

Resisting the Hero's Tale: The Trope of the Cowardly Soldier in the Literature of the Great War

Cristina Pividori, TecnoCampus (Universitat Pompeu Fabra)

Abstract

Among the experiences of otherness that unsettled the imperial trope of the warrior hero, this paper focuses on the representation of the coward in three autobiographical responses to the Great War. By following the traces of the malingerer, the deserter and the psychologically injured soldier in Herbert's *The Secret Battle* (1919), Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (1929) and Manning's *Her Privates We* (1930), the hero-other distinction induced by Victorian standards will be explored as a popular theme that becomes problematic on the Western front, as the figure of the (heroic) self and of the (antiheroic) other start to move away from the rigidity of the binary system. While Herbert, Aldington and Manning keep a strong component of their own class and patriotic identity both in their novels and in their lives, the Great War experience suggests the possibility of removing the association traditionally maintained between heroism and the Victorian notions of manliness. Such openness not only challenges the norm, but paves the way for the elaboration of a new sense of heroic selfhood. Particular attention is given to the representation of the shell-shocked soldier as a site of struggle and negotiation between the trope of cowardice and its reality.

Key words: trope; hero; coward; shell-shock; masculinity

1. Introduction

The trope of the soldier as a warrior hero, whose essential traits were physical strength, courage and aggression, on the one hand, and a moral dimension to justify war on the other, was a dominant paradigm in the literary construction of the heroic masculine ideal that prevailed in mid- to late-nineteenth century Britain and in the years prior to the Great War. The depiction of masculine traits as innate essences, unchanging and ahistorical, derived from an overemphasis on an essentialist view of male roles, the function of which was to divide, separate, and thus manage masculinities based on a binary opposition between the (heroic) self and the (antiheroic) other.¹ In the context of this Manichean confrontation,

¹ Essentialist theories of gender—in opposition to what has been called “constructionism” or “social construction of masculine identity” (Gilmore 1990: 1; Connell, 2005: 67-70; Kimmel 2004: 93-116)—assert that “masculine or feminine traits are innate (essences) in the individual” (Buchbinder 1994: 4).

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the representation of the warrior hero was thus constructed against “a negative stereotype”—embodied by women, cowards, homosexuals and the omnipresent military enemy— that “failed to measure up to the ideal” and projected “the exact opposite of true masculinity” (Mosse 1996: 6). Blurring this type of distinction, which Thompson calls “bonding-by-exclusion” (1982: 176), seemed to invoke chaos and defeat. As British colonial expansion continued into the twentieth century, together with the military demands and the need to perpetuate the status quo, the blank acceptance of the idea that “by not being Others we define ourselves” (Barkan 1994: 180) started to reveal the anxieties behind the traditional concepts of manliness.

In fact it was the encounter with modern warfare and with the unprecedented scale of death during the Great War that acted as the final straw in the subversion of the apparently stable imperial discourse. While still promoted through the use of uniforms, the pride in the regiment and the remembrance of the fallen, this binary system, whereby the British soldier had the right to assume superiority over the antiheroic-other, started to raise questions and concerns about the rule making process. The borderlines between ‘the hero’ and ‘the other’ either disappeared or shifted sharply; the meaning of ‘them’ started to be seen as a variation of the meaning of ‘us’ and the alterity of the other could not be always secured. As Barrell suggests, “what at first is seen as the other—utterly foreign, repugnant, disgusting—is ‘made over the side of the self’” (qtd in Steedman 1995: 72).

Among the experiences of otherness that unsettled the normative image of the British soldier, this paper focuses on the representation of the coward. In Hadlock’s words, “the coward is a telling figure, in every sense” (2006: 239). The idea of cowardice as providing an exact mirror of the anxieties and fears of the soldier hero is distinctive of World War One literature. The coward is an outsider that inspires fear and rejection

This essentialist approach to gender was a constant in Victorian literature and allowed for the construction of the binary oppositions that distinguished warrior-heroes from the others—females, cowards and enemies— and made them appear either as the protectors or seducers of women or as the feared enemies of other men (Buchbinder 1994: 3; Mosse 1996: 9; Braudy 2003: 24). Consequently, Victorian writers and readers were encouraged to praise forms of heroism that not only excluded women but—because of their racial, class and ideological components—also excluded large numbers of men.

and is always stereotyped in much the same manner as it faces the accepted norm; yet it also internalizes the need to incorporate certain non-normative aspects into the soldier's experience. My contention is that the exploration of the figure of the cowardly soldier demands a reconceptualisation of the concept of the heroic self in more significant and subtle ways than have been acknowledged by dominant narratives. In that sense then, the coward emerges as an agent of resistance, embodying the conscious or unconscious abandonment of pre-war ideals of manly behaviour. By following the traces of the cowardly soldier—in the representation of the malingerer, the deserter and the psychologically injured soldier—I will explore how the hero-other distinction induced by Victorian standards became problematic during the Great War, as both hero and other start to move away from the rigidity of the binary system.

In order to develop my arguments I will focus on three autobiographical responses to the Great War, Herbert's *The Secret Battle* (1919), Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (1929) and Manning's *Her Privates We* (1930). The three texts share a common theme: Herbert's Harry Penrose, Aldington's George Winterbourne and Manning's Bourne are similarly affected by the war, exhibiting the type of stoic resistance that may have won them a Victoria Cross, yet, their power of action is driven too far to resist the weight of war and they are turned into victims rather than heroes or, better said, into the victims-as-heroes. Although the three writers represented, enacted and reproduced the circulating codes of manhood both in their novels and in their lives—they came from middle-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds; they had been to public schools and served as officers at the front—their attitudes towards cowardice suggest the possibility of removing the association traditionally maintained between heroism and normative masculinity. Functionally, the presence of the cowardly soldier in the texts may be attributed to the need to distinguish it from proper male behaviour, yet it may also be read as the expression of the writers' own restrained impulses, as fear was the driving force behind their stories. In effect, as Scheunemann suggests, fear is not only "the emotion most intimately connected with war" but "fear and cowardice may appear to be too closely connected" (2012: 181). The three novels are structured around fear, or rather around the tension between the desire for and the fear of war.

Moreover, Winterbourne's suicide and Penrose's alleged desertion, which were essentially related to cowardice at the time, are in fact the result of severe war trauma. The question of "shell-shock," then, will be brought to the fore, not just as mental injury, but as a site of struggle between courageous and demonic stereotypes of military identity. The figure of the shell-shocked soldier becomes a metaphor that goes beyond the sense of oppression and futility that permeated the Great War experience. It has to do with certain masculine impulses and behaviours that departed from the hero's tale and revealed the tension between traditional gender roles and the private, emotional experience of war. My contention is that the appreciation of the wide spectrum of acts ranging from the courageous to the cowardly is critical to understand how cowardice is represented both as trope and reality in the literature of the Great War.

2. *The Malingerer, the Deserter and the Shell-shocked Soldier*

As a countertype to the hero, the trope of the coward goes back in time to Aristophanes' comedy *The Knights* in 424 BC, in which the cowardly soldier is first introduced as a purely comic type: Cleonymus was an Athenian general who dropped his shield in battle and fled. Whether in the form of a mock-hero or in a more tragic, evil or pitiful portrait, the coward has been a recurrent theme in literature, probably because manly courage has always had a heightened social dimension.² In the late

² Unlike Aristophanes' mock-heroic treatment of Cleonymus, Sir Walter Scott's *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1828) follows the tragic destruction of the coward. Self-aware and ashamed of his cowardice, Conacher commits suicide after fleeing a duel with Henry Gow, his rival for the hand of the fair maid Catherine Glover. In 1884, Guy de Maupassant takes his readers into the mind of another tragic coward. "Le lâche" was published in *Contes du jour et de la nuit* (1885) and tells the story of Vicomte Gontran-Joseph de Signoles. After what may be regarded as a mental duel with himself, the Vicomte commits suicide rather than face the fear of death. This is because duels were fought "for the sake of male honour, and the concept of honour was to last, associated with courage [...] [T]o be called a coward was the worst insult" (Mosse 1996: 18), even worse than death. The representation of character traits contesting traditional representations of the heroic can also be seen in Shakespeare's plays. All the complexity of cowardice and courage is contained in the character of Hamlet who, faced with evidence that his uncle murdered his father, becomes too

nineteenth century, a New York Times editorial argued that “to be brave is as essential for a man as to be chaste is for a woman” and that “these fundamental points of honor are rigidly exacted in proportion to the elevation of society” (“The Crime of Cowardice” 1863). No matter how much the traditional masculine ideal has varied in detail, it has always served as a symbol for the hopes of society at large. Its enemies, then, are seen as the enemies of society as well, as the image of the courageous soldier willing ‘to do his bit for King and country’ has been built in opposition to all that this single standard of manhood is not.

Despite this alleged ‘stark opposition’ between the courageous and the cowardly, the history of literature has allowed for a more complex appreciation of what seems to be a highly subjective and disputable matter. The complexity of the so-called “unheroic modes” (Brombert 1999: 1) and the idea that the anti-hero emerges as “a special category of heroes” (Lubin 1968: 3) make it possible to suggest that perhaps the courageous was twinborn with the cowardly, that inherent to the classical heroic ideals was the human failure to achieve or at least to sustain those ideals: “Every hero has his weakness, and we may believe every coward has a point where he comes to bay and will fight the world” (“The Coward in Literature” 1909: 255).

The Victorian imperative to rebuke cowardice and embrace courage profoundly affected how soldiers behaved at the front. While performance in battle was especially subject to judgement in these terms,

indecisive and thoughtful for revenge yet too bold for suicide. Macbeth, on the other hand, can be regarded as a coward, if compared with Lady Macbeth, yet he is strong and brave as a soldier. As mentioned above, sometimes the coward serves as comedy relief. School stories dwell mockingly on the representation of the coward, particularly Thomas Anstey Guthrie’s *Vice Versa: A Lesson to Fathers* (1882). By some magic trick, the amiable business man Paul Bultitude finds himself transformed into his son’s person and expected to fight his battles in a boarding school ruled by the hated Dr. Grimstone. As to the cowardly villain, the rich Barney Newcome, in Thackeray’s *The Newcomes* (1855), is a genuine Victorian specimen of the braggart type. Dickens’ *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) brings about one of the most abject cowards: the hangman in Newgate prison. Edward Dennis’ horror of being executed is in exact proportion to his enjoyment of inflicting death on others. Because of their unsettled roots, Jews were not only considered as outsiders, but as a prime target for cowardice; the Jew picture-dealer in Kipling’s *The Light that Failed* (1890) is an interesting example.

the challenge to preserve and enhance manly reputation was an ongoing concern. It entailed both avoiding conduct that might have invited the charge of cowardice and keenly upholding manhood, often at the expense of other men. Those who, because of their unmanly behaviour, were regarded as cowards could not align with the genuine soldiers and were marginalised by the group. Of Lance-Corporal Miller, a deserter on the Somme who was now under arrest, Manning's Bourne feels "a wave of pity and repulsion" (Manning 1999: 122).³ Miller is deemed to be inadequately masculine: "after one glance at that weak mouth and the furtive cunning of those eyes, Bourne distrusted him [...] he had the look of a Hun" (123). Not only does his bodily structure differ from that of the rest of the men in the battalion, his mind is under suspicion as well: "he carried with him the contagion of fear" (122).

Miller symbolises physical and moral disorder. This dual cowardly dimension emerges from the equally dual personality of the hero—both strong body and pure soul—yet one-dimensionally perceived as a harmonious whole. Either because he is physically weak or because he was suspected of avoiding suffering, the spectacle or even the very idea of pain, Miller fails to measure up to proper male behaviour. Manning's judgment is maintained even after Miller's death sentence is commuted to penal servitude and he returns to duty: "'They ought to 'ave shot that bugger,' said Minton, indifferently; 'e's either a bloody spy or a bloody coward, an' 'e's no good to us either way'" (Manning 1999: 193). Yet, although the cowardly Miller constitutes a complication Bourne and his chums wish they did not have—"he was a ghost who unfortunately hadn't died" (123)—none of them would choose to be part of the firing squad. Conveniently, then, Miller vanishes once again on the eve to the next attack and so does the uncomfortable reminder of his cowardice. Miller's desertion becomes the vehicle through which Bourne vindicates the grim courage and endurance embodied in the figure of one of his pals, Weeper Smart:

³ It is important to mention that desertion was rare; only "21 soldiers deserted out of every 10000" during the first year of the war and "the rate fluctuated around 6 and 9 for the rest of the war" (Bourke 1996: 80). However, Bourke adds that "forging signatures to ensure that they were miles away at zero-hour, getting another man to answer their names at roll call, dodging parades and slipping out of camp were habitual activities for many servicemen" (80).

[...] for no one could have had a greater horror and dread of war than Weeper had. It was a continuous misery to him, and yet he endured it. Living with him, one felt instinctively that in any emergency he would not let one down, that he had in him, curiously enough, an heroic strain. (Manning 1999: 193-194)

Manning stresses that “the interval between the actual cowardice of Miller, and the suppressed fear which even brave men felt before a battle, seemed rather a short one” (82), suggesting that given the most extreme conditions, anyone could break down. Yet it is the fearful Weeper Smart who carries Bourne back to the trenches when he is hit by a bullet at the very end of the book (246). In this sense, friendship emerges as a higher value, even higher than all forms of patriotic and idealistic exhortation. The difference between the cowardly Miller and Weeper Smart is that Weeper cares for his friends. The ‘isms’ for which Manning’s Bourne is fighting become less important than himself and the men next to whom he fights. The quality of the ties emerging from the common experience favours a secret bond among Bourne and his chums, “a sense of having a collective, ‘clandestine’ self, which could not be made visible to those ‘outside’ the war” (Leed 1979: 113). Manning thus rejects those who, by their cowardly actions, betray this bond, and therefore attempt to challenge his idea of heroism. In that sense, his condemnation of cowardice goes beyond Miller; he blames those who made the decisions at the expense of the sufferings of the men in the ranks. Unlike Winterbourne and Penrose, Manning’s Bourne was not an officer but “a man from the formally educated classes who [...] decided to enlist as a ranker” (Parfitt 1988: 85), who bridged the gap between the soldiers and the high command to place himself on the most vulnerable side of the divide.⁴

⁴ Manning came from a world of wealth and privilege, yet when the war broke out he enlisted in the King’s Shropshire Regiment as “Private 19022” (this is how he first identified himself as an author) where he lived together and trained with the men in the ranks, mostly miners and farm labourers. He was selected for officer training, but failed the course. In 1916 he was sent to France with the 7th Battalion and had a few months at the front; there he experienced action at the Battle of the Somme and was promoted to lance-corporal. In 1917 he was posted to Ireland with a commission as a second lieutenant in the Royal Irish Regiment but did not get along with the other officers (he had a drinking problem, which led him into frequent fights). While the enigmatic Bourne is indeed endowed with most of the author’s own qualities, artistic detachment was

Herbert makes this unbridgeable gap even more visible when he refers to those who, because of their physical and moral distance from the actual fighting, were only destined to be the negative countertype. Of one of these “stupid generals” (Hynes 1992: X), Herbert says:

[The Major General at Harry Penrose’s Court Martial] had many rows of ribbons, so many that as I looked at them from a dark corner at the back, they seemed like some regiment of coloured beetles, paraded in close column companies. All these men were excellently groomed: ‘groomed’ is the right word, for indeed they suggested a number of well-fed horses; all their skins were bright, and shiny, and well kept, and the leather of their Sam Brownes, and their field boots, and jingling spurs, and all their harness were beautiful and glistening in the firelight. (1982: 116)

There is something clownish and ludicrous in the portrayal of the Major General; the idea of a circus parade, of the “groomed” and “well-fed” horses, ironically mirrors the loss of order and ineptitude that defined the British High Command during the Great War. Herbert’s mocking observations about the Major General may also be in consonance with the “lions led by donkeys” attitude suggested by Clark (1991: 19-20).⁵ The Major-General’s position in the army had been awarded by privilege, not merit, having being spoiled by upper-class luxury and greed. Herbert’s disdain is inspired by the ‘manly’ man’s conviction that the true nature of the countertype could only be seen in its proper dimension if both the ideal and its antithesis were put side by side.

For those like Aldington’s Winterbourne who struggled to conform to the norm, the search for an identity proved distressing: So much so

achieved by describing the experience of the ranks on the Western Front. Such a viewpoint put the author at a unique position in relation to his contemporaries as he had the chance of giving more prominence to the hitherto largely neglected men in the ranks.

⁵ The expression “Lions led by donkeys” has been widely used to compare the bravery of the British soldiers with the incompetence of their commanders. Although Evelyn Blücher had attributed it to the German GHQ in her memoir *An English Wife in Berlin* (1921), the expression came to be popularly known as the title of Alan Clark’s *The Donkeys* (1961). Clark was unable to specify the exact origin of the expression and credited it to a conversation between two generals in the memoirs of Falkenhayn: “Ludendorff: ‘The English soldiers fight like lions.’ Hoffman: ‘True. But don’t we know that they are lions led by donkeys’” (Clark *Epigraph* 1991).

that “he was afraid of being afraid” (Aldington 1984: 23).⁶ Wandering absentmindedly through the streets of London while on leave, Winterbourne is overwhelmed by the imposing presence of the strong-looking American marines, who “walked in London with the same propriety swagger that the English used in France” (Aldington 1984: 341). The standard of manliness is set, but how is it to be reached? Winterbourne secretly knows that he will never be able to measure up to it. The fact that he is mistaken for a deserter and then reprimanded for not carrying his pass speaks for itself (341). However, he is determined to ‘do his bit’ and ‘stick it out’ to the end. His wish to take part in the war is reinforced by his encounter with the experienced soldiers coming back from the front:

There was something intensely masculine about them, something very pure and immensely friendly and stimulating. They had been where no woman and no half-man had ever been, could endure to be. [...] They looked barbaric, but not brutal; determined, but not cruel. Under their grotesque wrappings, their bodies looked lean and hard and tireless. They were Men. With a start Winterbourne realized that in two or three months, if he were not hit, he would be one of them, indistinguishable from

⁶ Winterbourne was also at pains to adapt to public school traditions and rules and satisfy general expectations:

Long before he was fifteen George was living a double life—one life for school and home, another for himself. Consummate dissimulation of youth, fighting for the inner vitality and the mystery. How amusingly, but rather tragically he fooled them! How innocent-seemingly he played the fine, healthy, barbarian schoolboy, even to the slang and the hateful games! [...]. ‘Rippin’ game of rigger today, Mother. I scored two tries.’ Upstairs was that volume of Keats artfully abstracted from the shelves. (Aldington 1984: 74-75)

Yet Winterbourne was not the only one living a double existence; most boys knew that deviation from the masculine ideal was subject to dismissal and strong sanctions. As a commentator wrote in 1872: “a nation of effeminate, enfeebled bookworms scarcely forms the most effective bulwark of a nation’s liberties” (Turley qtd in Mangan 2000: XXIV). It was in this dialectic interplay between bloods and non-bloods, manliness and effeminacy, power and powerlessness that masculinities were constructed and constantly transformed. Unlike the “type of ‘thoroughly manly fellow’” (Aldington 1984: 83) who possessed the virtues of physical strength and athletic talent, boys like Aldington’s Winterbourne, who were poor at games and “sank absorbed in his books, his butterflies, his moths, his fossils” (73), appeared as counter-figures to public-school standards.

them, whereas now, in the ridiculous jackanapes get-up of the peace-time soldier, he felt humiliated and ashamed beside them. (Aldington 1984: 253)

War offers an almost exclusively masculine experience to Winterbourne, where no women and no-half-men are allowed. Courage is, of course, a prerequisite for heroic quality. These “intensely masculine” men have absolutely no objection to rushing bravely into dangerous confrontations. Their sense of abandon is something Winterbourne envies. Without having undergone the rite of passage into manhood, he feels childish, feminine. His admiration for the fortitude and stoical endurance of the more experienced comrades constitutes a source of both attraction and distress, as he relishes—and fears—the chance to do his bit and prove himself to them.

The fear of being seen as a coward dominates Penrose’s idea of manhood as well: “I’ve a terror of being a failure in [war], a failure out here—you know, a sort of regimental dud, I’ve heard of lots of them; the kind of man that nobody gives an important job because he’s sure to muck it up” (Herbert 1982: 11). His efforts to maintain a manly façade mask everything he does. He needs to prove himself in the eyes of his friend Benson, the narrator, and in the eyes of history. While looking at the plain of Troy, the classical surroundings of the Gallipoli campaign, Penrose praises the feats of the Greek heroes and promises not to be a failure, not to be a regimental dud: “I’ll have a damned good try to get a medal of some sort and be like—like Achilles or somebody” (Herbert 1982: 12). Penrose’s feelings are those of the boy who was raised to feel courageous, but deep down does not feel it.

But what was the normative standard of courage? Rather than pointing at the willingness to fight, Aldington argues that the ideal of manly courage was built upon “determination and endurance, inhuman endurance.” And he ironically adds that “it would be much more practical to fight modern wars with robots than with men” but that “men are cheaper” (1984: 267). This inhuman, ‘machine-like’ standard of courage determined the judgment of those who differed from the norm. In Rutherford’s words, it was “an heroic ideal, stripped of romantic glamour certainly, but redefined convincingly in terms of grim courage an endurance in the face of almost unbearable suffering and horror” (1978: 65).

Expectedly, not all men could bear the threat of physical and mental devastation for long periods of time: Unlike robots, “men [had] feelings”

(Aldington 1984: 267). Those who could not maintain the zest for warfare and did not manage to desert used their bodies as a form of protest. Malingering, “the wilful fabrication of physical or emotional symptoms to avoid an unwanted duty” (Lande 2003: 131), became one of the responses to the failure of becoming a war hero. It originated in the most basic human emotions such as exhaustion, desperation, resentment and fear and grew as a practice as the war progressed. As Bourke writes, “this inflation may be represented in Sir John Collie’s book on Malingering and Feigning Sickness, first published in 1913. When a revised edition was released during the war, the book was nearly twice the size” (Bourke 1996: 85). Benson, Herbert’s narrator, speaks of the genuine exposure to risk that successful malingering required:

S.I.W is the short title for a man who has been ‘evacuated’ with self-inflicted wounds—shot himself in the foot, or held a finger over the muzzle of his rifle, or dropped a great boulder on his foot—done himself any reckless injury to escape from the misery of it all. It was always a marvel to me that any man who could find courage to do such things could not find courage to go on; I suppose they felt it would bring them the certainty of a little respite, and beyond that they did not care, for it was the uncertainty of their life that had broken them. You could not help being sorry for these men, even though you despised them. (Herbert 1982: 94-95)

Even if it was almost impossible to trace this type of scam, commanders, doctors and surgeons remained vigilant to detecting it. When the pretence was discovered, the malingerer was morally condemned by the group. Yet the situation led inevitably to injustice when “the malingerer stole social benefits that should have been reserved for the truly disabled” or if “legitimate illness” was mislabelled “as fakery” (Lande 2003: 132-133). The harsh treatment given to malingerers might be attributed to the fact that the victim was, in reality, only expressing the soldiers’ own impulses. Herbert’s Penrose despises men with self-inflicted wounds, perhaps because “in these wrecks of men he recognized something of his own sufferings” (Herbert 1982: 95). His scorn, “was a kind of instinctive self-defence—put on to assure himself, to assure the world, that there was no connection—none at all” (96). Accepting that the cowardly emerged from the heroic to subvert it would mean admitting to the existence of a negative side of the heroic ideal or, in Manning’s words, to an “extreme of heroism” that was “indistinguishable from despair” (Manning 1999: 8).

Although suicidal impulses were uncommon, sometimes suicide was regarded as the only possible alternative to holding on to fear-based emotions. Aldington's novel is basically the account of how George Winterbourne is progressively and inevitably forced to commit suicide at the war's end: "I think that George committed suicide in that last battle of the war. I don't mean he shot himself, but it was so very easy for a company commander to stand up when an enemy machine-gun was traversing" (Aldington 1984: 23). By revealing Winterbourne's tragic outcome at the beginning of the novel (the very title betrays itself), Aldington follows the structure of Greek tragedy "to avoid any cheap effects of surprise" and "give free expression to the feelings and ideas of one very minor actor in that great tragedy" (Aldington 1968: 302). Aldington's narrator, both a soldier and a friend, assumes his "blood-guiltiness" (Aldington 1984: 35) for his pal's death: "I told him then that he ought to apply for a rest, but he was in agony of feeling that he was disgraced and a coward, and wouldn't listen to me" (1984: 33). He knows Winterbourne is in no condition to continue fighting: "by November '18 poor old George was whacked, whacked to the wide" (Aldington 1984: 23). And then he blames both the institutions, for overexposing Winterbourne to spiritual and mental failure on the battlefield, and Winterbourne's indifferent and impervious family at home:

The death of a hero! What mockery, what bloody cant! What sickening putrid cant! George's death is a symbol to me of the whole sickening bloody waste of it, the damnable stupid waste and torture of it. You've seen how George's own people—the makers of his body, the women who held his body to theirs—were affected by his death. The Army did its bit, but how could the Army individually mourn a million "heroes"? (Aldington 1984: 35)

The death of the hero on the eve of the Armistice is doubly ironic: Aldington mourns the death of the generation who, in Dodd's words, "spent their childhood and adolescence struggling, like young Samsons, in the toils of the Victorians" (1929: 232) and of the values that had ruled their lives. In effect, those who had been educated in the Victorian heroic tradition broke down under the continuous strain of having to repress fear. Just like Penrose's intolerance towards malingering, the narrator's guilt over Winterbourne's death suggests that it was the men who could not live up to tradition that provoked the deepest anxiety among those

who were still part of the norm. Moreover, to the extent that Winterbourne's failed manhood bears the marks of the shell-shock that imploded his mind, the novel conveys an extreme pessimism and disillusionment that may have been attributed to Aldington's own experience of shell shock:⁷

He looked unaltered; he behaved in exactly the same way. But, in fact, he was a little mad. We talk of shell-shock, but who wasn't shell-shocked, more or less? The change in him was psychological, and showed itself in two ways. He was left with an anxiety complex, a sense of fear he had never experienced [...] And he was also left with a profound and cynical discouragement, a shrinking horror of the human race. (1984: 323)

Because fear was part of a representational framework that had to be repressed or silenced, "officers and men alike seemed anxious to restrain their feelings" (Manning 1999: 21). Men were ashamed to let other men see they were afraid: "fear, in that generation, was a crime" (Terraine 1982: XII). The acknowledgment of fear was evidence that men were not as courageous as they pretended to be. Winterbourne's fear is the fear of shame and shame leads to silence, the silence that keeps other men believing that he can keep pace with war demands. Silence keeps Winterbourne's war going until the endurance of nerve-shattering conditions culminates in his mental breakdown.

The term shell-shock was coined during the Great War to refer to the conditions resulting from the concussions from the exploding shells. Yet the history of combat stress reactions and the different labels assigned to them—soldier's heart, battle fatigue, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Gulf War syndrome, among others—have shown that the term in fact refers to the psychological disorders resulting from the stress of battle. Among the symptoms associated with shell-shock at that time were: "Stupor, confusion, mutism, loss of sight or hearing, spasmodic

⁷ When Aldington returned from Belgium in 1919, he divorced Hilda Doolittle and moved to the countryside. The eight years he spent in Berkshire village helped him cope with the effects of having been severely gassed and shell-shocked. Yet he never fully recovered from the physical and mental damage that the war had inflicted on him. In a letter to Amy Lowell he confesses to his mental breakdown: "Since I got back I have only been able to work three days a week; if I work more I get horrible pains in my head, due, people say, to a sort of deferred shell-shock" (Aldington qtd in Gates 1992: 53).

convulsions or trembling of the limbs, anaesthesia, exhaustion, sleeplessness, depression, and terrifying, repetitive nightmares” (Leys 1994: 624).⁸ Since giving medical treatment to the great numbers of men who were suffering from war-induced mental illnesses would have implied accepting that the long-held moral values and physical standards were being threatened by the Great War, most of these men were convicted—and some of them executed—for cowardice.⁹

Based on the case of Edwin Dyett, the naval sub-lieutenant shot for cowardice, *The Secret Battle* dares suggest that cowardice was not only a matter of discipline and character. In the novel, Harry Penrose is a brave officer whose nerves are shattered by overexposure to combat. Like Winterbourne’s suicide, Penrose’s death at the hands of his own men of D Company demands a reappraisal of traditional gender roles. In Benson’s words, “my friend Harry was shot for cowardice—and he was one of the bravest men I ever knew” (Herbert 1982: 130). Indeed, “like many another undergraduate officer of those days” (5), Penrose was “all eagerness to reach the firing-line” (15). Despite his suffering from shell-shock, he does his best not to surrender to mental disease by acting courageously until he cannot bear it any longer. Of Penrose’s military heroism, Herbert says:

On the fifth day in the line he did a very brave thing—brave, at least, in the popular sense, which means that many another man would not have done that thing. To my mind, a man is brave only in proportion to his knowledge and his susceptibility to fear; the standard of the mob, the standard of the official military mind, is absolute; there are no fine shades—no account of circumstance and temperament is allowed—and perhaps this is inevitable. (Herbert 1982: 36)

⁸ In recent years, psychiatry has expressed a growing interest in the study of “post-traumatic stress disorder”—PTSD—which essentially results from the unavoidable imposition on the mind of horrific events that the mind cannot control. As Young explains, the syndrome is “based on the idea that intensely frightening or disturbing experiences could produce memories that are concealed in automatic behaviours, repetitive acts [hallucinations, flashbacks and other intrusive phenomena] over which the affected person exercise[s] no conscious control” (Young 1996: 4).

⁹ The War Office Committee of Enquiry into “Shell-Shock,” (1920-22) gives the following statistics: “two years after the Armistice, some 65,000 ex-servicemen were drawing disability pensions for neurasthenia; of these, 9,000 were still undergoing treatment” (Bogacz 1989: 227).

By portraying Penrose as a sympathetic, understandable figure, Herbert finds a way not to upset a readership used to the heroic rhetoric. The sufferings of those who struggled to repress their fears and do their duty threw into question widely accepted medical and military ideas. So much so that from 1920 to 1922, the War Office Committee of Enquiry into “Shell-Shock,” under the chairmanship of Lord Southborough met in London to try to answer some of the distressing issues raised by the shell-shock phenomenon, particularly the fact that most of the convicted ‘cowards’ were men like Harry Penrose, that is to say, “volunteer[s], most likely of middle-class origin, who had proved [their] valour repeatedly in the war—and who had still cracked under the continuous strain of trench warfare” (Bogacz 1989: 247).

While some of the members of the committee remained faithful to the pre-war beliefs that saw shell-shock either as a somatic reaction to high-explosive or as a failure of character; others, including the respected W.H.R. Rivers, argued that the origin of the affliction was mental. Since Freud’s psychological theories were still suspect in the early 1920s, the report issued by the committee adopted a “half-way house” treatment, “both physical and mental in its aims” (Bogacz 1989: 242), and which struggled “to reconcile the modern ambiguous notion of shell-shock with the traditional absolutist norms of behaviour in war and peace” (248).

Yet the committee had no other alternative but to acknowledge that shell-shock was beyond self-control, that those who could not fight because of psychological disorders should not be simply seen as cowards. The combined effects of war neurosis and repression together with the proliferation of the efforts aimed at masking the magnitude of the crisis around pre-war medical, military and moral values had accelerated the need to re-examine these values.

Herbert’s novel is the story of a breakdown, in which the major theme is the extraordinary perseverance of Penrose in his “secret battle” to fulfil the role of the hero: “Fellows like him keep on coming out time after time, getting worse wind-up every time, but simply kicking themselves out until they come out once too often, and stop one, or break up” (Herbert 1982: 125). In Hynes’ words, “Herbert succeeded in constructing a new kind of war novel, and a new kind of memorial—an anti-monument to a condemned coward” (Hynes 1992: 306). According to the dominant discourse, those who, like Penrose, were executed at

dawn brought shame on their families and country.¹⁰ Yet Penrose's is one of a number of cases who, because of mental disease, was unjustly sentenced. Discussing Penrose's feelings previous to the death sentence, Benson claims:

There are, of course, lots of fellows who feel things far more than most of us, sensitive, imaginative fellows, like poor Penrose—and it must be hell for them. Of course there are some men like that with enormously strong wills who manage to stick it out as well as anybody, and do awfully well—I should think young Aston, for instance—and those I call the really brave men. Anyhow, if a man like that really does stick it as long as he can, I think something ought to be done for him, though I'm damned if I know what. He oughtn't... (Herbert 1982: 126-127)

These “sensitive, imaginative fellows” who felt things more than the rest were compelled by their principles and public honour to keep on fighting, yet they could hardly reconcile the consequences of such decisions to their private feelings. Tradition had been so thoroughly instilled in Penrose that it is almost impossible for him to break away from it. His feelings are not the feelings of a powerful man. His are the feelings that come inevitably from the rupture between the social and cultural perceptions of what he was supposed to be and what he really was. Penrose's determination in constructing his own heroic narrative conceals the tensions and uncertainties with which his self-identity is fraught. So much so that he begins to lose sight of his real needs and desires and becomes traumatised.

When the shell-shock experience is foregrounded in Harry Penrose's story, the gap between trope and reality narrows, the bridge is shortened. Shell-shock itself is the opening through which reality can affect discourse, marking the eruption of a variety of conflicts that go beyond

¹⁰ To the High Command, soldiers' executions served a twofold purpose: deserters would be punished and similar ideas would be dispelled in their comrades. The Court was anxious to make an example “for they were just men [...]. They would do the thing conscientiously” (Herbert 1982: 117). However, “as judges they held the fatal military heresy, that the forms and procedure of Military Law [were] the best conceivable machinery for the discovery of truth. It was not their fault; they had lived with it from their youth” (1982: 117). Those who were condemned to death usually had their sentences confirmed by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig on the evening following their court-martial. A chaplain was dispatched to spend the night in the cell with the condemned man and execution took place the following dawn.

war trauma into the cultural and gender perceptions of those who suffered the war. The shell-shock crisis puts an end to the soldiers' struggle to maintain an image of themselves which was continually being disconfirmed by their experience. The term then "turn[s] from a diagnosis into a metaphor," framing not only "the war's scale, its character, its haunting legacy" (Winter 2000: 7), but also "a disguised male protest not only against the war but against the concept of 'manliness'" (Showalter 2009: 172). While a single standard of manhood had encouraged most volunteers of the generation of 1914, the growing awareness of the existence of men who could not be labelled heroes—or cowards—in the traditional sense becomes an important concern.¹¹

3. Conclusions

Although the figure of the hero is irreversibly fragmented after the Great War, the trope of the coward does not emerge triumphant. Cowardice is shown to have played a significant role in the decline of the values that manliness and society as a whole had required, yet it cannot be considered as a unified, unproblematic whole. The existence of a culturally normative ideal of male behaviour has continued to play a major role in war literature; yet being heroes at a time when the reality of war was in flagrant contradiction with the desired Victorian manly ideals, appears to be an impossibility.

The three novels discuss the progressive decline of the Victorian heroic rhetoric and stress the presence of a cowardly countertype threatening to weaken and destabilise it. Cowardice is linked to the paradoxical in a twofold sense. On the one hand, the figure of the cowardly soldier acts as a trope, that is, as the anti-heroic opposite to the

¹¹ Nearly 90 years after their deaths, 306 soldiers who were shot at dawn between 1914 and 1918 were granted posthumous pardons from the British Ministry of Defence. The pardon recognises that the men were not 'cowards' or 'deserters' and should not have been executed for military offences. They were upgraded to being 'Victims of War.' Among them was Private Farr, shot for cowardice in 1916. His family had been campaigning for years for him to be pardoned, arguing that he was suffering from shell-shock and should not have been sent back to the trenches. Not one of the executed soldiers would have been executed today, since the British military death penalty was outlawed on 29 April 1930.

highly praised Victorian manly codes and, on the other, it functions as an agent of resistance revealing the inner fractures and contradictions within the hero's tale.

As a trope, cowardice contradicts and, by opposition, exhorts to heroism, for the coward represents all that the soldier was not supposed to be according to Victorian standards. The insistence on attaching the codes of manliness to the three characters in the novels attempts to preserve the continuity with the old heroic tradition, but inevitably deflects it in a new direction. The unparalleled slaughter and devastation caused by the Great War did not distinguish between heroes and cowards; all became victims of its destructive equality. The resulting panorama is one of contradiction: firstly, because the boundaries between courage and cowardice are now less clear and more questionable; and, secondly, because the figure of the soldier enters into a transitional space which draws attention to these ambiguities. In effect, courage is no longer constructed in binary opposition to cowardice, but rather as a reaction against institutions and a national ideal of military comradeship, essentially responding to the need for soldiers to recover their common humanity and a sense of belonging and individual worth.

This leads to the other possible reading of cowardice as a budding form of confrontation through which the texts seek to challenge pre-war values. The figure of the coward articulates certain voices and experiences that had not found much possibility for expression until then because of the complex and multifaceted reality they embody. Not only do the three novels re-open the question of what makes a soldier hero, but ultimately aim to prove that courage and cowardice coexist in the most complex and interesting works of war fiction. The difference between the trope and its reality is articulated by the different shades of fear triggered in the soldier's minds: physical horrors and anxieties, painful awareness of death and even the fear of being afraid, that is, the fear of not measuring up to the trope. Most importantly, the cases of shell-shock portrayed in the texts are not only perceived in their traumatic dimension but as a metaphor for the anxieties resulting from the vanishing of pre-war certainties and from the reliance on more subjective and personally defined values.

The perseverance in the representation of courage in combat and the implicit connection between this figure and the emerging coward have complicated the search for the real Great War soldier in the texts. The

complexity of the representations under study has allowed for the tracing of two quite different portrayals of the soldier, yet separating them has not been possible to any degree of certainty. The result has been the emergence of a disjointed, fragmented and self-contradictory hero-coward that cannot uphold the hegemonic status to which he is supposed to aspire. Seen in such contrasting terms, the soldier enacts a complex and lively role identity which not only intertwines trope and reality, especially in the dramatic descriptions of mental disturbance, but allows for the appropriation, understanding and humanisation of the cowardly other within the self. This seems to pave the way for the adoption of more inclusive masculine roles. Moving away from the manly ideal as the norm results in an awareness of the individual and of the moments that are produced in the articulation of difference. Taken together, these findings suggest that the resultant friction in the shaping of masculine identities does not merely mean a distance from the trope but the opportunity for the elaboration of new signs of heroic behaviour.

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