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The Return of the Soldier at 101: The Illusion of the Front in Taxi Driver and The Return of the Soldier

Less than a month before his death in 1917 Edward Thomas wrote in his diary of a bat flying away from no-man's land, 'shaken at last by shells from one of the last sheds in Ronville.' Much of his later diary is like this. It records the flight of nature and the increasing ruination of his surroundings, the erasure of towns and buildings by the incessant pounding of artillery.<sup>1</sup> As he moves closer to the frontline you feel as though he is travelling to a different planet; somewhere distinctly otherly that could accommodate the destruction and trauma of war in a way that home never could.

By the latter half of the 20th century the nature of military conflict had changed significantly. Clearly delineated battlefields, the trench-lines of which still gouge the landscapes of northern France, had given way to the more mobile engagements of the Vietnam War. In conflicts without frontlines we are forced to develop new language. Terms like "search and destroy" and "counter-insurgency" are created to describe new and spatially dislocated forms of war, often in scenarios where civilians and combatants can be almost indistinguishable. As our methodologies for spatially conceptualising conflict change so too do our strategies for representing the mental stresses inflicted on soldiers during that conflict.

The vulnerable amnesiac Chris Baldry, on medical leave from the frontline in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*,<sup>2</sup> could not seem more removed from Vietnam veteran Travis Bickle and his violent rampage at the climax of Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*.<sup>3</sup> It would be easy to forget that the texts share a common central theme. Both are concerned - at least in part - with representing the ramifications of trauma on their protagonists' psychologies. These radically different images of the returning soldier are linked intimately to the essentially different nature of the conflicts they return from. Both represent an exploration of how trauma interacts with place and identity, and I would go as far as to suggest that the latter is entirely anticipated by the former.

In her study of trauma the American Psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman suggests that the central task of early recovery is 'the establishment of safety.' She links patients feeling unsafe to a perceived loss of control over their environment, and warns us that re-establishing this control, and therefore a sense of individual safety, takes precedence over all other aspects of treatment.<sup>4</sup> The sensitive relationship between control and environment lies at the center of both texts. 'I gotta get organized' Bickle tells Betsy, the campaign worker. 'Little things, like my apartment, my possessions.' West's Baldry Court is evidence of a similar desire. It seems as though it couldn't be further from the 'brown texture of corruption which is No Man's Land' (146).

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Thomas, 'Diary of Edward Thomas, 1 January - 8 April 1917' in *The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas* ed. R. George Thomas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), (pp.460-483) p.476.

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca West, *The Return of the Soldier* (London: Virago, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> *Taxi Driver*, Dir. Martin Scorsese., (Columbia, 1976), [on Netflix].

<sup>4</sup> Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Pandora, 1992), p.155-9.

Bickle's New York has never been synonymous with the manicured perfection of Baldry Court. He doesn't have nostalgic security to recover, just a vague notion that somewhere there might be the same safety that Chris is supposed to find when he returns home. He tells us 'all my life needed was a sense of some place to go,' and expresses his belief that 'someone should become a person, like other people.' The place Bickle is searching for is understood as a site of individual stability, comparable to Chris' fixation on Monkey Island once the illusory safety of Baldry Court breaks down. The army therefore provides an opportunity for Bickle, along with Baldry, to avoid confronting an underlying domestic trauma. After his honourable discharge he wants taxi work to fill the same space, justifying his choice by saying 'I just wanna work long hours.' Motion and the mundanity of taxi work can't prevent him lingering on the same traumatic landscape, however - the neon decay that occupies an identical position to Jenny Baldry's 'brown rottenness' (13).

Through Jenny Baldry Court is presented as the opposite of frontline desolation. It is a place out of time, still lit by the 'mild clarity of many candles' (58). One gets the sense of a deliberately constructed environment - the product of an anachronistic mid-Victorian idealism. Chris is responsible for it being rebuilt after his marriage, and we are told that the architects had 'not so much the wild eye of the artist as the knowing wink of the manicurist' (12). Jenny reflects on the neatly curated border, which proclaims 'only controlled beauty,' where wildness has been 'made delicate' (115). West makes it clear that Baldry Court is something of a contrivance. It's too lovely to be real. The image is linked intimately to 19th century upper-class ideas of home life, the Patmorian stable and enclosed domestic sphere where the women in his life had 'made happiness inevitable' for Chris (16). In Chris' amnesiac return to Monkey Island we see this motif of enclosed (and therefore controllable) environment writ large - a piece of stable land surrounded on all sides by flowing water. There is an equivalence here that begs the question: why, when attempting to process his trauma, is Chris unable to simply return to Baldry Court and his loving wife?

Even before West constructs her image of the stable, enclosed environment of Baldry Court she is involved in undermining it. The narrative begins with Jenny dropping in on Kitty 'revisiting her dead,' (11) unlocking the door to the nursery that was once used by her and Chris' infant son. The locked nursery and its contents become a locus for the suppressed domestic trauma that must be faced by Chris before he can regain his memory. Baldry Court therefore fills both the psychological and geographical space between these twin traumas - the equally incomprehensible tragedies of the frontline and the domestic sphere. Despite Kitty's best efforts she is unable to establish an environment of safety for Chris - indeed for herself - and consequently West renders this domestic ideal shattered. Chris, torn between two harsh and traumatic realities, retreats into his memories of a lost idyll; somewhere both he and Margaret describe as 'not a place, but a magic state' (102).

As we can see, West's writing is always involved in deconstructing the spatial binary it presupposes. Jenny can't understand Chris' infatuation. She sees it as a 'fantastic act of cruelty' and, as it therefore can't belong to the perfectly beautiful sphere of domesticity, she displaces it

to 'somewhere behind the front' (135). She transitions to a dream scenario, where 'A slut sits at the door of a filthy cottage' and Chris is in dialogue with 'an old man with a smile at once lewd and benevolent.' The signifiers of civil society are there, but degraded. The church lacks its tower, the houses are 'hideous' - their bricks showing 'like sores' through holes where plaster has been stripped away. (135-6) Jenny's vision of life by the front is otherworldly, the same kind of phantasmagoria that Scorsese's Bickle experiences in New York's underworld of neon-lit decay, drug-dazed prostitutes, and burst fire hydrants.

Bickle is working-class, educated 'here and there.' For the men of that time that meant military service. For Jenny and Kitty the ability to distance themselves from the war is also a function of class, though it is often misread as an unusually antifeminist portrayal of wartime women. West more than most was aware of the role that women were playing in the war effort. She writes a powerful series of articles for the *Daily Chronicle* in 1916 titled 'Hands of War' that catalogues the experiences of women working in vital, previously masculine industrial roles like the munitions factory. Baldry Court's old-world aristocratic idealism allows West to carefully prise apart the threads of traditional masculinity and femininity, woven together in the lower classes by war labour, in order to expose that despite their differing dyes they are the same material. By reasserting atavistic ideas of gender roles she creates a space in which Chris' shell-shock has more of a disruptive influence in an environment where, as Misha Kavka explains, 'masculinity was differentiated from femininity along the demarcating line of psychological illness, and particularly hysteria.'<sup>5</sup> I argue that West's project is more ambitious than what Rebecah Pulsifer describes as 'as much a study of women's adjacent involvement in war as an account of male war trauma.'<sup>6</sup> Rather than these traumas being separate states, she creates an equivalence between the supposedly feminine (domestic) and masculine (external) localities of trauma, with the aim of assaulting the notion that they are in fact inherently gendered. In designing texts that demonstrates the universality of various inexpressible trauma, West anticipates the breakdown of these gendered and spatialised divisions.

Neither *The Return of the Soldier* or *Taxi Driver* are able to resolve the traumas they portray. One ends with the reassertion of the status quo, Chris implicitly returning to battle as he is now 'every inch a soldier' (188). The other ends with a bloody rampage, and a dying hallucination that his sacrifice allows the young girl he is fighting for to go back to a stable home. We are haunted as the disembodied voice of an old man reads to us at the end of the film, thanking Bickle 'for returning Iris' and telling him that his life is now 'full again'. The resolution is too neat and, like the manicured hedgerows and candlelit corridors of Baldry Court, the viewer detects that it disguises an unspecified and darker trauma.

It is fairly uncontroversial to suggest that *The Return of the Soldier* explores a totally different side of war to Thomas' description of the frontline, but as we have seen this claim in itself is

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<sup>5</sup> Misha Kavka, 'Men in (Shell-)Shock: Masculinity, Trauma, and Psychoanalysis in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*' in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* Vol. 22 Iss. 1 (1998), (151-171) p.155.

<sup>6</sup> Rebecah Pulsifer, 'Reading Kitty's Trauma in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*' in *Studies in the Novel* Vol. 45 Iss. 1 (Spring, 2013), (pp.37-55) p.37.

problematic. The enduring brilliance of the novel, that which allows it to have such a strong resonance in the later 20th century and beyond, is its questioning of what exactly constitutes a side in this context. West asks us whether our attempts to spatially sequester the trauma of war are valid at all, or whether they instead create various mental structures, often along binaries of class and gender, that block effective healing. The concept of the frontline demands a sense of the secure home to act as a counterbalance. Somewhere totally safe from any great trauma - not just that of war, but those which can arise from domestic life. Despite her protagonist's best efforts he is unable to construct one outside of nostalgia. Comparing it to a more recent portrayal of the returning soldier we can see how West anticipates the cynical environment of Scorsese's noir, the delocalised trauma that echoes between imaginary frontlines and homes and inevitably finds its outlet in different orders of violence. Neither text provides an adequate answer to the problem of trauma, but both speak to a need to revisit how we conceptualise its mental geography.

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