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THE GREAT WAR REVISITED:  
THE LAUGHTER OF THE FOOL AND THE SHAME  
OF THE COWARD IN PAUL BAILEY'S *OLD SOLDIERS*

**Abstract**

The purpose of the paper is an analysis of the representations of the cultural memory of the Great War in Paul Bailey's novel *Old Soldiers*. The discussion will focus on the metaphorical representation of the futility myth (laughter) and the psychological representation of the crisis of masculinity (shame). The laughter of the fool has obvious connotations with the Book of Ecclesiastes, yet, as the analysis will prove, the depiction of the memory of the first day of the Somme battle through the prism of laughter has an important predecessor in Ted Hughes's poetic sequence *Crow*. The attempts to escape the memory of cowardly conduct will be set in the context of the psychology of shame, which will allow deeper insight into the construction of the anti-hero in British literature about the Great War.

Paul Bailey's *Old Soldiers* was first published in 1980. The action of the British novel is set in the late 1970s, a period dominated by repeated outbreaks of violence in Northern Ireland. There is, however, only one brief reference to the political turmoil; the explosion of a bomb in Belfast proves ephemeral media history in comparison with the memory of the First World War that resurfaces after a chance meeting between Victor Harker and a man who calls himself Harold Standish, but turns out to be, as revealed by the end of the novel, Eric Talbot, a deserter from the battlefields of the Somme. The eponymous "old soldiers" meet in St. Paul's Cathedral. The place of their meeting is highly evocative, it is a site of "historical monuments" and memorials to the "illustrious dead" (Bailey, 1999: 13–14). The two veterans

are neither eminent men (both served as privates in the Great War) nor was their war service in any way distinguished and worthy of tribute. And yet they are, in Bailey's novel, men whose memory of the past holds the truth of the soldiers' experience of the Great War. This truth is located in Victor Harker's recollection of his reaction to the death of his friend on the western front, represented metaphorically as the laughter of the fool, and in Eric Talbot's taking on different identities after the war, an act justified psychologically by the shame of desertion.

Modris Eksteins writes that the popular understanding of the meaning of the Great War has been determined by "the trinity of horror," i.e. three battles that provided the quintessential imagery, themes, and meaning for the four long years of the military conflict:

The battles of Verdun, the Somme, and Ypres embody the logic, the meaning, the essence of the Great War. [...] the standard imagery that we have of the Great War – the deafening, enervating artillery barrages, the attacks in which long lines of men moved forward as if in slow motion over a moonscape of craters and mud, only to confront machine guns, uncut barbed wire, and grenades – comes from these battles rather than those of the first or last year of the war. This middle part of war reversed all traditional notions of warfare. [...] The victimized crowd of attackers in no man's land [...] has become one of the supreme images of the war. (2000: 144–145)

In Bailey's novel, the complex military history and the geographical scope of the Great War is reduced to the haunting memories of the first day of the notorious battle of the Somme: "[Victor's friend] fell then – where others had fallen, and were to continue falling, all that long hot day" (21). The choice of the 1st of July, 1916, as the date signifying the emblematic British experience of the Great War is not surprising. John Keegan has written extensively about this one day, emphasizing "the magnitude of the catastrophe, the greatest loss of life in British military history" (1999: 317–318); and Martin Middlebrook has likewise stressed the fact that "eighty percent of Britain's casualties occurred after the opening of the battle of the Somme" (1984: 275). The unprecedented loss of life on a single day became a key argument supporting the futility myth, i.e. the evaluation of the Great War as "a tragic and unnecessary conflict" (Keegan, 1999: 3). In Eric Leed's words, "disillusionment is a means by which a variety of distinct stages of knowledge and experienced realities are organized into a narrative sequence" (1978: 683). In Bailey's novel, metaphor takes precedence over a narrative representation of the past. Disillusionment is signified by a particular memory of a particular emotional reaction of one soldier; and this reaction, which is laughter, has a metaphorical function through obvious connotations

with the Book of Ecclesiastes, and through a potential point of convergence with Ted Hughes's Crow-poems, one of which explicitly alludes to the battle of the Somme through the prism of laughter.

In August 1914, Victor Harker was only sixteen years old, and yet already working in a London factory. He saw in the famous propaganda poster "Your King and Country Need You" the possibility of escape from a life he abhorred and a promise of a great adventure. He represents the longings of working-class youth who had, in fact, rushed to the recruitment offices after the outbreak of the Great War: "inevitably, among the first to volunteer were those with few family ties, working in dreary dead-end jobs" (van Emden, 2005: 33). The new life at the front was marked by a significant transgression of the borders delineating hitherto distinct social classes. The war-engendered friendship between Victor Harker and George Popplewell testifies to the superiority of the common predicament of trench warfare over barriers of education and profession. The death of George on the first day of the Somme battle is an important caesura for Victor Harker, bringing to an end the youthful idealism that had guided him to the battlefields of the Great War.

Disillusionment should not be confused with pacifism. Victor Harker makes a crucial distinction between the Great War and the Second World War. The former was senseless carnage lacking political, military and moral justification: "I didn't know then, and I don't know now, what or why I was fighting in France," whereas the Second World War was an entirely different experience: "The idea of fighting Hitler made sense to me" (99). George Popplewell's death becomes the signifier of the futility of the Great War: "I saw my friend [...] blown to pieces in front of men. I saw what remained of his face. I saw his brains spilling out. They were good brains. They were wasted" (99). This death will haunt Victor for the rest of his life, as an obsessive memory-scene, forcing itself constantly upon his mind, replaying itself over and over again before his eyes. War veterans often emphasize the impossibility of escaping traumatic war memories: "Nightmares and replays of the fighting are stereotypical of a soldier's return from battle. [...] you cannot imagine how vivid and real these uninvited intrusions are. They take over your life and you become a slave to them. Initially, you fear turning the light off, or closing your eyes, knowing as soon as you relax, the mind will wander and you will be thrown headfirst back into the deepest depths of the battle. (Eyles-Thomas, 2007: 225-226).

Harker describes his psychological fixation on one particular scene from the past as "senile dementia" (67, 77, 85), yet the true nature of his intrusive memories resides in their content. First and foremost, the manner in which his friend was killed was a shocking awakening to the realities of war and the vulnerability of the human body:

The most important point to be made about the male body during the Great War is that it was intended to be mutilated. The cowering, agonized expressions on the faces of soldiers struggling back from the front lines suggests recognition of their inability to struggle against the forces determined to wreak havoc on their bodies. [...] The severity of these mutilations was unprecedented: nothing in British history (neither nineteenth-century wars nor the grim injuries perpetrated upon the human body in factories or mines) was adequate preparation for the physical devastation of the First World War. All parts of the body were at risk: head, shoulder, arm, chest, intestines, buttocks, penis, leg, foot. (Bourke, 1999: 31–32)

What is more, Victor's memories of George's harrowing death include his response, which was, incongruously, laughter. It was an incontrollable, hysterical reaction to a sight that defied both rational thought and the powers of the imagination: "George's whole face was gone – only blood, and bits of bone, and brains were left. George stood for a moment before his laughing friend, and a sound like water gurgling in a pipe escaped from him" (21); "He was laughing – helplessly, crazily – at the sight he had spent months waiting for: the inside of his friend's George Popplewell's head" (117). Laughter and death become interchangeable in Victor's tormented mind; laughter prompts memory of death; the memory of death brings about laughter.

Every year Victor raises a toast to the memory of his dead friend, pondering over the unfathomable fact of his own survival: "that too, was a miracle, a constant source of wonder"; "He might have gurgled. George might have laughed" (43). Laughter signifies here the workings of pure chance in matters of life and death; with man being a mere pawn in the hands of inscrutable fate. There is no reason why one man is killed and another survives. There are, however, further meanings of laughter in the novel. One obvious context is the Book of Ecclesiastes, where the wisdom of sorrow in "a house of mourning" is contrasted with the laughter of fools in "a house of feasting" (7: 2–6). Victor Harker volunteered for the war in firm belief it would be a "house of feasting," an adventure that, concomitantly, would ensure him a better future life. He saw in his friendship with George a fulfillment of his desire to achieve greater goals in life: "he talked [...] of what he owed to George. George introduced him to poetry – he'd never read it before, not even at school" (75). George's death shatters this idealism, for war is "a house of mourning," and thus Victor's uncontrollable laughter is a moment of epiphany, a realization of oneself as the fool, and an acknowledgment of one's hopes and dreams to have been no more than a self-created delusion.

It is telling that laughter in Bailey's novel is personified: "Now he heard [...] the echo of a laugh that had shaken his body on a field in France. It had

sprung from his throat. It had leapt from him wildly. It had a will of its own” (20). Man has no control over laughter, it is laughter that subjugates man. So it is with war, unleashed by man, but ultimately a force over which man has no power whatsoever. This is Victor Harker’s recollection of the first day of the Somme battle: “victory had been assured; the plan of campaign was fool-proof. Nothing could possibly go wrong. The laugh with the will of its own was evidence to the contrary” (30). Laughter comes into being from the clash between man’s arrogant faith in his infallibility and indestructability and the scale of the defeat and the losses on the Somme. The personification of laughter endows it with a being-ness that is separate from that of man; it is the laughter-as-the-Ultimate Judge or laughter-as-the Existentialist Absolute that is the laughter *at* the fool.

A potential interpretative context for laughter in Bailey’s novel is Ted Hughes’s poetic sequence *Crow*, published in 1970. *Crow* is the ruler of “emptiness,” “blindness,” “dumbness,” “deafness,” and “silence” (1972: 91). Hughes’s construct is an a-moral being, i.e. neither moral or immoral. Born out of a void and born into a moral wasteland, *Crow* has no ethics to sustain him. The ontology of this creature is contained in its laughter: “I will measure it all and own it all/ and I will be inside it/ as inside my own laughter” (23). *Crow*’s laughter has been interpreted as “an experiential space that has been rediscovered [...], that defies the laws and logic of the known and constituted”, or it may signify dissociation between affective life and the Western social contract, suggesting the bankruptcy of our religious and ethical systems” (Bentley, 1997: 32). *Crow* laughs because he instinctively recognizes the madness and pointlessness of man’s endeavours; man uses laughter as a façade to hide the terrifying truth of his own irrationality and the futility of his actions. In “*Crow Improvises*,” it is man who takes various “objects” in his hand, measuring them against each other. The entire poem is built round the metaphor of the spark, which is ignited through this clash of opposites: the Universe versus Earth, the past versus the present, birth versus death. The sparks annihilate space and time, exposing the nothingness at the core of human existence.

In Daniel Pick’s words, “the figure of war is torn between [...] different discursive possibilities: it is seen to provide coherence, boundaries, meaning but also to erode the identity of the structures and forces that inaugurate it” (1993: 7). In “*Crow Improvises*,” man takes the battle on the Somme into one hand and a sleeping tablet into the other: “The spark that blasted blew the valves of his laugh” (64). There is more than one possibility of interpretation here. First, the similarity between a battle and a tablet is that they are both “manufactured” by human beings. The paradox resides in the fact that man is capable of creating tablets that bring about mental comfort as well as mechanized warfare that irreversibly destroys the human mind. The battle of

the Somme is the epitome of the “technologically administered violence,” which, for Eric Leed, was the most crucial factor determining the psychological breakdown of soldiers on the battlefronts of the Great War: “Always the randomness of death at the front, the impersonality of violence, was qualified by the recognition that it was men who were operating these machines, men who made and continued the war [...]. This combination of the impersonality, randomness, and human agency behind the mechanized violence of war was uniquely destructive of the psychic defenses of combatants” (Leed, 1979: 180–181). In Hughes’s poem, the spark transforms laughter – initially an attempt to subjugate what is irrational – into an uncontrollable and hysterical reaction signifying a mind ravished by the war: “neurosis was a psychic effect not of war in general but of industrialized war in particular” (Leed, 1979: 164).

The battle of the Somme and the sleeping tablet may be further interpreted as the clash between memory and oblivion. A sleeping tablet offers the bliss of rest by shutting off the workings of the human brain; peace of mind is achieved through enforced stupor. The memory of the Somme works the opposite way, imprinting itself on the human mind, returning in the form of traumatic recall. The sleeping tablet is a form of controlling the human mind, the battle epitomizes the impossibility of such control. One may say that the spark gives birth to a laughter that is essentially the laughter of the fool, a foregrounding of man’s culpability in his own destruction: “war is waged by men; not by beasts, or by gods. It is a peculiarly human activity. To call it a crime against mankind is to miss at least half its significance; it is also the punishment of a crime” (Manning, 1990, no page number).

According to Jarold Ramsey, the figure of Crow may be interpreted in an anthropological context, as Hughes’s highly individualized “Trickster” who has “a complex mediative purpose – as between the moral ideals of a people’s Way and their naked instincts” (1983: 174). For John C. Witte, the figure of the Crow is concomitantly “a symbol for man’s baser nature” and “a study of the violent eruptions of the irrational that have shattered Western culture” (1980: 42). Crow symbolizes a regress to pure instinct; and, amidst all the death and destruction, he resorts to the fundamental and basest need of the body, which is eating. He also plays with the human bodies and transfigures them into sexed creatures. It is worth noting that Eric Talbot – the second of the “old soldiers” in Bailey’s novel, is portrayed through the prism of the “lowest” of human proclivities which contrast strongly with his aspirations to a “higher” level of existence, epitomized by his impersonations as Captain Harold Standish (courage) and Julian Borrow (poetry). Despite these disguises, he belches at the table and comments upon his “eupeptic outburst” in the following manner: “A man who has fought for his country as bravely as

I have can surely be excused the occasional trifling breach of etiquette” (17). His comments on the Arab immigrants shock Victor who finds it hard to believe that these people are “wayside shitters” who “leave their deposits anywhere and everywhere” because they “hold the turd sacred” (19). He is interested in whether Victor “can still get [his joystick] up” (20) and prides himself in his own sexual potency. It is also revealing that Eric Talbot – as a deserter – escaped from the threat of death straight into unrestrained mindless sex: “A farmer’s wife took care of me for a time. I screwed her senseless. I was a handsome blighter” (112). When Victor Harker brings up the subject of the Somme at the restaurant, Eric Talbot – as Captain Harold Standish – will later seek refuge from his own resurfacing memories in the arms of a prostitute. He equates “lovely big titties”, “lovely nipples”, “lovely veins”, “lovely flesh” (the repetition of “lovely” almost an incantation) with “life” itself, “lovely, lovely life” (99–100).

Eric Talbot is haunted by nightmares: “when he tried to scream, strange words leapt from him: Etaples, Amiens, Neuve Chapelle, Rheims, Rouen. ‘Montreuil’ was on his lips when he awoke” (107). It is not, however, the horrors of trench warfare that he wishes to escape, but the memories of his own disgraceful conduct as soldier. The man whom Victor Harker meets in St. Paul’s Cathedral has a habit of referring to himself in the third person: “Captain Harold Standish is a guide these days. He shows people the sights” (13). “Standish” admits that he tends to stray away from historical truth in the stories he tells to the tourists: “he tarts things up a bit” (14). His account of his war service appears, in its geographical scope, a bit over the top: “I served all over. [...] I was in Belgium. And Africa. All over Africa. Nigeria, mostly” (15); “Was I ever in Kenya? I suppose I must have been. A very colourful part of the continent, I seem to recall” (16). His manners leave much to be required and the topics of his conversation tend to embarrass the listener. Victor is astounded and repelled by this figure whose mystery is partially revealed by the narrator in the second chapter. The appearance (including teeth), manner of talking and entire conduct of Captain Harold Standish was created as a disguise as a means of escape from one’s true self and past life: “he had lived with the captain nearly half his life. He had brought him into being – Harold, his first invention – out of boredom” (22). By means of free-indirect discourse, the narrator allows the reader to enter into the mind of Eric Talbot in order to unveil the peculiar relationship between the man and his invented self: “he and the captain had had some larks over the years. Between them, they had kept the enemy at bay – that scourge of endless afternoons, overcast mornings, and lonely nights” (23).

Eric Talbot multiplied his dramas and character-roles. In chapter three of the novel, Captain Harold Standish undergoes a complete make-over and

becomes Tommy, the vagabond, “a scruffy old sod” (31), “the barely human; the ones whom respectable people pretended did not exist” (32). The history of Tommy’s “birth” is duly provided:

Walking briskly down Piccadilly one day – he was late for lunch at the Ritz – the captain was approached by a spectacularly filthy beggar to whom he tossed an appropriately stained sixpence. The captain’s creator saw Tommy in an instant – a refined vagrant, quietly spoken, living on his undemonstrative wits in the great metropolis. Weeks later, Tommy made his first appearance (32).

Captain Standish and Tommy are opposites in their appearance – the change from captain to vagrant involves the removal of front teeth and sexual abstinence. The third identity is that of Julian Borrow, “a poet still unrecognized,” and he “had been born, so to speak, in the reading-room of one of London’s many libraries” (55). Julian’s appearance is meticulously created as an in-between: he has teeth – though they are crooked and stained, and his clothes indicate a man who is well-off yet more interested in intellectual pursuits than laundry. Women are allowed in the life of Julian for the combined purposes of sexual pleasure and artistic inspiration. Julian frequents Speaker’s Corner to illuminate his audience with his mind, speaking of poets and poetry.

Eric Talbot puts on these three different identities in order to escape harrowing memories of the past. These attempts at escape prove, however, to be futile. The traumatic memories resurface at night, regardless of the current impersonation, breaking through the protective disguises:

Tommy’s dreams were rarely Tommy’s. They belonged to Captain Standish and Julian as well. The three personalities occasionally merged, to their creator’s bewilderment. The three shared a nightmare. A man who had their face and their body was in a field. Vague figures – shapes of men, nothing more – were ahead of him. There were trees in the distance. He was unable to move towards them, although he wanted to. The sky turned red. His hands, his arms, his legs were incapable of movement. He was paralysed. When he tried to scream, his mouth wouldn’t open. He was gulping for air when he awoke. As soon as he realized that the dream was over, he asked himself who he was (51).

These nightmares are recurrent and, therefore, they also reappear throughout the novel as persistent and inflexible memory-images. The man in the field sees trees in the distance but is trapped in an emotionally-induced stasis and cannot move. The core of the nightmares is the man’s paralysis: “He was the paralysed man for whom the distant trees were rattling, rattling” (66). „In the distance, the trees were rattling. He was paralysed, as always” (107). The trees represent the desire to escape the reason for the paralysis, which



is the soldier's fear of death. The fixation on the trees testifies to the subjugation of the mind to the physicality of the body, the surrender of military discipline to the instinct of self-survival. In the nightmares, he is unable to move; whereas in his memories, the fields beyond called his name, and he responded, and the trees opened up a world without pain, fear, and death: "He was no longer paralysed. His young limbs moved swiftly, surely. They took him into the trees, and beyond the trees into towns with foreign names. They took him into the warm night, with its insect noises and its tiny, watchful, suddenly scampering animals. They took him away from death. They took him away from the guns and wounds and howitzers" (109). As a soldier, Eric Talbot ran away from the battlefield because of fear; his nightmares reveal a different fear, namely the fear of not being able to run away. In this sense, the nightmares testify to the unwanted truth, namely that Eric Talbot was a coward.

It is obvious that the soldier must be trained to overcome natural instincts and emotions when placed in circumstances endangering his well-being and life: "armies are ritualistic organizations. Military ritual [...] is a comprehensive framework of behavior designed to serve, inter alia, as a precaution against disorder and a defence against the randomness of battle" (Holmes, 2004: 236). The truth remains, however, that "of all the emotions in combat, fear [is] the most dominant" (Bourke, 2006: 199). Fear may have different manifestations: "fear is the common bond between fighting men. The overwhelming majority of soldiers experience fear during or before battle: what vary are its physical manifestations, its nature and intensity, the threat which induces it, and the manner in which it is managed" (Holmes: 204). It would not be an exaggeration to say that it was the literature about the Great War, published throughout the 1920s and 1930s, that had a crucial impact on future cultural representations of the soldier, foregrounding fear as an understandable and acceptable emotion in wartime, going so far as to exonerate self-inflicted wounds and desertion. The focus on fear, rather than on acts of courage and the spirit of endurance, bespeaks of the crisis of masculinity brought about by the carnage in the battlefields of Flanders and France.

Bailey's coward-figure shares a marked similarity with Herbert Read's Cornelius Vane, the eponymous anti-hero of a narrative poem published in the aftermath of the Great War. Read's poem traces the gradual breakdown of a soldier during an attack on enemy lines. Initially, Cornelius is an integral member of his unit, signified by the use of the plural pronoun "But they must go on." The sights of the wounded coming back from the attack is the moment when Cornelius separates himself mentally from his fellow-soldiers: "For he must go on." Then he separates himself physically, by going aside for a moment. It is then that a shell explodes near him, and this proves

his breaking point. He sees “open fields” far away which tempt him with their “tranquility,” and he succumbs to this temptation and runs towards them and away from the raging battle, ultimately finding solace in the woods (1946: 92).

The route of his flight – from fear of death to “the bright sun rising/ And the birds that sing” (92) – is also the itinerary of Eric Talbot. Their fear is similar insofar as it is irrational; it does not stem from a direct threat but an imagined one: “Fears of the effects of enemy weapons have a similar tendency towards illogicality: soldiers do not necessarily most fear those weapons that do the most damage” (Holmes: 209). Talbot and Vane are also comparable in that their desertion ultimately brings about death they had so desperately sought to evade. Cornelius Vane is arrested, court-martialed and shot at dawn by soldiers of his own regiment. Eric Talbot survives the war yet his life becomes a never-ending running away from his past, and, in the end, he commits suicide. In the case of Eric’s memory of his desertion, the personification of the field is the result of the projection of the soldier’s desire upon landscape and, concomitantly, a relinquishing of individual responsibility in the act of running away. The grass says what Eric wants to hear. The splitting of personality – Eric remembers himself in the third person – is evocative of the externalization of an internal yearning for escape, and for life. In memory, the coward and deserter are transfigured into a youth answering the call of nature, a man succumbing to an exterior command and, thus, how can he be culpable? Memory creates a moral deception, an illusion of necessity, and, as such, functions as a form of escape from truth. Yet, as memory resurfaces as nightmarish reconstructions of the same scene, it becomes obvious that the truth of having been a coward cannot be suppressed and the feeling of shame cannot be shed.

Eric Talbot’s recurrent nightmares and physical symptoms (trembling hands, shaking body) may be attributed to posttraumatic stress disorder; his escape into different identities is obviously related to shame: “whereas researchers in the past tended to claim that trauma survivors experienced guilt for surviving, or made little distinction between guilt and shame, an emerging consensus now asserts that shame is a relevant emotion in posttraumatic stress” (Leys, 2007: 125). Shame derives from an excruciating sense of inferiority, a distorted perception of the self: “Whereas guilt is generated whenever a boundary (set by the superego) is touched or transgressed, shame occurs when a goal (presented by the ego ideal) is not being reached. It thus indicates a real ‘shortcoming.’ Guilt anxiety accompanies transgression; shame, failure” (Piers, 1971: 24). The distinction between guilt and shame is crucial, for the former stems from a negative evaluation of one’s own actions, whereas shame is determined by a negative assessment of the self, often on the basis of a conscious or instinctive evasion

of action: “shame theory displaces the focus of attention from action to the self by insisting that even if shame is connected to action, it does not have to be, since shame is an attribute of personhood before the subject has done anything, or because he is incapable of acting meaningfully” (Leys: 131). Shame is psychologically far more destructive than guilt because “the experience of shame is directly about the self” (Lewis, qtd. in Tangney and Dearing, 2004: 18). One can atone for one’s actions but one cannot change one’s self, the way one thinks, feels and behaves.

In Bailey’s novel, the reasons for an acute sense of shame and, in consequence, a depreciation of one own’s selfhood, are located in Eric Talbot’s internal conflict between desire and conduct. An infantile idealization of the self is confronted with the truth of the self that is unveiled by the brutal realities of warfare. As a child, Eric dreamed of finding King Solomon’s mines and the Lost World, and for a mind so shaped with stories of adventure, war offered an opportunity not to be missed. Eric saw himself in the future as the opposite of his own father: “he would not be like Gerald Talbot, a dull commercial traveler who wrote poetry in his spare time. He would be man of action” (109). Eric’s father committed suicide. It was not the fact itself but the subsequent judgment of his father by others that had a tremendous impact on the boy. His mother said: “what a coward, Eric, what a perfectly disgusting coward” (110). Eric believed that “he would be brave one day. He would be fearless” (109). His conduct as soldier failed short of his expectations of greatness. Hence his escape into enactments of made-up personalities, which perfectly reflects “the spectatorial dimension of shame” (Leys: 128). Captain Harold Standish was intended as the antithesis to Private Eric Talbot. In these impersonations, the deserter created the war career of a man characterized by responsibility and courage: “I was proud of the men I captained, and [...] I like to think that they were proud of me. They called me ‘Good old Captain Hal’” (13). Captain Standish was an admirer of discipline: “I was never one to countenance any larking about in the ranks” (13”); and he tells some misbehaving youths “You owe your lives to me” (23). In wartime, he was always “in the thick of things” alongside his men (89). The paradox of shame resides in the fact that it is a narcissistic emotion. The desire to be invisible goes hand in hand with the need to be seen: “shame only arises when someone knows, or fears, they have been seen. Shames relies on the art of exposure, even if exposure is what it hates most” (Rose, qtd. in Leys, 127). Eric Talbot’s meeting with a fellow-veteran is crucial for it allows the exposure of the shame: “I ran away. I deserted,” “I’m Eric. Private Eric Talbot. No one else” (112); “It’s a simple story. I wanted to live, so I ran away” (113).

In the theme of Eric Talbot – alias Captain Harold Standish, Tommy, and Julian Burrow – there is a concomitant doubling and reversal of the

psychological imperative to escape. The doubling occurs when the soldier escapes from death (combat) into life (desertion), and then escapes from his shame (the memory of his own cowardice) into different impersonations (the constructions of respectable identities). The reversal takes place when the deserter who ran away from the battlefield to save his life commits suicide, returning to death he had once so desperately wanted to escape. Talbot's death is a symbolic return back to the Great War, epitomized by the vision of the Golden Virgin:

He set off purposefully towards the river. He was ready to make his greatest escape, to stage his positively final disappearance. Death, which he had feared in France, was welcoming him, and he was happy to be free at last to accept the invitation. 'No shudders. No spasms'. [...] Eric Talbot stood on the bridge and looked down at the river. [...] He climbed on the parapet and jumped. He saw the Golden Virgin break loose and knew that the war was over (114–115).

Earlier, Talbot told a nurse that “the war will end when the Golden Virgin falls” (108). This is an allusion to the superstition surrounding the golden statue of Virgin Mary on top of the Basilica in Albert. The statue was hit by a shell in 1915 and leaned over, looking as if it were about to fall down: “myth busily attached portentous meaning to it. [...] The war would end, the rumour went, when the statue finally fell to the street. Germans and British shared this belief, and both tried to knock the statue down with artillery” (Fussell, 2000: 131–132). In Bailey's novel, the only way to bring an end to the (memories of) war is to return back to it, the only way to evade death is to die. There was, however, another superstition surrounding the Golden Virgin, namely “that the side that sot down the Virgin would lose the war” (Fussell: 132). One may say that Eric Talbot's vision of the Golden Virgin falling off the Basilica is the moment he accepts his personal defeat.

*Old Soldiers* is a novel about two veterans of the Great War and, therefore, one would assume, its primary concern is human memory. The focus on memory relocates the meaning of the Great War from event to experience, but when this experience is presented through the metaphor of the laughter of the fool (Victor Harker) and through the psychological concept of shame (Eric Talbot), we are faced with another interpretative possibility. This is a novel about the literary representation of the memory of the Great War. The specific conflation of literary tropes and psychology serves to foreground the ravished male psyche as the one and only “truth” of the Great War. As early as 1930, Douglas Jerrold strongly criticized the authors of war books for perpetuating “the illusion that the war was avoidable and futile, [and] the illusion that it was recognized as futile by those

who fought it” (1930: 18). The focus on victims of shell-shock, S.I.W. cases, deserters became the hallmark of combat narratives; whereas the focus on veterans haunted by traumatic memories of the past became the determining feature of veteran narratives. Bailey’s novel takes as its subject matter cultural memory as a construct, a manner of representation that has become fixed and immutable across time.

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