women to be free to live more interesting lives. So do I. Any man who isn't an abject moron would rather see women becoming more intelligent and magnanimous instead of having them kept ignorant and timid and repressed and meekly acquiescent, and therefore sly and catty and wanting to get their own back. But you won't achieve

> that with Suffrage. Of course, let women have votes if they want them. But who the devil wants a vote? I'd gladly give you mine if I had one. But the point is this: when women, all women, know how to control their bodies, they'll have an enormous power. They'll be able to choose when and how they'll have a child and what man they want as its father. (159)

Aldington does not champion the family as the model for a perfect morality. He presents marriage as an elaborate and hypocritical means of couching the sexual urge as spiritual salvation: the bells at the marriage of George's parents peal "Come and see the fucking. Come and see the fucking" (48). Rather he upholds the social and moral primacy of heterosexual lovers. Freed from the financial and social implications of conception, men and women would be able to explore their natural sexual desires with honesty, but 'until then we can only look on and sigh at the ruined lives; and reflect that men and women might be to each other the great consolation, while in fact they do little but torment each other…(164).

But consolation for what? In his preface to the novel, a letter to Halcott Glover, Aldington confesses:

> Through a good many doubts and hesitations and changes I have always preserved a certain idealism. I believe in men, I believe in a certain fundamental integrity and comradeship, without which society could not endure. (8)

Human relationships are natural, but some, it would seem, are more natural than others, and most natural of all is the primal, intimate and delicate communion between young men which must be protected at all cost from intimations of homosexuality:

> Friendships between soldiers during the war were a real and beautiful and unique relationship which has now entirely vanished, at least from Western Europe. Let me at once disabuse the eager Sodomites among my readers by stating emphatically once and for all that there was nothing sodomitical in these friendships. I have lived and slept for months, indeed

> years, with "the troops," and had several such companionships. But no vaguest proposal was ever made to me; I never saw any signs of sodomy, and never heard anything to make me suppose it existed. However, I was with the fighting troops. I can't answer for what went on behind the lines. (30-1)

This bond exists because of the war, but also in spite of it, and in spite of an elderly patriarchy larding over its natural beauty with an outdated and grotesque mythology of Kiplingesque cant about how to deny your intelligent self-hood and so become a "thoroughly manly fellow" (79):

> That's the great break in the generations. Trying to use some intelligence in life, instead of blindly following instincts and the collective imbecility of the ages as embodied in social and legal codes. (169)

The male establishment, with its rulers, law-makers and educators however, is presented as invincible. Young men are sickened and brow-beaten into conformity with the designated manly attributes and sent over to France to confront a situation before which their heroic ideals, their reason and their language fail utterly. They are then sent over the top. Should they survive, they return unable to communicate their experience, thus opening an even wider abyss between the generations and the sexes. After describing this process, Aldington's narrator writes:

> That is why I am writing the life of George Winterbourne, a unit, one human body murdered, but to me a symbol. It is an atonement, a desperate effort to wipe off the blood-guiltiness. Perhaps it is the wrong way. Perhaps the poison will still be in me. If so, I shall search for some other way. But I shall search. I know what is poisoning me. I do not know what is poisoning you, but you are poisoned. Perhaps you too must atone. (36)

The blood guiltiness goes beyond contrition for the spilling of male blood. It lies in the complicity of a man continuing his blood-line in this atmosphere of

"sickening putrid cant" (35) that corrupts the perceived primary human relationships: the homosocial and the heterosexual.

Written during the First World War, Rebecca West's novel The Return of the Soldier also locates a strong sense of horror in the perspective of the war-time division of genders prompting the realisation of the destructive nature of contemporary gender identities and relationships, rather than in the realities of the conflict itself. It is true that the soldier who returns, Chris Baldry, has repressed all memories of the recent terrors of battle, but the tension of the novel turns upon the fact that he has also forgotten his adult life before the war, his "prosperous maturity" (134), and Kitty, the wife he married during it. For his own psychic safety, Chris' mind has returned him to his boyhood, and the pastoral scenes on Monkey Island of his first love affair with Margaret, the inn-keeper's daughter. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator Jenny, Chris' cousin, says of a view of the countryside:

> That day its beauty was an affront to me, because like most Englishwomen of my time I was wishing for the return of a soldier. Disregarding the national interest and everything except the keen prehensile gesture of our hearts towards him, I wanted to snatch my cousin Christopher from the wars and seal him in this green pleasantness his wife and I now looked upon. (13)

Once he is home, she is witness to Chris' simulated second boy-hood, to his liberation from his harsh adult responsibilities of maintaining the brittle-beautiful world of regimented crocuses and shot silks in which she and his wife and move, both loving, both possessive. Jenny comes to realise that the "green pleasantness" has a "seal" precisely because it is a form of trap. West acknowledges both the attraction of the idea of a pre-war paradise of innocent relationships, and the impossibility of its construction by a writer with any integrity. The only true and attainable idyll of modern life is that of childhood, but this contains the seeds of its own destruction – the necessity of ageing. She says of Chris:

He was so wonderful when he was young; he possessed in great measure the loveliness of young men, which is like the loveliness of the spry foal or the sapling, but in him it was vexed into a serious and moving beauty by the inhabiting soul. When the sunlight lay on him, discerning the gold hairs on his brown head, or when he was subject to any other physical pleasure there was always reserve in his response to it; from his eyes, which though grey were somehow dark with speculation, one perceived that he was distracted by participation in some spiritual drama. To see him was to desire intimacy with him so that one might intervene between this body which was formed for happiness and this soul which cherished so deep a faith in tragedy….(104)

Jenny is initially aware of a female responsibility to "compensate him for his lack of free adventure" (21). The tragedy of manhood is that the exercising of the child-like desire for imaginary adventure has real and horrific consequences:

> Why had modern life brought forth these horrors that make the old tragedies seem no more than nursery shows? Perhaps it is that adventurous men have too greatly changed the outward world which is life's engenderment. (63-4)

Chris' renewed relationship with Margaret provides Jenny with a vision of some of the potential of the heterosexual love relationship, which, interestingly in a novel by a young feminist, endorses a woman in the traditional feminine role of soother and sustainer of the adventurous masculine man. Chris' peace while lying on a blanket in the garden with Margaret

means that the woman has gathered the soul of the man into her and is keeping it warm in love and peace so that his body can rest quiet for a little time. That is a great thing for a woman to do. I know there are things at least as great for those women whose independent spirits can ride fearlessly and with interest outside the home park of their personal relationships, but independence is not the occupation of most of us. What we desire is greatness such as this which had given sleep to the beloved. (144)

Chris and Margaret are loving each other without notions of possession or of calculation, but they are only able to do this in an artificial childhood world created by Chris' neurosis and Margaret's complicity with it. Watching Margaret react to the news that Chris and Kitty lost their son before the war began, and learning that Margaret was similarly bereaved, Jenny reaches her conclusion:

> For that her serenity, which a moment before had seemed as steady as the earth and as all-enveloping as the sky, should be so utterly dispelled made me aware that I had of late been underestimating the cruelty of the order of things. Lovers are frustrated; children are not begotten that should have had the loveliest life, the pale usurpers of their birth die young. Such a world will not suffer magic circles to endure. (161-2)

When Margaret reminds him of his loss, Chris is awoken from this artifice. No father of a dead son can believe himself to be still a child, so as Jenny watches him return to the house: "He walked not loose-limbed like a boy, as he had done that very afternoon, but with the soldier's hard tread upon the heel" (187). The only way to create an idyll is to create a child, and provide it with an idyllic childhood, but even before the mass son-slaughter of the Great War, men and women were demanding the wrong things of each other, and in their sickness creating babies that were born sickly and died prematurely. Like Aldington, West is unable to advocate reproduction as the antidote to the nihilism of the War. Repopulation of a nation of people with the blood-guiltiness of corrupted human relationships in their veins is a further act of destruction, not regeneration.

Conversely, Sebastian Faulks' novel Birdsong is unequivocal in its upholding of reproductive sex as the primary human interaction and as the antithesis to, not the accomplice of, the First World War. His hero, Stephen Wraysford, endures most of the combat as a nihilist, utterly detached from any sense of purpose. He admits to Captain Gray: "I don't value my life enough. I have no sense of the scale of these sacrifices. I don't know what anything is worth" (164). If the numbness abates and he requires motivation, it is his hatred of the Germans that fuels him to

continue; not the concept of the Second Reich, but the reviled physical presence of the men who fight for it on the other side of No Man's Land. This is in contrast to the novel's lesser hero, the working class Jack Firebrace, who is able to suffer the claustrophobia of tunnel-digging for his family: "His endurance was for them; the care he took to try to stay alive was so that he would see the boy again" (199). Jack's family, we are informed, are fit to inspire little beyond a Dickensian pathos; a rather raddled older woman and a sickly child who is later to die of bronchitis; but the power of the institution is enough to inspire Jack to strive to live. Both Stephen and Isabelle, his French lover before the War begins, place what is presented to be an unnatural importance upon the sexual act, mistaking it for an experience of origins. As he enters her, she sighs: "I was born for this" (60), and in Flanders Stephen is anxious to procure a prostitute for the virgin Weir because

> he wanted Weir to know what it felt like to be with a woman, to feel that intimacy of flesh. It made no difference to him whether Weir died in all innocence, but he felt it was in some way necessary for him to understand the process that had brought him into being. (203)

Isabelle's unnatural passion is "cured" by her pregnancy:

> The coming child had already begun to still her most restless expectations. The need satisfied in her was so deep that she had not previously been aware of it; it was as though she had become conscious of a starving hunger only after having eaten. (110-1)

Stephen's rehabilitation from his excessive nihilism and morbid passion is not instantaneous: it is a gradual process of learning through pity to love the soldiers in his charge. The novel makes a determined effort to document male love relationships which involve aesthetic appreciation and nurturing without any suggestion of the homoerotic. Jack has an artistic bent – he has been known to sketch during the novel – so his approbation of his comrade "Arthur Shaw with his handsome, heavy head and calm manner" (142) is sanctioned and free of the

masculinist spectre of homosexual desire. Stephen is licensed to exhibit tenderness towards Weir as they have both just been through the holocaust of the battle of the Somme:

> "Hold me," said Weir. "Please hold me."
> He crawled over the soil and laid his head against Stephen's chest. He said, "Call me by my name."
> Stephen wrapped his arms round him and held him. "It's all right, Michael. It's all right, Michael. Hold on, don't let go. Hold on, hold on." (240)

The essence of Stephen's training in humanity is his learning to love like a father, to experience a vehemently non-sexual intimacy with his comrades. As part of this process, he is able to gain a sense of what the war is being fought to protect. He meets Jeanne, Isabelle's sister, in Amiens, and through her he experiences the continuity of family (he is himself an orphan) without the "unnatural" abandon of his passion for Isabelle. It is thus that, on the verge of a breakdown at the news of Weir's death, Stephen's captain is able to motivate him through a concept of future generations, through invoking the family:

"If you falter now you'll rob his [Weir's] life of any purpose. Only by seeing it through can you give him rest."

> "Our lives lost meaning long ago. You know that. At Beaumont-Hamel."
> Gray swallowed. "Then do it for our children."
> Stephen pulled his stiff limbs out from the dugout and into the summer air. (388)

Later sections of Birdsong are devoted to a 1970s British business woman, Elizabeth Benson. Childless, in a relationship with a married man, her personal need for a sense of her origins leads her to investigate her grandfather's service in the Great War, visiting the battlefields in France, and decoding his encrypted diaries. Unearthing Stephen Wraysford's combat experiences emphasises to her the relative triviality of her existence, leading her to conclude that "in her

generation there was no intensity" (414). The solution to her emptiness is the same as Isabelle's. Her lover Robert looks on as she gives birth to his child:

> Then Elizabeth opened her eyes, and he saw them fill with a determination he had never seen in any human face before. She threw back her hand and he could see the sinews of her neck rise up like bones. Her wild eyes reminded him of a horse that has finally scented home and clamps his teeth on to the metal bit: no power on earth could stop the combined force of muscle, instinct and willpower as it drove on to its appointed end. (502)

For Faulks, the Great War can be considered justifiable insofar as it can be made to represent the binary opposite of reproduction, and thus to teach us the value of the family. In a modern age pampered by effective contraception, he indulges his naturalistic fantasies of the primacy of conception, as the monumental scale of deaths initiates a rite of rebirth. The female role is joyfully reinscribed as motherhood. Men are no longer reductive biological hunters and protectors, but reductive biological fathers, their staunchly heterosexual bonds with other men a form of training for the non-erotic intimacy of parenthood. After both World Wars, an enormous push in patriarchal propaganda sought to emphasise the primacy of the nuclear family so as to reinscribe traditional gender roles on a disrupted society.Birdsong rewrites the process of World War I itself as a means to this enduring end.

The opening scene of Pat Barker's novel The Ghost Road seems at first to uphold Faulks' sense of war and reproduction in opposition, each the antidote to the other. Billy Prior, the protagonist, is observing (or rather, ogling) a young mother on the beach. He assumes that, her husband taken away by the War, she has been demoted from matriarch to sulky, subdued daughter back in her own mother's remit: the fulfilment of her own family life has been removed, and she is bereft of sex and of status. He soon surmises, however, that no marriage ever occurred to sanction the arrival of her child, that "Louie's knees were by no means glued together, even after the child" (5). War is here not the opposite of sex, it is

simultaneous to it, involved with it. Billy Prior provides the ideal fictional hero in such a scenario. His creation as a bisexual allows his participation in both sides of the sexual experience of war; the fumblings on home leave and the longings of the trenches; and his rather anachronistic fluency of hard-core sexual expression allows our voyeuristic participation too. Expectations of sex/death binary opposition are confounded again when Prior has been solicited by a prostitute. A whiff of gas from a leaky tap in her bedroom and the resulting reflex fear it inspires in him makes his erection falter, but he is able to rehabilitate himself with another violent military memory:

> Narrowing his eyes, he blurred her features, ran them together into the face they pinned to the revolver targets. A snarling, baby-eating boche. (41)

At the conclusion of this disorientating and unsatisfactory incident, Billy swears off sex with prostitutes:

> He wouldn't do this again, he decided, buckling his belt. It might work for some men, but … not for him. For him, it was all slip and slither, running across shingle. He hadn't been sure at the end who was fucking who. Even the excitement he'd felt at the idea of sliding in on another man's spunk was ambiguous, to say the least. Not that he minded ambiguity – he couldn't have lived at all if he'd minded *that* – but this was the kind of ambiguity people hide behind. And he was too proud to hide. (43)

Ambiguity, the talisman of post-modern thinking, haunts many of Billy's sexual experiences in this way. He is never "sure at the end who was fucking who," or who his mind is actually fucking – pliant civilians or his own fantasies of the enemy. War is simultaneously a turn-off and a turn-on, a contradiction to titillate the ironic sensibilities of the late twentieth century. Revealingly, however, Billy does achieve one sexual act free from any ambivalence: a snatched encounter with his fiancée Sarah Lumb, behind the sofa in her mother's house:

But he's always careful, always prepared – though never prepared for the surge of joy he feels now. He's like some aquatic animal, an otter, returning to its burrow,

greeting its mate nose to nose, curling up, safe, warm, dark, wet. His mind shrinks to a point that listens for footsteps, but his cock swells, huge and blind, filling the world. (81)

Finally, sex feels natural, and this incredibly self-aware, self-ironizing hero loses himself in joy. There is no ambiguity here. When Billy receives a letter from Sarah at the Front, saying that she is not pregnant as the result of the loss of the condom during this session, he is unexpectedly bereft. There is no ambiguity either in the portrayal of Sarah's mother, Ada Lumb, who would "give a brass monkey the wilts" (80). We are allowed no sympathy for her on-going quest to raise her daughters alone from poverty to perceived "respectability," but lured to despise her for making a living selling potions to "procure abortion or cure clap" (65) and for "appraising" (67) Billy's trousered groin while ruthlessly policing his time alone with Sarah. Like Ange Mate on Eddystone, she is the antithesis to 'natural', heterosexual sex with its potential for conception. Having at first entangled them, Barker now decisively separates the drive of war and death from the drive of sex and life, setting them firmly in opposition.

In marked contrast to Death of a Hero with its portrayal of an elderly patriarchy still staunchly powerful and unflinching amidst the sacrifice of its sons, The Ghost Road emphasises the adverse effects of the First World War on the traditional tenets of masculine identity and control. Sharing a tent with a new recruit while waiting to be sent to the Front, Billy muses on how the slaughter of so many young men has disrupted the patriarchal order of filial progression:

> How appallingly random it all was. If Hallet's father had got a gleam in his eye two years later than he did, Hallet wouldn't be here. He might even have missed the war altogether, perhaps spent the rest of his life goaded by the irrational shame of having escaped. "Cowed subjection to the ghosts of friends who died." That was it exactly, couldn't be better put. Ghosts everywhere. Even the living were only ghosts in the making. You learned to ration your commitment to them. This moment in this tent already had

> the quality of *remembered* experience. Or perhaps he was simply getting old. But then, after all, in trench time he *was* old. A generation lasted six months, less than that on the Somme, barely twelve weeks. He was this boy's great-grandfather. (46)

Note how Hallet is attributed to be the product of a father here, and not a family. Elsewhere, the presence of the "real" character Dr W. H. R. Rivers and his intellectual influence on Billy Prior allows us the experience of the immediacy of battle alongside an insight into the now generally accepted diagnosis of shell-shock: a hysterical male reaction to passivity, repression and confinement. The experience of war, traditionally perceived as a profoundly masculine rite, is preventing the possibility of access to a rationalist discourse, and instead fosters an environment where men's only resort is to use trench voodoo as a means of protection and their bodies as a means of protest. They can be rehabilitated only by Rivers' methods of 'ritual drama' (53). His attempts with traditional psychiatry have failed to affect Moffet's paralysis:

> What he'd actually tried was reason. He didn't *like* what he was going to do now, but it had become apparent that, until Moffet's reliance on the physical symptom was broken, no more rational approach stood any chance of working. (20)

Rivers draws charmed circles around Moffet's limbs, and gradually the paralysis retreats. For George Winterbourne, the War is conceived and maintained by a terrifyingly uncompromising drive of patriarchal rationality and technology: to Rivers and Prior, it is terrifying precisely because it represents an utter failure of masculine reason. At dinner in his billet in Amiens, Billy expounds his futility thesis:

> What do I think? I think what you're saying is basically a conspiracy theory, and like all conspiracy theories it's optimistic. What you're saying is, OK the war isn't being fought for the reasons we're told, but it *is* being fought for a reason. It's not benefiting the people it's supposed to be

> benefiting, but it *is* benefiting somebody. And I don't believe that, you see. I think things are actually much worse that you think because there isn't any kind of rational justification left. It's become a self-perpetuating system. Nobody benefits. Nobody's in control. Nobody knows how to stop. (143-4)

Again in contrast to Death of a Hero, debilitating confusion over the male gender role and the masculine bond are appreciated in The Ghost Road to be long-standing patriarchal anxieties rather than the recent revelations of younger men. There is none of the grotesque certainty exhibited by Winterbourne's father, George Augustus: the older male generations are portrayed as pitiful rather than maniacal. Major Telford, in all his bodily ignorance, vehemently assures Rivers that a nurse had once cut his penis off after a riding accident (thankfully, his 2cock" is still intact for urination), and exits whistling "A Bachelor Gay Am I" (60). Rivers himself is ideologically located somewhere between young and old, and is shown as torn during his childhood between opposing poles of influence; the effete Charles Dodgson with his phobia of snakes and professed hatred of little boys ('*Boys are a mistake*', 26); and the legend of his name-sake, Will Rivers, who shot Lord Nelson, and had his leg amputated without anaesthetic ("'*He* didn't cry,' his father had said, holding him up. '*He didn't make a sound.'* And I've been stammering ever since, Rivers thought, inclined to see the funny side,"' 95). Rivers is not a whole man, and this is why he can heal broken men, like the deformed witchdoctor Njiru, of the tribe of people on Eddystone Island, the subject of his anthropological research. Patching men up mentally at Craiglockhart Hospital and sending them back into battle, he is both implicated in the son-slaughter and sickened by his experience of its effects. He has no sexual outlet, ruefully diagnosing himself to have "a certain difficulty in integrating the sexual drive with the rest of the personality" (25), and identifying his relationship with Billy Prior as that of a father and his son, despite Billy's numerous sexual advances towards him. Rivers retreats for comfort to the past, but it is the

anthropological past of Eddystone, which allows him to create myths to excuse and explain human behaviour rather than demanding strategies of change.

Despite his bisexuality, Billy Prior too is compromised between a hatred of patriarchal hypocrisy and a complicity with its traditional order. Like Aldington and Faulks, and despite her obvious relish at the ludic possibilities of Billy's bisexual sensibilities, Barker is keen to prove a male bond beyond homosexuality, a masculine intimacy with an implied higher status than the homoerotic. Billy's homosexual experiences are recounted with blatant relish in the sections from his diary, but in his role of officer he is well aware of the dangers of a "reputation of 'having an eye for Tommy'" (173), and suppresses his impulses accordingly, despite a potential confidant in Wilfred Owen. Confronting this repression directly as he supervises his men lining up to wash, he writes:

> And I thought about the rows of bare bodies lining up for the baths, and I thought it isn't just me. Whole bloody western front's a wanker's paradise. This is what they've been praying for, this is what they've been longing for, for years. Rivers would say something sane and humorous and sensible at this point, but I stand by it and anyway Rivers isn't here. Whenever a man with a fuckable arse hoves into view you can be quite certain something perfectly dreadful's going to happen. (177)

His anger couches the War as the depraved product of the warping of traditional masculine codes of honour by a latently homosexual patriarchy safe behind the lines. At the Front, however, these codes are being replaced:

> I remember standing by the bar and thinking that words didn't mean anything any more. Patriotism honour courage vomit vomit vomit. Only the names meant anything. Mons, Loos, the Somme, Arras, Verdun, Ypres. But now I look round this cellar with the candles burning on the tables and our linked shadows leaping on the walls, and I realize there's another group of words that still mean something. Little words that trip through sentences unregarded: us, them, we, they, here, there. These are

> the words of power, and long after we're gone, they'll lie about in the language, like the unexploded grenades in these fields, and any one of them'll take your hand off. (257)

Through Billy, Barker documents a collapse of the myths of traditional heterosexual male heroism and leadership and the failure of the language they are couched in, but then goes on to replace them with myths of modern male intimacy, bravery and self-sacrifice which are resonant today in the names of these battles. Admiration overrides the pathos and sense of pointlessness. These masculine bonds are held up as deeper and more heroic in their essence than any male self-acceptance of homosexual desire. They reverberate in Billy Prior to drive him on, and they are intended to linger beyond the twin epitaphs of the novel, the first delivered by Billy at his death at the Sambre-Oise canal: "*Balls up. Bloody mad. Oh Christ"*(273), and the second by Hallet as he dies in hospital, his devastated face mangling his final words: "*Shotvarfet"* ["It's not worth it"] (274). Professed nihilism and ambiguity overlie the reinscribing of masculine heroism and a heterosexual male community, just as they did the primacy of reproductive sex.

At the beginning of this paper I asserted that the attraction of the First World War for a contemporary audience lies in our identification with the myth of division and utter disillusionment that now dictates our perception of it, a myth largely initiated by the poetic works of self-professed truth-tellers like Owen and Sassoon. The earlier novels I have chosen here also subscribe to this thesis of futility. But rather than in descriptions of the direct experience of battle, the central horror of both The Return of the Soldier and Death of a Hero is often located in the fact that heterosexual relationships in their current state are thwarting the participants from their goal of spiritual and sensual satisfaction into misunderstanding and evil. It is interesting that both Aldridge and West understand the gender relationships and identities during the First World War as contiguous to those before it: the divisions may have been exaggerated by a (male) Home Front so far away from a (female) home, but they are essentially the

same abject mess of repression and patriarchal invincibility. No pre-war idyll of natural men and natural women interacting naturally can be constructed with any sense of integrity. Both novels are informed with a sense of the fracturing of a generation, but it is a fracture which must be effected in the future. They make an intellectual demand for the pause in reproduction they believe is necessary to assess the extent of social injustice and spiritual damage, and to initiate the discovery of a heterosexual bond of sexual fulfilment and intellectual honesty. Of course, contemporaneous with these novels ran a parallel literature of the war, one which maintained its optimism and its patriotism, and the literary paradigm of the binary opposition of war and reproduction. The heroic, anti-modernist tradition was not a fatal casualty of the conflict, and we have seen both Faulks and Barker working through an atmosphere of nihilism to reinscribe in their novels the enduring stances of male heroism and male comradeship, with Faulks policing the latter for homosexuality as ruthlessly as Aldington did over sixty years before him. Even The Ghost Road's bisexual Billy Prior is educated by war in a male bond far truer, it is implied, than a homosexual one. Attracted by the thesis of disillusionment, and initially invoking this through their principle characters, they go on to replace it with rites of renewal, of regeneration through reproduction. A society like ours with fail-safe and ubiquitous methods of contraception can afford to posit parenthood as the ultimate human satisfaction, to uphold against war a morality grounded in biology rather than intellect in a way that Aldington and West could not. For Barker and Faulks, comfort is gleaned from their apprehension that the patriarchy and the male gender role have always been wounded and unstable. We're still here, and with modern male fulfilment relocated in fatherhood, we shall continue to be so.

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First Response

This is an interesting paper, though one which the author was originally asked to revise in order that this final version be less oblique. The idea of setting alongside two novels written out of direct experience of the First World War with two contemporary, retrospective "war" novels is potentially very productive. Recent books like Jay Winter's Sites of Mourning may well incite us to wonder what the contemporary revival of the 1914-18 war meant within the culture. Ferebe's point that writers about the war are discussing gender patternings (reproduction in all senses) as well as some notional, pure experience of war in itself, is an important one, and would apply to many other texts -for example Lawrence's writings about the war in a story like "The Blind Man."