

Trauma, Innocence and Freud in *The Return of the Soldier*

Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* opens to the nursery of a dead child; Jenny, the narrator, 'wish[es] for the return of [her] soldier', in a room 'full of whiteness' to which the soldier's son will never return (West: 1918/2018, 3-6). The death of innocence pervades West's novel; our age is one of innocence lost. Depression and anxiety are increasingly widespread. Posttraumatic stress disorder, which first entered popular consciousness as the 'shell shock' of the First World War, is on the rise. Our popular culture is saturated with cynical and graphic violence, and the internet ensures children can access brutality.

Childhood is snatched from the young. Many of our youth have been lured by diverse fanaticisms: children have travelled to be soldiers and brides and to witness and commit unspeakable horrors. We live after Freud and, in part due to his influence, we are increasingly aware of the wounds of the psyche. Yet psychoanalysis has left us hopelessly unequipped to heal those wounds. West's novel is an exploration of trauma; it contains a critique of Freud and goes beyond psychoanalysis. Her insights into the human psyche are timeless, but they take on particular significance for the contemporary reader.

The soldier has suffered three traumas: he has lost the woman he loved, he has lost his son, and in the 'flooded trench in Flanders' he suffered the trauma of war (138). This world is a traumatic one, in which '[l]overs are frustrated; children are not begotten that should have had the loveliest life, the pale usurpers of their death die young' (121). In response to such cruelty Chris' wounded unconscious returns him to a state of innocence. The traumas are removed from his conscious mind, and he is given the gift of lost love.

Freud was fascinated by the 'traumatic neuroses' caused by the First World War (Freud: 1920/2003, 50). Chris' war experiences may have, in the language of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 'provoke[d] a massive disturbance in the organism's energy system', prompting a 'massive "counter cathexis"', resulting in the repression of the last fifteen years of his life. The Freudian psychoanalyst, Dr Anderson, proclaims that Chris' 'unconsciousness self is refusing to let him resume his relations with his normal life', due to some 'suppressed wish' (123).

In relation to this, Chris' Oedipus complex is significant: a particularly sexual understanding of which is proposed in the final chapter. Anderson remarks 'He turned, then, to sex with a peculiar need'; Margaret

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replies 'Yes, he always very dependent'. The dynamic is clear, Chris' father was a 'little jealous of him', while his 'mother was not his sort. She wanted a stupid son' (124-5). Chris' natural mother was emotionally and spiritually absent. The descriptions of Margaret's maternal nature and the images of her and Chris illustrate the dynamic (Chris lay with Margaret in 'the confiding relaxation of a sleeping child' (105)). Chris claims that when Margaret picks up facts 'she kind of gives them a motherly hug. She's charity and love itself' (53). Chris did not experience such affection from his own mother, 'a hard-riding woman' (42), rather such unconditional love he receives from Margaret alone.

But despite the Doctor's reference to sex it is here that West goes beyond Freud. It is insisted that their love is not physical: 'Embraces do not matter ... there needs be ... no stretching forth of the hands, no pressing of the lips ... theirs is such a union that they are no longer conscious of the division of the flesh'; unlike Chris' wife Kitty, Margaret has no 'beauty of suave flesh' (104). This love is in *some* sense spiritual. In contrast, there is 'nothing more' to Kitty than her 'material seeming' (102) - though its significance is still unclear, the perennial opposition of the spiritual and the material is evident. Contemporary readers are very aware of psycho-sexual dynamics: our era is characterised by its conscious opposition to repression. We are encouraged to cultivate our desires. But the Freudian Dr Anderson is mistaken as to the nature of Chris' repressed desire: beyond our sexual drives, might there lie a deeper emptiness?

West offers an exploration of Chris' desire to return to childhood and overcome emptiness. Freud claims that death drives are 'powerful tendenc[ies] inherent in every living organism to restore a prior state' (1920/2003, 76). All beings strive back to primordial being. As Freud recognises, this insight is not original to him: yet meaning of this claim is unclear – what prior state? Why do organisms seek to return? If such drives are fundamental to the psyche, then is there not, given our predicament, an urgent need to understand them? (Freud: 1920/2003, 78) Freud's own biological explanations offer little insight into Chris' striving towards innocence. West spiritualises this desire. In the Christian tradition the link between the divine and childhood innocence is deep, with Jesus teaching "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 18:3), thus linking the return to childhood with reversing the trauma of the Fall. The *Tao Che Ching* tells us to be 'like a baby', and describes how 'Things grow and grow, / But each goes back to its root (1993, 16, 56) (the circular interplay of Eros and Thanatos). Hence, the returning-striving functions on an individual and cosmic

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level: all things strive to return back to the womb of creation, while each individual strives to return to their innocence.

But for West, this is not to reduce the personal to the religious. The 'soul of the universe' is described as 'an old man with a smile at once lewd and benevolent, repulsive with dirt', this is the God of traditional theistic Christianity 'equally cognisant and disregarding of everything living thing' (101). But Margaret, 'transfigured into the light of eternity' (102), is the Divine Mother, who has 'gathered [Chris'] soul into her soul and is keeping it warm in love and peace' (106). This is a spiritual vision of mother and child (and, with Chris' wounds, of the *Pieta*). Margaret carries Chris back to his spiritual innocence and heals him by disclosing the sacred. Rather than a transcendent deity, the sacred is an essential part of human life, immanent in humanity. The search for the sacred and the pure is not abstractly analogous to the individual striving to childhood but rather the same thing.

There is another important part of the story. Chris is an intensely spiritual figure, whose 'thirst' for 'sacrament' made him 'strike away the cup of lies about life that Kitty's white hands held to him, and turn to Margaret' (134-135). The experience of material life itself, taking over the *business* of his father, marrying Kitty, 'the type of woman that makes the body conqueror of the soul' (100), has traumatised him. Baldry Court with all its inanimate elegance has become a bodily prison for Chris. The soullessness of the war pushed him to the limit: no longer able to bear the merely material, he sought the sacred with maddened force. Chris chooses Margaret from the world-spirit, and thus shatters into a thousand pieces the material world of Jenny and Kitty (102).

Hence, the cruel irony of the book's last sentence 'He's cured!' There is no healing: Chris has been made acceptable to the world only through restoring past-traumas to his soul. If 'now we see through a glass, darkly', then it is in childhood (as Christ intimates) that we see 'face to face' (1 Corinthians 13:12). Chris was given the chance to see clearly again, to see the sacred: the Freudian doctor restores darkness to his vision. Hence, the critique of Freud: the fundamental problem of psychoanalysis is its analytical quality – its mode of operation is negative, surgical, reductive. It takes no great skill, West suggests, to break a person apart, but to rebuild them is a great task. The healing of mind and spirit is an ancient practice that requires compassion. Margaret alone is capable of healing Chris.

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And yet, as Jenny insists, Chris could not have stayed in his state of amnesia, the fragile beauty of his delusion turning to 'senile idiocy' (135). But then, must we believe the case is hopeless: are we doomed to either delusion or a traumatising material world? It is here we must recall that the novel takes place to the background of the First World War. Chris' trauma is intimately linked to the international war, the war that had a uniquely traumatising effect on European, and particularly English, consciousness. The horrors of war smashed the innocence of the long Edwardian summer. It smashed spirit in Britain: Church attendance plummeted and religious festivals lost their sanctity. How could it not be so, given what was seen in the trenches? There is no place in the world for Chris' spirit, for this is a world which is without spirit: the horror of war has left it an empty material place. If Nietzsche is right that God is dead and we have killed him, then it was in the two World Wars that the knife was sunk in.

Chris' individual psychological trauma is connected to the national trauma of the war. It is important to understand how outrageously West raises this to world-historical symbolism:

'On this stood a small Greek temple ... He lifted her in his arms and carried her within the columns, and made her stand in a niche above the altar. A strong stream of moonlight rushed upon her there ... he was filled with exaltation ... His love was changeless' (60-61)

The religiosity of this ecstatic scene is prominent – but its Hellenism crucial. West consciously associates their changeless love with the Ancient Greek temple. Despite the falsity of it, Ancient Greece has long been exalted as the summit of western Civilization: the cradle of spirit. Western history is thus a falling away from this innocence, as an individual life is. The trauma of the war creates a material meaninglessness that the spiritual soldier cannot face. From the beginning West describes the surface beauty of Baldry Court and its inhabitants, but as the novel continues we come to understand it is all surface, in such a place it is 'as if all weightiness were gone from things' (Nietzsche: 1980, 424).

Nietzsche's Death of God is the end of transcendent value: the falling away of western history from Greece is the collapse of higher values into the materialism of the 20th century. The spiritual soldier cannot live in such a world, for '[s]uch a world will not suffer magic circles to endure' (121): the temple has crumbled. And yet, this traumatised world is the world that we ourselves live in. And who can doubt that the world is not now, in a sense, more traumatising? In the absence of spiritual values, how are we to

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understand our suffering? Paradoxically, the 'cruelty in the order of things' (121) seems bearable only if one can nevertheless affirm the value immanent in things. Fanatics of far off Gods and idols believe they have permission to murder and to maim innocents at prayer. Violence and cruelty are the dominant images of our culture: innocence is brutalised. With greater than ever knowledge of the world's suffering, how is one to remain innocent? How can one not hear the cry of 'guilty!' ringing out? West's novel has shown that our ability to dissect each other will not make us whole. Nor will far off Gods come to save us. A more human compassion is needed to heal trauma and restore innocence. How is this task to be undertaken? Nietzsche's questions in the *Gay Science* §125 are more apt than ever:

'What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?'