Signs of Coping, Signs of Trauma:

Mental Coping Strategies, Breakdown and Trauma in Pat Barker's *Regeneration* Trilogy and Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong*

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Five years after the war is over we're all liable to look back with regret to every bullet that missed us!

The Young Lions – Irwin Shaw

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List of Abbreviations

BS	*Birdsong*
RG	*Regeneration*
TEITD	*The Eye in the Door*
TGR	*The Ghost Road*

Introduction

Almost three years ago, the centennial anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War was marked by commemoration services throughout Europe and the rest of the world. There was much media attention given to the occasion, and stories, battles and historical figures were discussed in TV programmes, newspaper articles, museum exhibitions and other forms of public outlet. As I write this in August 2017, the approximately fifteen months still to come will be marked by the centennial anniversaries of different battles, key moments and, of course, the end of World War I with the November 1918 Armistice. About 100 years ago, in July 1917, a key moment in literature and in the history of the voices that spoke out against the war, was the publication of Siegfried Sassoon's *Finished with the War: a Soldier's Declaration,* in which he denounced the war and the powers that, according to him, "deliberately prolonged" (Barker, RG 3) it. The declaration and the consequences of its publication on the author's life are prominently featured in Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, a set of three novels (published between 1991 and 1995) that deal with the First World War and the enormous physical and mental strain that the horrific battles and war experiences placed on the shoulders of men fighting at the frontline. Another noteworthy text of fiction dealing with the First World War is Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* (1993), also published halfway through the 1990s. *Birdsong* explores, as Faulks himself puts it, "how far the human body and spirit could be driven in killing" while seeking to find "the limits of humanity" (*Introduction*). Thus, like Barker's *Regeneration*, Faulks' *Birdsong* deals with the psychological effects of the war.

The topic of the First World War and the focus on psychological damage experienced by soldiers set up interesting similarities between the novels. However, where breakdown and the trauma connected to this are overtly explored fields in studies discussing *Regeneration*, they are less well documented in studies discussing *Birdsong*. Moreover, the *Regeneration* trilogy is extensively discussed and studied in different academic fields, such as literary studies, history and psychology, and these analyses mainly deal with trauma. In contrast Faulks' *Birdsong* seems to have made a lesser impact and hardly any academic discussion of this novel exists. Therefore, the topic of trauma with regard to *Birdsong* is a far less explored field than is the case with the *Regeneration* trilogy. Another interesting

difference between the novels is the setting of most of the narratives. The *Regeneration* trilogy mainly deals with the effects of the numerous traumatic experiences the characters in the novels had to deal with at the Western Front. They try to overcome their demons in the relatively safe environment of Craiglockhart war hospital in Edinburgh, and are therefore, at least physically, far removed from the front. The First World War parts in *Birdsong,* however, are mainly concerned with the protagonist's actual experiences on the Western Front. The *Regeneration* trilogy and *Birdsong* can therefore be said to be complementary to each other: where Faulks deals with the war directly, Barker explores it indirectly. Although the topic of trauma is thus well explored in Barker's trilogy, it is worthwhile to make a comparison with the less explored *Birdsong*. Yet another difference between the novels is the different genders of the authors. Esther MacCallum-Stewart writes that female writing about the war is especially preoccupied with sensitivity and trauma, and usually seems to be written out of a pacifist point of view, as opposed to male writing which seems mainly concerned with finding closure. Whether this is also the case with Faulks and Barker remains to be seen.

As Trauma studies have become an increasingly dominant way of interpreting the First World War, other ways of analysing the experiences of the war are forced into the background. Courage and bravery, but also humour, for instance, are concepts that are not so much discussed when talking about the First World War. The focus on trauma and on the soldiers who could not cope with the conflict psychologically seems to have 'hijacked' the discussion about the war, thereby pushing the soldiers who served in the war into the role of the victim. The majority of men fighting in the war, however, were never diagnosed with any psychological troubles during or after the conflict, and were seemingly able to cope with their experiences at the front. As a result they seem to be underrepresented in the discussion surrounding the war. The historian Alex Watson has attempted to remedy this in a recent study on mental coping strategies on the Western Front. In his study Watson thus focuses on the soldiers who were able to cope with the stress and fear witnessed while serving, in contrast to the studies that concentrate on trauma and the soldiers who broke down or were unable to cope with what they witnessed. There is of course not just one correct way of representing the soldier's experiences during the First World War; the many different soldiers had many different experiences that ask for many different forms of representation. The (in this case) two groups of veterans, the ones who did break down and the ones who did not, are both worthy of representation; and both forms of representation

help to better understand the psychological history of World War One. Watson's study, however, is interesting because it seems to broaden the field of trauma studies. Mental coping strategies, breakdown and trauma are closely connected concepts that help explain the experiences, behaviour and reactions of soldiers fighting in the Great War. It would therefore be interesting to see how *Birdsong* and the *Regeneration* trilogy deal with mental coping strategies and to see if there is a connection between such behaviour on the one hand, and breakdown and trauma on the other.

In this thesis I will therefore discuss what has been written on trauma and see how this might, or might not be, applicable to *Birdsong* and the *Regeneration* trilogy; while I will also study the novels for their dealings with mental coping strategies. Because of the different settings of the novels, the different approaches and the different gender of the authors, it is expected that trauma and mental coping strategies are featured differently in each novel. My thesis question will be: How do trauma and mental coping strategies feature in *Regeneration* and *Birdsong,* and is there a connection between both concepts in the novels? The first chapter of this thesis discusses the theoretical background to this research, and will draw on Cathy Caruth's writings on trauma. Next to that I will use Alex Watson's article "Self-Deception and Survival: Mental Coping Strategies on the Western Front, 1914-18" as the theoretical background for the discussion on mental coping strategies. The second chapter compares *Birdsong* and *Regeneration* and their dealings with mental coping strategies. The third chapter compares both novels on their dealings with trauma. The final chapter is the conclusion to this research, and presents the results and their importance.

1. Theoretical Background

Many men would take the death-sentence without a whimper, to escape the life-sentence which fate carries in her other hand.

- T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

That soldiers experienced psychological breakdown and trauma in the First World War is a well-established fact today. Throughout the war years, the number of patients diagnosed with shell shock grew, as did the professional interest for this mental condition. After its coining by Capt. C. S. Myers at the start of 1915, shell shock quickly became a way to describe all unexplainable symptoms and forms of war-induced trauma at the front (Winter, 9-10). What was then called shell shock is today referred to as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and has become a well-explored field of study. In this field of studies Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy is an often cited source of inspiration. Her trilogy deals with the effects of traumatic experiences on officers who fought, and broke down, in the First World War. Although many wars have been fought since the First World War, and war-induced trauma is something that has been discussed under different names long before and long after the First World War, the Great War is seemingly still *the* war of trauma. This is probably partly due to the enormous amount of psychological war casualties but might also be a result of the scientific interest in the matter; an additional reason may be the way the war is remembered and perceived by the general public.

In popular memory World War One is infamous for its horrors and senseless slaughter. Due to the combination of modern weaponry and old-fashioned tactics, a whole generation of men was sacrificed for what seemed to be only a few yards of soil. Never before in war were the death tolls so high and the frontline experiences so horrendous. The enormous amount of experience of stress and fear, the hopelessness of the situations soldiers found themselves in, and the complete lack of control, all experienced at the front, placed a huge strain on the mental condition of the soldiers involved. Returning traumatised and being incapable of adapting to civilian life after active service seemed inevitable (McCartney 299, 307-308).

More recent studies, however, show that the truth is far more complex than this popularly remembered narrative of horror and trauma (see, for instance, Todman, 2005; MacCallum-Stewart, 2006; McCartney, 2014). This generalisation of the First World War experience begins by forgetting that the war saw many different fronts in many different countries. It would be wrong to view the Western Front as the sole way in which the war was experienced. Where the Western Front became a stalemate in the very first years of the war, other fronts saw much more diversity. For example, when the British Mesopotamian Campaign is compared to the campaign on the Western Front, a world of differences arises (see Hart 2013 for detailed explanations of the different fronts and campaigns in World War One). Soldiers' experiences on the two fronts therefore also differed greatly. In many narratives, however, the Western Front seems to be the epicentre of the war, and the experiences at this front were shared in a similar way by everyone. Esther MacCallum-Stewart explains that the origins of this generalisation might be partly due to the depiction of the conflict in war and post-war literature.

In her view, literature seems to have influenced the historical understanding of the First World War by overtly representing certain parts of it, namely "breakdown, literary output and homosocial/sexual bonds" (80). She also claims that "direct links" between these three parts are especially present in female writing about the war, and that the domination of these three topics "seems to suggest […] that alternatives were rare" (80). In contrast, male writing about the war is mainly concerned with finding closure and placing the period and experiences in one's life narrative, according to MacCallum-Stewart.

The female writing mentioned by MacCallum-Stewart, seems to depict one of the many ways in which the war was experienced. However, due to the constant return of the elements breakdown, literature and homosexuality in fiction, other ways of experiencing the war are forced into the background. This creates "the perception that shellshock and protest [and homosexuality] were more common than stoicism, bravery and endurance" (MacCallum-Stewart 86), thereby failing to acknowledge other experiences of, and reactions to the conflict. What these representations seem to forget is that not every soldier had a terrible experience and not every soldier was traumatised by the end of the war.

Although large numbers of soldiers were unable to handle the stress and psychological strain with which they were confronted, there was also a majority for whom this was not the case. Moreover, many soldiers who eventually did break down only did so

after a certain amount of time; initially, experiences were thus not so overwhelming that breakdown immediately followed. The reason for this might be found in the use of mental coping strategies. With these strategies soldiers found ways of channelling some of their experiences of stress and fear out of their system without becoming overwhelmed by them. Psychological breakdown and mental coping strategies therefore seem to be closely connected concepts; apparently men were able to postpone breakdown or even ward it off completely by employing these strategies (Watson 267).

Thus, a familiar sequence of events led soldiers from using mental coping strategies to deal with the horrors of war, to the point where these strategies were exhausted and they broke down. After mental breakdown soldiers were hospitalized behind the lines or in the United Kingdom. There they were helped to overcome their demons and to work through their traumas. After successfully doing so, soldiers were sent back to the front. Once back in France the whole cycle started again and soldiers began using coping strategies to try and cope with the circumstances that they were again being confronted with. Other routes, however, were also possible; psychological breakdown, for instance, was not always essential for experiencing symptoms of trauma.

Mental Coping Strategies

Watson discusses different 'mental coping strategies' used by soldiers serving on the Western Front of the First World War. Most of these strategies seem to adapt the day-to-day reality the soldiers found themselves in. Watson writes "at the root of soldiers' resilience lay a number of perceptual filters and psychological strategies which presented them with a distorted, overly-optimistic but beneficial view of their surroundings and personal chances of survival" (248). Although with the help of these strategies soldiers often painted a more positive picture of their reality than was in fact the case, the strategies also helped them to ward off feelings of helplessness, thereby protecting them from psychological conditions such as breakdown. Watson describes eleven strategies that helped soldiers to mentally cope with the experiences at the front. The strategies he discusses are: acquiring thick-skinnedness; repressing of emotions; becoming fatalistic; using of euphemisms; using of humour; using of religion; stressing finiteness; lacking of realistic grasp; acknowledging inefficiency of weaponry; comparing to others; ignoring hopelessness. Each individual coping strategy will be discussed below.

Acquiring thick-skinnedness

The first coping strategy described by Watson is that of acquiring thick-skinnedness. Soldiers, when first arriving at the front, needed to adapt themselves completely to the new situation they found themselves in. This also meant that they had to learn about their surroundings, procedures to follow (for example when under attack), what sort of weaponry was used, what each weapon sounded like, and what damage each shell or bullet could do. The possession of this knowledge provided the soldiers with a sense of control. When a soldier became aware of the different risks he was faced with, he could repress his immediate response of fear and apply techniques to those threats that were more helpful for his survival. Hereby risks became comprehensible and manageable. Watson writes: "in order to survive the front both mentally and physically, soldiers thus had to learn to judge risk without being overwhelmed by it" (251). Acquiring thick-skinnedness thus helped the soldier to stay calm under fire and approach problems and threats rationally.

Repressing of emotions

A second coping technique described by Watson is that of repression. Repression basically entails that an unacceptable traumatic event, desire or impulse is pressed into the unconscious to avoid crisis in the conscious mind (Barry, 92-93), and is, of course, well known from Freud's psychoanalysis. Watson also describes his coping strategy along these lines, and notes that although repression is "a useful immediate solution" it does not qualify as "an effective long-term coping strategy" (253). The initial repression of possible traumatic experiences helps the soldier to continue and take care of his own life. Later, when in a safe environment, he is able to dwell on his experiences. The reason why this is not an effective long term strategy is because "traumatic episodes [that are initially repressed] could return to haunt soldiers as memories or nightmares" (Watson 253). Repressed experiences thus are not pressed into the unconscious forever, but instead are likely to return at a certain moment in time.

Becoming fatalistic

The adoption of a fatalistic mindset was another coping strategy used by frontline troops. The often complete randomness of death and destruction showed that no theory or strategy could really protect one from the unpredictability of the falling shells and the other weapons

in use. Soldiers surrendered to the circumstances they found themselves in and found peace in their (unavoidable) fate. 'Everyone has a bullet with his name on it' is an often heard expression in war-themed books and media. Watson quotes "If it comes, it comes" (251) from a German lieutenant. A fatalistic mindset therefore offered a helpful strategy for the "negation of fear which would otherwise have caused great strain" (Watson 252). Arriving at this state of mind was done via two roads; firstly, "one is completely dulled" by a long and arduous stay on the frontline, or one "makes oneself accept that the trouble has to come again" (Watson 252).

Using of euphemisms

Euphemisms were also widely used to avoid "telling the worst part of the war" (Watson 252). Instead of naming the things as they were, men made creative use of language when talking about horrific and terrible events. This helped "to avoid acknowledging traumatic or painful facts" (Watson 252). Two examples given by Watson are 'knocked out' and 'trying time' but one can also think of more generally used ways of mentioning someone's death as 'kicked the bucket', 'gone out west' or 'passed away'.

Using of humour

Comparable to the use of euphemism was the use of humour "to reinterpret the environment positively" (Watson 253). Scary, dangerous or traumatizing objects and encounters were given funny nicknames or talked about light-heartedly. In this way "humour made [the situations] appear more manageable" and easier to talk about (Watson 253). What once were intimidating and harmful objects seemed far "less threatening and thus less frightening" when redubbed. Bayonets, for instance, became 'tooth-picks' and machine guns 'chattering Charlies' (Watson 253). Songs were also used as a tool to voice fears, hopes and desires. Especially those with ironic themes, such as 'I Don't Want To Be a Soldier' or 'Far Far from Ypres I Want to Be', seemed popular. Interpreting one's desires and circumstances in such an ironic manner helped to prevent the horrible nature of these circumstances "from overwhelming" the soldier's "will to go on doing his duty" (Brophy and Partridge). A darker form of humour was also present at the front. Watson states: "men learned not only to treat the possibility of their own death with derision but also developed an increasingly dark sense of humour towards general misfortune" (254). The reason behind

this might be found in Trice's argument that "modern psychological research has found that people demonstrate an increased liking for 'hostile' humour following uncontrollable experiences" (1148). Humour thus "made the reality of death, mutilation and powerlessness at the front not only easier to accept but also to address and thus enabled men to maintain an optimal approach to risk, recognizing but not becoming overwhelmed by it" (Watson 255).

Use of religion

Religion and religious feelings also still played a major part in society in the early 1900s. With the war the future was less certain, and life in general was less controllable. This was the cause of an upsurge in religious expressions. Not only established religion played a part at the front but there was also a rich culture of belief in keepsakes, fetishes, rituals and supernatural powers. Watson observes that "their popularity stemmed primarily from their perceived ability to provide a clear set of unwritten instructions for survival" (260). They also helped to turn religion into something that was more concrete "than the abstract faith in an invisible God" (Watson, 260).

Stressing finiteness

According to Watson, "the recognition that combat, however awful, was only a temporary state greatly helped soldiers through the more stressful periods of action" (263). Soldiers thus recognised that the conflict had to end at a certain moment in time; it was not going to continue forever. Next to the finiteness of the war, the soldiers' active service in the frontline usually only took ten days per month. Although relief did not always show up in time, these ten days of active service helped tremendously for the realisation that facing the danger and perils at the frontline was only for a limited time. A similar realisation seems applicable when faced with heavy artillery bombardment. Although these bombardments sometimes went on for days, they had to come to an end sometime. Artillery bombardments, however, also were often the prelude to an attack. If, with that in mind, the ending of a bombardment was still desired, seems questionable.

Lacking realistic grasp

Another reason why soldiers were capable of coping with the tremendous mental strain was the fact that most soldiers lacked a realistic view of the situation. They seemed to hold on to an unrealistic belief in their 'own invincibility' and 'luck'. Watson explains this as "stemming from a human inability to imagine one's own demise" (256). This stance might also be encouraged by surviving certain battles or just a certain amount of time in the frontline unscathed. When surviving different battles and bombardments one might gain more confidence in surviving the next attack. This coping strategy is also closely connected to the 'comparing to others' strategy discussed below.

Acknowledging inefficiency of weaponry

Another coping strategy that was popular amongst troops was the acknowledgement of the limitations of First World War weapons. As Watson states, "the inefficiency of first world war weaponry in killing […] was eagerly acknowledged by combatants" (264). Although most weapons made an explosive impression on the visual and auditory senses, they were not so efficient in taking out troops. Most shells and bullets missed their targets and fell without physically harming anyone. Wild calculations were used to prove the unlikeliness of being killed in the frontline; 'out of one hundred shells comes only one direct hit' or 'the minute number of casualties to bullet fired' (Watson 264), are just two of them. Watson rightly notes that "providing that the almost inexhaustible supply of enemy munitions was ignored, the chances of survival appeared reasonably good" (264).

Comparing to others

Another way of coping with present difficulties was by recalling earlier hardships or the hardships experienced by friends or family members serving at other parts of the front. There was always someone in the world who had drawn a worse hand than you. Watson substantiates this coping strategy by paraphrasing a diary entry. He writes: "after receiving news of his brother's death, Wrench consoled himself by comparing his situation to the experience of another man whose sibling had fallen dead into his arms while they served together at the front" (265). When comparing his situation to that of the other man it seems less terrible than it looked like at first hand. Stories like these might also give strength to the one in mourning; 'if that man was able to continue living after seeing his son killed in action

than so should you be'. Recalling earlier and more dangerous hardships that were overcome "also reassured the speaker of the likelihood of his own future survival" (Watson 265).

Ignoring hopelessness

When finding themselves in hopeless situations and other coping strategies failed or were not applicable, soldiers tried to take their attention away from the peril and instead focus on something manageable such as card playing or singing. "Ignoring it by using avoidance and distraction strategies" helped to not succumb to feelings of fear and hopelessness (Watson 265).

Although not mentioned by Watson, one quite obvious outlet for the soldiers and an often used way of managing fear before going into battle was found in the use of alcohol and other sedatives. Men received regular rum rations, especially before going over the top, but also were able to come by alcohol themselves. Fiona Reid writes: "for many soldiers alcohol was the drug of choice because it was readily available and culturally acceptable" (118). Robert Duncan argues that "on the frontline alcohol was to many a necessity", and that alcohol was used "to ease nerves prior to an attack" (117). In *Goodbye to All That* Robert Graves also refers to the use and abuse of alcohol in the trenches. Halfway through the memoirs he writes that "the unfortunates were officers who had endured two years or more of continuous trench service. In many cases they became dipsomaniacs. I knew three or four who had worked up to the point of two bottles of whiskey a day before being lucky enough to get wounded or sent home in some other way" (144). Next to the use of alcohol, drug use was not uncommon at the front. As was the case with alcohol, drugs were also quite easily acquired. Military authorities were not so much concerned with eliminating drug use but rather wanted "to control the way in which men used drugs" (Reid 134). Next to easing nerves, alcohol and drugs were often used "to overcome feelings of powerlessness" (Reid 118) or "simply to 'keep going' under difficult circumstances" (Reid 134). The same can, although in a lesser way, probably be said of tobacco use in the trenches. Alcohol, drugs and other sedatives thus can also be seen as ways to mentally cope with the stress and fear experienced at the front and therefore also should belong to the list of mental coping strategies described by Watson.

Almost all coping strategies discussed by Watson thus seem to deal with the adaptation to reality to make it seem less hopeless and uncontrollable. By doing so the soldiers created a world in which their personal survival was not just possible but also very likely. Not facing reality helped soldiers to channel some of the anxiety and stress experienced at the front out of their system. This in turn provided them with the self-control that was needed to respond appropriately to the danger they had to face every day. Some of the coping strategies, however, also had a downside. Watson observes that fatalism under veterans sometimes took a turn for the worse; they became careless and started to take unnecessary risks (252). But there were also soldiers who had so much faith in their lucky charms that they blatantly risked their lives for them.

Breakdown and Trauma

When coping strategies were exhausted and soldiers could not handle the mental strain, stress and fear experienced at the front anymore, they often broke down and were unable to continue in active service. Soldiers who broke down were often labelled as shell shocked. At first it was believed that shell shock was caused by brain damage or concussion. The reasoning behind this was that soldiers who had been in the proximity of exploding shells were internally damaged by the shock wave caused by these shells, hence the name shell shock. Later, when soldiers who had never been near any explosion showed similar symptoms, this thesis was cast aside (Winter 320) and replaced by the theory that day-to-day exposure to extreme forms of violence and death slowly erodes one's capability of dealing with the stress and fear attached to such experiences (Lewell 17). Wessely rightly argues that "men had only a limited 'bank of courage', which would inevitably be expended under the conditions of the western front" (271). Next to the limited capability of dealing with stress and fear, men seemed to break down at different moments and in different situations. Where a single horrific event might have been too much for some men, others were able to continue fighting. Some men apparently had stronger nerves than others. Wessely notes: "eventually the strongest nerves would crack under the strain of trench warfare" and "every man had his breaking point" (271). It is thus believed that every man has a limited 'bank of courage'. At a certain moment in time, levels of stress and fear get too high even for the ones that were able to ward off breakdown for a longer period of time.

Two explanations for the different reactions of men to traumatic experiences thus seem to exist. On the one hand there is the point made by Lewell and Wessely that some men seem to have possessed an 'immune system', or 'bank of courage', which helped them cope with more than one traumatic event before breaking down. Every traumatic event that they encountered, however, slowly eroded it until the immune system was completely broken down. On the other hand there is the idea that some men had stronger nerves than others; what was considered a traumatic event by some was not traumatic for others.

When the term 'shell shock' was introduced it was used to label many different symptoms and conditions. Jones and Wessely note: "typically soldiers complained of fatigue, poor sleep, nightmares, jumpiness and had a variety of somatic symptoms such as palpitations, chest pain, tremor, joint and muscle pains, loss of voice or hearing and functional paralysis" (19). Other symptoms, however, were not unusual. One thing combining all conditions was the fact that there was no visible wound that could explain the cause of the symptoms. The symptoms connected to shell shock all seem to be part of "the immediate mental reaction to the traumatic experience" (Lewell 14); men had been confronted with a violent or deadly situation and started showing symptoms of shell shock. The immediate mental reaction, however, is often just the start of frequently "enduring expressions once 'normal' life is resumed" (Lewell 14); these 'enduring expressions' are usually seen as symptoms of PTSD. So, working through trauma does not just happen by curing the symptoms that are part of the immediate mental reaction, but instead requires a much larger and longer trajectory to achieve healing; if full healing is even possible.

Often used as a starting point when studying trauma is the etymology of the word 'trauma'; "trauma derives from the Greek *τραῦμα*" (Steffens 37) which basically means 'wound' or 'damage'. The concept of trauma is separable in physical and mental trauma. Physical trauma deals with bodily injuries that "threaten to overwhelm the body's defence system", and psychological trauma with "an event, or a series of events, that overwhelms the balance and defence systems of the mind" (Lewell 13-14). Psychological trauma thus entails that the victim is confronted with such an overwhelming experience that he is unable to mentally and emotionally cope with the encounter. Herman notes that "traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe" (33). When such an event is encountered

and one is overwhelmed by this experience, one switches off emotional and mental presence and experiences it in a numbed and detached way. Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart elaborate on this by noting that "many trauma survivors report that they automatically are removed from the scene; they look at it from a distance or disappear altogether" (168). Survivors seem to detach themselves from the event by pretending not to be present, or only to be distant observers of the incident. The experience is then repressed into the unconscious part of the mind, only to haunt the victim in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, hallucinations and such, after having returned to a safer environment. The actual traumatic event can often not be recalled consciously, making it hard for survivors to grasp where the flashbacks, nightmares and other forms of haunting are coming from.

One of the major difficulties to overcome when having witnessed a traumatic event is integrating the experience into one's life narrative. Mieke Bal argues that "traumatic memories [need] to be legitimized and narratively integrated in order to lose their hold over the subject", and that "traumatic memories […] resist integration, they cannot become narratives" (viii). Because of the overwhelming nature of the traumatic event, and because the event is experienced in a numbed state and cannot be consciously recalled, the event cannot be placed into a chronological narrative. Herman argues that

> the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery (1)

These conflicting interests stand in the way of a 'true' representation of the traumatic event and cause the subject's inability to understand and communicate it. Therefore trauma is widely viewed as a silencing concept. Herman concludes, "traumatic memory [...] is wordless and static" (175). Because the traumatic event cannot be consciously recalled it is often impossible for the subject to put his experiences to words, which makes healing next to impossible since understanding the experience in a chronological and structured way is essential for further attempts of recovery. Making an effort to understand the event that caused the traumatic withdrawal into the unconscious mind does not mean that the 'memory' of the event can be fully accessed or recalled. The recalled memory always forms a

reconstruction and thereby is in its essence an adaption of the real event. Consequently, in a traumatic history there "is always a matter of distortion, a filtering of the original event through the fictions of traumatic repression" present, thereby making "the event available at best indirectly" (Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience" 185). Thus to start working through traumatic experience(s) some essential problems have to be overcome first.

The silencing characteristic of trauma is sometimes seen as one of the reasons for the transmission of trauma to second or even third generations. Gertrude Mander considers that

> the war experiences of our parents and grandparents must have had a significant influence on the emotional development of those generations for whom the war of this century are historical events they can only relate to in their imagination. The stories and the silences of the parent generations are alive in their children in the intangible ways in which projection and introjections travel transgenerationally (24)

Traumatised parents seem to project some of their PTSD behavioural patterns onto their children whilst bringing them up. The children "seem to have consciously or unconsciously absorbed their parents' experiences and integrated them into their psyches" (Yarvis 873). Furthermore, it seems likely that the parental silence on certain topics would inspire younger generation to actively pursue the omitted parts of their family history or to try and help their parents finding closure to the traumatic memories still haunting them. Jeffrey Yarvis asserts that

> children of victims often relive the experience of their parents and grandparents in an effort to heal the soul wounds of their parents and grandparents by writing and recording their experiences. This is an effort to transform the trauma but can cause the second and third generations to experience the trauma for themselves (673)

By digging up the traumatic pasts of their parents the children themselves take on some of the trauma experienced by their elders and in a way become traumatised themselves.

With the 1918 Armistice the First World War finally came to an end. In its wake it left many traumatised veterans who long after the war's final moments still experienced symptoms of PTSD. For some this must have had a profound effect on their family life and the way they brought up their children. Their mindset affected their spouses and their children, and in some cases behavioural patterns belonging to PTSD were transmitted to those later generations.

2. Coping with the War in *Birdsong* and the *Regeneration* trilogy

Too close to death ourselves to make a fuss. We economize on grief.

- Pat Barker, *The Ghost Road*

As discussed in chapter one, mental coping strategies seemed to have played an important role in the Great War. This chapter therefore explores in which way mental coping strategies are present in *Birdsong* and the *Regeneration* trilogy, but also whether the strategies described by Watson suffice to analyse those featuring in the novels, or whether other strategies not mentioned by Watson are also used. As explained earlier, a major difference between the books is the setting of most of the narratives. Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy is mainly set in the United Kingdom, and deals with the effects of traumatic experiences witnessed at the Western Front. Most of Faulks's *Birdsong,* in contrast, takes places in the trenches of the frontline. There are, however, also certain overlapping elements in the novels; in *Birdsong*, the characters of Stephen Wraysford and Captain Weir are seen when on leave in France and back in England, and in *The Ghost Road* Billy Prior is followed at the front during the last few months of the war. In addition, the soldiers who are back in the United Kingdom after serving on the front often suffer from shell shock and therefore are, although geographically removed from the conflict, arguably psychologically still present in the war. Nonetheless, the use of mental coping strategies is affected by this difference in scenery, and *Birdsong*, due to its setting, features a wider variety of mental coping strategies than the *Regeneration* trilogy. Watson mentions eleven mental coping strategies in his study. All strategies are present in greater or lesser degree in the novels, except for the strategy *acknowledging inefficiency of weaponry*. In this chapter Watson's strategies that are overtly present in the novels will be discussed first; the strategies that feature less follow as second, and the newly discovered strategies will be discussed in third place.

Commonly used Mental Coping Strategies

Repressing of emotions

The first mental coping strategy that is very apparent in the novels is that of repression. Repression is widely used by the main characters of the books as a strategy to ignore traumatic experiences at the front. On different occasions the use of repression is also attributed to many of the background characters. In the novels, repression seemingly forms an easily applicable strategy, and an almost natural initial response to traumatic events, one which is especially used when experiencing war or other life-threatening situations where the need to carry on is of vital importance. This tendency is also very present in the *Regeneration* trilogy where many characters have repressed their emotions and traumatic experiences, or are depicted as actively repressing them. In the final episode of the trilogy, Prior's contemplation on repression lays bare the paradox that soldiers were faced with when it came to repressing traumatic experiences:

> Two bubbles break here. Longstaffe sliding back into the trench with a red hole in his forehead and an expression of mild surprise on his face. And the bayonet work. Which I will not remember. Rivers would say, remember now – any suppressed memory stores up trouble for the future. Well, too bad. Refusing to think's the only way I can survive and anyway what future?
>
> The whole thing was breakdown territory, as defined by Rivers. Confined spaces, immobility, helplessness, passivity, constant danger that you can do nothing to avert. But my nerves seem to be all right. Or at least no worse than anybody else's. All our minds are in flight, each man tries to reach his own accommodation with what he saw. What he did. But on the surface it's all jollity (*TGR* 193 – 194).

Prior here seems very aware of the pros and cons of repression. At this moment repressing the evidently traumatic 'bayonet work' seems a necessary evil to him, without which he is unable to go on. On top of that, he realises that he too is likely to fall in the near future. The postponement of dealing with any psychologically difficult subject to a future which he will probably not witness must sound very appealing to him. Prior does not hesitate to take this bet. Ironically enough, his anticipated death will thus save him from any future psychological troubles due to the repression of these traumatic experiences. By stating "all our minds are in flight" (194), Prior shows that he is not the only one who represses what he has witnessed and taken part in, but that it seems to form a collective effort to pretend that all is well.

Everybody seemingly joins in the "jollity" that masks the inner struggles and represses the emotions, and no one seems capable of breaking through this deadlock. This tendency is repeated the night before the final attack of the trilogy in which Prior and Owen die. Prior states:

> I think of rats on the canal bank with long naked tails and the thought of that cold water is definitely not inviting. But we sing, we tell jokes and every joke told here is funny. Everybody's amazingly cheerful. The word I'm trying not to use is fey. There is an element of that. We all know what the chances are (*TGR* 257-258).

An interesting difference between the two instances is that in the first passage traumatic memories of a previous battle are repressed, where in the second one the fears and expectations of the battle to come are repressed. A big difference between the two thus is that the repression of fear, although a mental coping strategy, does not have the same implications as the repression of trauma.

Although Prior's knowledge about repression changes immensely throughout the trilogy, his approach to traumatic experiences does not. In the first novel of the trilogy, Prior, shortly after recovering his speech, reluctantly speaks with Rivers and says, "'No. I don't think talking helps. It just churns things up and makes them seem more real'" (*RG* 51), to which Rivers replies "'but they are real.'" (*RG* 51). A few lines later Rivers also implies that Prior does not want to work through his trauma. Prior's reluctance to speak about his nightmares, fears and experiences seems to stem from the role that men fulfilled in society and the expectations belonging to that role. Amna Haider explains that

> Fear and terror were taboo emotions for the 'manly' British soldiers during the Great War. Rather, courage, forbearance, stoicism and bravery were the culturally endorsed emotions fed on the 'heroic vision and masculine fantasies' of the Victorian British masculine ideal (56)

These strict social expectations of men presumably exacerbated the way men dealt with these 'taboo emotions', and led frontline soldiers into the domain of repression. It also makes the therapeutic speaking about upsetting events difficult. This tendency is also made clear in *Regeneration*, where it says: "they'd been trained to identify emotional repression, as the essence of manliness. Men who broke down, or cried, or admitted to feeling fear, were sissies, weaklings, failures. Not *men*" (*RG* 48). So, from an early stage in life men were assumed to be able to deal with emotional and traumatic events without showing emotions.

Letting on that one was unable to do this, by for instance shedding tears, made one into a weakling, not a real man. When being surrounded by men and in a military setting, being viewed as a weakling was probably not a favourable position, and thus, to make sure emotions did not take over, many men repressed their traumatic experiences.

Like Prior in the *Regeneration* trilogy, Firebrace in *Birdsong* also recognises repression and jollity as a way of concealing less 'manly' feelings in others:

> Jack's solemn face glistened with the effort of his comedy, and the men's determined response, whistling and slapping each other in mirth, was a token of their determination, and their fear (144).

And also Wraysford's gaze in *Birdsong* protrudes through the façade of elation:

> Stephen knew, they had locked up in their hearts the horror of what they had seen, and their jovial pride in their resilience was not convincing. They boasted in a mocking way of what they had seen and done; but in their sad faces wrapped in rags he saw the burden of their unwanted knowledge (282-283).

Although both instances show the façade as being rather shallow, they also recognise it as being definite. Later, Wraysford interestingly calls this fake sense of jollity a conspiracy: "he shared their conspiracy of fortitude" (*BS* 283). Everyone seemingly joins in the effort to avoid recognising the truth, and even actively partakes in keeping up appearances; indeed, turning the silence on the topic into a public secret, or as Wraysford puts it, into a conspiracy. Earlier on in the book Stephen hints at the underlying reasons for this by stating,

> this eruption of natural fear brought home how unnatural was the existence they were leading; they did not wish to be reminded of normality [...] if the pretence began to break, then it would take lives with it (*BS* 148).

Pretending that everything was fine and maintaining the façade of fortitude thus seemed to be ways of avoiding thinking about the 'real' meaning of events. By 'forgetting' what life was like before the war and what normal life entailed, life in the frontline became the new 'normal' for the men. This pretence was considered highly valuable because it kept men from pondering too much on their current situation and all the discomforts they had to live with. When this pretence was broken down by, for example, new arrivals, it painstakingly reminded the men of the situation they were living in, giving cause to gloomy thoughts and fatalistic mindsets. A similar moment is found in Weir and Wraysford's final meeting the night before the latter has to partake in an attack. Weir comes to Wraysford's dugout to tell

him of a bad premonition he has had; he anticipates Wraysford's death in the upcoming attack. Weir feels that this therefore is the moment to tell Wraysford how much he has meant to him and that he will never forget him. Wraysford is angered by Weir's declaration because it is the first station in a train of thoughts that will break through the conspiracy. To be able to go over the top Wraysford should not be thinking about his death. Weir thus speaks of things that were usually left unspoken and thereby violates the taboo that lay on certain subjects; by wording his apprehensions he, however, also conveys his fear to Wraysford, who is more in need of repression since he has to go over the top the following morning.

Use of religion

In his article Watson argues that "faith gave sense to an otherwise frightening and chaotic world" (257). We see what happens in the case of Jack Firebrace who gradually loses his faith in God as the narrative of *Birdsong* unfolds. As a result of the chaos and fear he experiences deteriorate. Shortly after the introduction of his character he prays "to God to save him" (*BS* 131) from court-martial, and most likely the firing squad for sleeping on sentry duty. Later when receiving the news of his son's death he again finds comfort in religion: "I will not let this shake my faith. His life was a beautiful thing, it was filled with joy. I will thank God for it" (*BS* 209). Although Firebrace does find some comfort in his religion, it is arguably also at this point in the narrative that his faith starts showing the first cracks. When having to convince himself that the death of his son will not shake his faith, he actually already admits that his faith is not so strong that it is unshakeable. His son's death only waters a seed that was already growing underneath the surface. Later he is seen viewing the first day of the Somme from a distance. After realising that the expected walkover instead becomes a slaughter of British troops, he pleads to God to "let it stop" (*BS* 229). When this does not happen it is said that "Jack turned his face away from what he saw, and he felt something dying in him as he turned" (*BS* 229). Next to Firebrace, the company priest is also appalled by the sight:

> Horrocks pulled the silver cross from his chest and hurled it from him. His old reflex still persisting, he fell to his knees, but he did not pray. He stayed kneeling with his palms spread out on the ground, then lowered his head and covered it with his hands. Jack knew what had died in him (*BS* 230)

The enormous amount of chaos and death, and the overwhelming nature of the event seem to have such an impact on Firebrace and the priest Horrocks that they lose their faith. Instead of strengthening their beliefs, their war experiences weaken their faith up to a point where the belief in any spiritual power is completely shattered. After failing to find solace and reason in his religion and after more emotional setbacks Firebrace abandons faith and grows fatalistic.

At different moments in Billy Prior's diary entries in *The Ghost Road*, reference is made to superstitions. Prior writes, "a huge crow flew over us, flapping and croaking mournfully. One for sorrow. The men didn't rest till they'd succeeded in spotting another" (*TGR* 240). A few pages later he writes, "what about after the war? But perhaps it's better not to think about that. Tempting fate" (*TGR* 242), and continues "so far, touch wood, there's been no trouble" (*TGR* 243). As Prior shows, next to religion, superstition also played an important role at the front. Where everything seemed chaotic, men found relief in habitual rituals and superstitions in order to try and make sense of their experiences. Watson explains that "in the absence of security, certainty or control in the natural world, men turned to the supernatural for reassurance" (*TGR* 256).

In *Birdsong* this tendency is further explored in the characters of Michael Weir and Stephen Wraysford. When Firebrace has to report to Wraysford for sleeping on sentry-duty, he finds the officers Weir and Wraysford in a drunken state in Wraysford's dugout. Wraysford claims that he has "no recollection at all" (*BS* 133) of summoning Firebrace to report to him. After seeing, "the almost empty bottle of whiskey that stood on the table" (*BS* 133), Firebrace also notices "five playing cards laid out in the shape of a star, face down, with thin trails of sand between them" (*BS* 134), with "in the centre of the formation [...] a carved wooden figure and a stump of candle" on the same table (*BS* 134), and he states a few lines later that there "were more wooden carvings of human figures" present in the dugout. Firebrace has clearly stumbled upon some sort of spiritual session. At that moment nothing more is made of his findings. It is only later that the reader witnesses a fortune-telling session with Weir and Wraysford. By then both officers have been through some nerve-wrecking experiences and seem altogether less stable than at the time Firebrace found them.

After a long day underground, Weir comes to Wraysford's dugout for a drink and almost orders him to, as he himself puts it, "do the runes" (*BS* 290). Wraysford heeds the

request and tells Weir his fortune with the help of playing cards, a dead rat, candles and some sand. When arriving on the scene Weir is evidently walking on his last legs. Ellis, a newly arrived officer, sits in and observes both men and the event. He thinks to himself: "the officer from the tunnel [Weir] appeared to be always on the point of collapse" (*BS* 290), and a few lines later he continues, "Weir came shaking to the dugout for whiskey and reassurance" (*BS* 290). After Weir's fortune is told the three men start talking about what reasons they have to survive the war, and Weir tells them of his leave and the contempt he now feels for his parents and the other people in England. If anything, the fortune-telling seems to be a preliminary for meaningful conversation. Instead of having small talk, Weir's fortune opens up some room for discussion on the reasons for fighting, but also for surviving the war.

Becoming fatalistic

Another strategy or rather a mindset that is strongly present in the novels is that of fatalism. Fatalism is adopted by many characters who experienced emotional setbacks or breakdown earlier on in the narratives. The novels almost make it seem that men turned to fatalism when stress and trauma levels got too high and all other strategies had failed. Two strong characteristics constitute the presence of fatalism in the novels. Firstly, men stopped thinking for themselves, surrendered to the circumstances they found themselves in, and strongly relied upon routine. Secondly, they lost their interest in life and the will to survive the conflict. This strongly connects to Watson's explanation of the strategy. He argues that "the will to live is crushed and makes way for a mindless apathy and resignation" (252) to events.

In *Birdsong* fatalism becomes first evident in Weir. The night before surrendering to fatalism, Weir is almost forcibly brought to a whorehouse by Wraysford in order to finally experience what it is like 'to be with a woman'. For Weir the night ends in frustration, and the morning after,

> He was resigned to it. He felt that he had lost control of his own life: when he had finally tried to alter some central part of his existence it had come to nothing but humiliation. The guns would not be much worse (*BS* 208).

After going his whole life without knowing the love of a woman and the constant question of what it would be like, the experience he has never had has grown into an enormous thing for

Weir, something to believe in, a reason to survive. After Wraysford knows to destroy this belief, Weir loses the reason to survive and surrenders to fatalism. Shortly after, Wraysford, who returns from his final meeting with Isabelle, also resigns to fatalism, although in a more symbolic manner; "Stephen closed his eyes. He no longer had strong opinions on what he wanted or did not want to do. The train would take them in its own time" (*BS* 337). By meeting Isabelle and finally finding closure to the questions he still had surrounding her return to Azaire, he seems to close the book on his past, and also loses the will to actively control his life. He boards the train that will take him to his destiny. Later, when Weir is shot dead by a sniper, this mindset is taken even further and Wraysfords seems to lose all will to survive. A third character who seems to succumb to fatalism is the miner Firebrace. His degradation is closely followed through the novel. Bit by bit he is seen surrendering his beliefs and will to survive. The death of his close friend Shaw seems to be the final blow, after which he is unable to recover. Firebrace then also takes on a fatalistic stance in life.

What is interesting about the characters Weir, Wraysford and Firebrace is that the reason for adopting fatalism is preceded by a personal emotional event. After the death of a friend, humiliation with women or other emotional setbacks, all will to control events and to survive the war seem to be lost. The war itself and the conditions it was fought in seemingly only form insignificant background events to the instance(s) of personal trauma. The "mental and physical exhaustion" that made men "indifferent and so callous that they took very little trouble to protect themselves" (Watson 252) seems to not only stem from being under constant bombardment and having to live in perpetual fear. A strong element seems to also lie in emotional setbacks of a more personal kind.

In *Regeneration* a similar situation occurs when Sassoon admits to losing interest in his own survival after losing a friend. He explains,

> A friend of mine had been killed. For a while I used to go out on patrol every night, looking for Germans to kill. Or rather I told myself that's what I was doing. In the end I didn't know whether I was trying to kill them, or just giving them plenty of opportunities to kill me (*RG* 11)

What at first sight seems a lot like anger and a search for revenge later is identified by Sassoon as a form of fatalism. Although the constant going on patrol in search of danger strongly suggests fatalism, it might also contain an element of repression. By busying himself with patrols, there is less time to think of his friend's death, and because of the constant

danger to his own life these thoughts must have been forced into the background. At the final page of the novel, Rivers identifies in Sassoon "a genuine and very deep desire for death", and also fears that he is "going back with the intention of being killed" (*RG* 250). Even after a longer period of rest away from the front Sassoon seems to be unable to shake off his fatalistic mindset.

Less present mental coping strategies

Next to the three omnipresent mental coping strategies discussed above, the remaining strategies of Watson are far less present in the novels. This section therefore briefly summarises how these strategies feature in the stories.

Acquiring thick-skinnedness features in both novels as a background strategy, and features more clearly as main- and background characters freshly arrive at the front. Men slowly accustom themselves to the situations they encounter. In *Birdsong* the reader follows the experiences of Wraysford and others in a chronological manner. Thereby the reader, like the main characters in the novel, slowly grows accustomed to the situations the men have to deal with. It is only when new background characters arrive, like Ellis, that the characters and readers are awkwardly reminded of how unusual the existence at the front actually is. Since the *Regeneration* trilogy uses flashbacks and retellings of the men's experiences at the front, the men's stories are often only accessed belatedly, and the novel therefore is less chronologically structured than is the case with *Birdsong*. As a result the reader does not gradually accustom himself to the situations described in the novels, and accordingly awkward reminders are also less present.

Euphemisms hardly feature in the texts. The Germans are occasionally referred to as "poor old Jerry" (*BS* 339), "the Boche" (*BS* 387) or the "Brutal Hun" (*TGR* 174). This seemingly has little to do with avoiding talking about the worst part of the war, and might be better interpreted as a mocking term that has become normalised. An infamous euphemism in the *Regeneration* trilogy is ousted by Prior. While shovelling the remains of two men who have been directly hit by an artillery shell into a sandbag, Prior picks up an eye from under the duckboards and says, "what am I supposed to do with this gob-stopper" (*RG* 103). Here the use of a euphemism does seem to be applied in order to not mention the gruesome fact that Prior is holding someone's eye; an eye that was part of someone's face only minutes before.

In the discussion of repression earlier, it is already shown that men used humour and jollity to hide their real feelings. Humour but also songs feature abundantly in *Birdsong* in the character of Jack Firebrace. When on leave Firebrace takes on the role of comedian and performs "series of jokes" (*BS* 144) and songs in bars. The nature of the jokes and songs, however, are unknown to the reader because they do not feature in the text. The frontline parts of *Birdsong* occasionally also include a dark form of humour in which, as Watson puts it, death was treated "with derision", and "an increasingly dark sense of humour towards general misfortune" (254) was developed. This is seen, for instance, when a group of men go 'over the top' to retrieve some of the bodies of the fallen that have already been out in the open for a few weeks. As the bodies are collected some of them fall apart, causing one of the soldiers to throw up in his gasmask. This is received with laughter, and the other soldiers are described as "snorting private mirth inside their masks" (*BS* 350). Similar moments of humour and song are present in Barker's novels.

That men who were in the frontline often lacked a realistic overview of events does not feature strongly in the novels. The only instance where it is referred to directly is when Wraysford contemplates on his momentary staff job, "I know quite a lot about troop strengths in this area. More than when I was fighting" (*BS* 426). While looking at maps and following troop movements Wraysford thus learns to place his former battalion's part in the bigger picture. Generally, then, the focus of most characters in the novels seems to lie on their own place in the conflict. The bigger picture is hardly ever addressed.

Finiteness seems to play an important role for the characters. Throughout all novels, but especially in *Birdsong*, men are depicted as constantly thinking of the moment when difficult tasks, battles, frontline duty and the war in general will come to an end. This clearly shows that men are aware of the fact that difficult situations are temporary, and that they will have to come to an end. Yet it also illustrates that men try to focus on the better and easier times ahead when in peril.

Comparing one's suffering to that of others is a coping strategy that is incidentally found in the novels. Where Watson mainly focuses on the comparison of one's personal suffering to that of another, in the novels it is mainly done in a more general way. In *Birdsong*, for example, this is seen at different moments when the miners compare their existence at the front to the soldiers in Wraysford's platoon, and vice versa. Since the miners spent a big part of their time underground, they were spared most bombardments. Most

soldiers, however, did not have to worry about collapsing tunnels and enemy mines. If recognising this also helped the characters to mentally cope with the things they encountered seems doubtful. It at least is not clearly present in the texts.

Ignoring the hopelessness of the situation is a strategy that seems closely linked to that of repression. In the novels men are seen doing things and talking about topics in order to distract themselves from the situation they are in. Take, for instance, Wraysford's behaviour in *Birdsong,* who, while under artillery fire in his dugout, "enjoyed these housekeeping sessions, when he could escape from the worst of the shellfire and turn his mind to practical tasks" (*BS* 182). Instead of waiting for the bombardment to end he starts doing other things, and in this way he does not have to ponder to long on the life-threatening situation. Another moment that Wraysford is seen doing this is when he and Weir are sitting together in his dugout, and Weir explains that he is able to distinguish between the different types of artillery bombardments. Weir tries to summarise the bombardment as follows: "'it's a mixed barrage. The field gun alternating with heavy artillery at intervals of –'" but then he is rudely interrupted by Wraysford who says, "'be quiet,' [...] 'don't torture yourself '"(*BS* 151). While analysing the bombardment Weir is starting to shake and afterwards he begs Wraysford to talk to him "about anything but this war" (*BS* 151). Wraysford thankfully seizes the moment to talk about women, thereby distracting himself and Weir from the maddening characteristics of the bombardment.

Newly Found Mental Coping Strategies

Writing as a mental coping strategy

In *Birdsong* as well as in the *Regeneration* trilogy the act of writing occurs on different levels and seems to play an important part in the texts. In the *Regeneration* trilogy, Sassoon and Owen concern themselves with literary output in the form of poetry, Rivers works on academic essays and patient dossiers, and Prior keeps a diary. Next to that, different characters send and receive letters of which some, or parts of some, are featured in the text. *Birdsong* also features the correspondence between the home front and the actual front but also between various characters from the novel. In addition, from the start of the novel Wraysford keeps a notebook, and indicates that he has done this ever since grammar school five years earlier.

In addition to being an act of communication, these writing processes in many cases also seem to have a therapeutic effect. In *Regeneration*, the character Sassoon writes poetry about his experiences at the front throughout the novel. In the same book the character Rivers notes that "writing the poems had obviously been therapeutic [...] writing the declaration might have been therapeutic too" (*RG* 26), and continues saying that "Sassoon's poetry and his protest [...] could be linked to his recovery from that terrible period of nightmares and hallucinations" (*RG* 26). To be able to write poetry about his experiences, Sassoon needed to reflect on these experiences instead of repressing them. Thus the putting to paper of his experiences helped him to work through the traumatic events he had witnessed. Sassoon's experiences of traumatic haunting therefore also seem to be lighter than those of others. The reason for his admittance to Craiglockhart is not because of his mental health but mainly because of political reasons. Sassoon's approach to the war and poetry seems to be contrary to that of the shell-shocked patient poet Owen. When talking about his poetry Owen states, "'Oh, they're not about the war.' He hesitated. 'I don't write about that'"(*RG* 84). He hesitatingly articulates his reason for not writing about the war as "I s-suppose I've always thought of p-poetry as the opposite of all that. The ugliness" (*RG* 84). Part of Owen's war-neurosis shows itself in stammers, reflected here in writing. Instead of trying to articulate his ideas on the war and his experiences, Owen thus writes about other things. It could therefore be said that Owen possibly suppresses his war experiences, and certainly does not dwell on them. When persuaded by Sassoon to write poetry on his war experiences, Owen is depicted as quickly recovering from his traumatic breakdown and regaining his self-confidence:

> Owen leapt up, went to the drawer of his washstand and produced the typescript Sassoon had lent him. He began leafing quickly but carefully through it. Sassoon, watching, thought, he's getting better. No stammer. Quick, decisive movements. The self-confidence to contradict his hero." (*RG* 157)

Instead of trying to not think about his war experiences Sassoon persuades Owen to focus on his experiences and to try and articulate them in poetry. This regaining of self-confidence seems to form a vital part of recovering from his breakdown.

Another noteworthy therapeutic writer is found in Prior in *The Ghost Road*. As seen above, Prior is not the talking type and spent a lot of time and effort on repressing his experiences. When in the final novel of the trilogy, he returns to the front he starts keeping a

diary in which he puts to word the situations he encounters. He finds himself in the same unit as Owen and closely monitors and compares Owen and his own reactions, as former psychological casualties, to those of the other soldiers when witnessing traumatic events. One of such events is when they are still in the reserve line, and Prior's unit encounters a throng of wounded soldiers returning from the front. The soldiers that were new to the front "stared at them, and you could see them thinking, That could be me, in a few days or weeks" (*TGR* 148). Owen and Prior's responses are far more detached: "I glanced at Owen and he was Indifferent. As I was. I don't mean unsympathetic, *necessarily*. (Though it's amazing what you leave behind when the pack's heavy)" (*TGR* 148). Although their reaction to this event might not be called psychologically healthy, they do not seem to repress anything, and their nerves seem unshaken by the encounter.

In a later diary entry Prior notes, "but my nerves seem to be all right. Or at least no worse than anybody else's" (*TGR* 194), and a few pages further expands on this by stating that

> we are Craiglockhart's success stories. *Look at us*. We don't remember, we don't feel, we don't think – at least not beyond the confines of what's needed to do the job. By any proper civilized standard (but what does *that* mean *now*?) we are objects of horror. But our nerves are completely steady. And we are still alive (*TGR* 200)

All in all, Prior's return to the front does not go hand in hand with a return to the psychological problems that are preliminary to breakdown. A reason for this might be found in the fact that he has started keeping a diary. By writing he is able to put his experiences into words and thereby end the hold that his traumatic experiences have over him. The control of his nerves might not just be ascribed to his therapeutic writing, but possibly also have something to do with the time he has already spent at the front and the fact that the war is in its final months.

One character who, even though he writes, does seem to show symptoms of breakdown is Wraysford in *Birdsong*. Wraysford is seen writing in his notebook at different moments in the text. Next to that, his notebooks form an important part of the plot surrounding his granddaughter Elizabeth. Even though putting his experiences into writing, halfway through the novel Stephen is temporarily relieved from his position by his superior Captain Gray in order to recuperate his 'tired mind'. His acts of writing apparently do not seem therapeutic. Wraysford gets two weeks of home leave and afterwards will return to

perform a staff job. Although Stephen does not break down in the sense that he is completely incapable of controlling his behaviour, he does seem incapacitated by his experiences. His writing therapy thus did not have the same effect as Prior, Sassoon and Owen's writing had, a reason for this may be found in the pre-war part of the novel. At the start of the novel, while rereading his diary entries, Stephen comes across something that might explain his failure to make his writing therapeutic: "he saw, with some surprise, that what had struck him most he had not written about at all" (*BS* 17). Stephen's repressive behaviour, as described above, seems also to have transferred to his writing. Although he writes, his writing is not therapeutic because he avoids writing down the parts that strike him most.

Yet another form of writing present in the novels is that of writing letters. Letter writing is a form of writing that is closely connected to the war. Without modern forms of communication, writing letters was the only way to keep in touch with relatives back home or elsewhere. In *The Ghost Road* Prior notes in his diary: "I look up and down the dormitory and there's hardly a sound except for pages being turned, and here and there a pen scratching. It's like this every evening" (*TGR* 115). Everybody seems to be writing. Next to keeping each other up to date about significant events at home or at the front, letters also seemed to fulfil another purpose. Prior explains, "I think it's a way of claiming immunity. First-person narrators can't die, so as long as we keep telling the story of our own lives we're safe" (*TGR* 115). When writing things like letters and diary entries in the first-person, one is brought back to life as soon as the letters are read. The writer, thus, only dies if no one reads him anymore.

Use and abuse of alcohol

The only sedative that features in the texts is that of alcohol. Where the use of alcohol is not that much present in the *Regeneration* trilogy, it features abundantly in *Birdsong*. Especially the character of Michael Weir, the officer of the miners, is depicted as using alcohol at different moments throughout the text. From his introduction up to his demise he seems increasingly dependent upon alcohol. Captain Weir seems to be one of the unfortunates mentioned by Graves in chapter one above; he has spent a lot of time at the front and in order to cope with the circumstances there, seems to have become a 'dipsomaniac'. How much alcohol Weir consumes and if he reached the two bottles of whisky a day mentioned

by Graves is not exactly known. He is, however, depicted as bringing a flask down into the tunnels because he cannot wait until the night, and as having used up his whisky rations.

The reason behind alcohol use and abuse seems to be two-fold in *Birdsong*. Firstly, there is the character of Weir who only seems able to talk about the war, his feelings and his traumatic experiences when under the influence of alcohol. His alcohol use therefore seems to be of a therapeutic nature. This is seen, for instance, when Ellis first meets Weir and notes that "he was frightened by Weir's dishevelled appearance and his inability to talk sensibly until the liquor had put some strength and reason in him" (*BS* 285). Alcohol seems to ease Weir's mind and to take his thoughts away from his fears. Drinking makes him able to speak of his experiences, and by doing so he knows how and where to place them in his life's narrative, which in turn helps him to continue his work, and not be overwhelmed by the traumas he encountered. Secondly, there is the character of Firebrace who, after losing his close friend Shaw in the tunnels, tries to drink away his sorrows. When on leave shortly after the incident, Firebrace goes on a drinking spree and the following is said about him: "there was this memory of Shaw, this painful memory, kept in place by his sober, conscious mind. He would hack away that sobriety, bit by bit, until it all was gone, taking the memory with it" (*BS* 344). Firebrace thus uses alcohol as a form of repression. When intoxicated he does not have to think of Shaw and is able to forget about the war for a brief period of time. He joins in the jollity of being on leave like many other characters in the novel are seen doing.

A similar character in *Regeneration* who arguably represses painful memories by drinking is Burns. Rivers, while visiting Burns, joins him in a local pub for a drink. Rivers notes, "Burns could drink apparently, and did, becoming in the process quite flushed and talkative, though nothing was said about his illness" (*RG* 172). Burns, despite his inability to keep down any food after being stuck head first in a German corpse, seems to hold his liquor well. It makes the otherwise withdrawn character talkative. Since he does not speak of his illness it seems that he uses alcohol, like Firebrace, as a repressive tool; it helps him to forget about his suffering for a brief period of time.

As has become clear, *Birdsong* and the *Regeneration* trilogy feature various mental coping strategies. The most commonly used strategies are repression, religion and fatalism, but other strategies also feature. Next to the strategies mentioned by Watson, there are a few other ways in which the characters mentally cope with the stress, fear and trauma they

encounter. Two often used coping strategies not discussed by Watson seem to be writing and alcohol use. In some cases the mental coping strategies applied by the characters seem to have a therapeutic influence which helps them to continue their service. Other coping strategies seemingly only help to postpone the impact of the traumatic events encountered. The novels seem to present the mental coping strategies in a certain preordained order. One's initial response to a traumatic encounter often seems to be repression, but also religion was used as a way to explain circumstances. When all strategies had been exhausted soldiers became fatalistic. What followed after fatalism was often death not breakdown. The men that broke down often only became fatalistic after returning to the front.

3. Trauma in *Birdsong* and the *Regeneration* trilogy

Children, that's what a man needs – children, who know nothing about it.

- Erich Maria Remarque, *The Road Back*

As shown in the introduction to this thesis, the *Regeneration* trilogy is extensively discussed within the field of trauma studies. In contrast, *Birdsong*, although dealing with identical topics goes largely ignored within the same field. This chapter therefore discusses how psychological trauma features in the *Regeneration* trilogy and how it features in *Birdsong*. The first part of this chapter compares the characters of Billy Prior (the *Regeneration* trilogy), and Stephen Wraysford (*Birdsong*), and discusses the origin and aftermath of their traumatisation, and also explains how their traumas are depicted throughout the different novels. The second part of this chapter focuses on trans-generational trauma, how this is especially present in *Birdsong,* and what the structures of *Birdsong* and the other novels seem to add to this discussion.

Prior and Wraysford's Wars; or Repressing, Retrieving, Recovering (and back to Repressing)

At Billy Prior's introduction in *Regeneration* it becomes immediately clear that he is suffering from PTSD. The fact that Billy is a patient at Craiglockhart, a war hospital for shell-shocked officers, already leaves little doubt about his mental condition. Prior, however, also showcases different symptoms connected to PTSD: he has nightmares, he is unable to speak without any apparent physical cause, and he does not remember what has happened to him. The greater part of the first novel of the trilogy is spent on establishing what caused Prior's breakdown, and on overcoming the trauma connected to it. While at Craiglockhart Prior's mutism quickly subsides and throughout the novel his memory gradually returns. By virtue of hypnosis the moment of his breakdown is also finally retrieved, and towards the end of *Regeneration* Prior is rendered fit for home service. The medical board does not seem to have any doubts about the validity of his re-established mental health. Service abroad is only ruled out due to his asthma. In *The Eye in the Door* "the validity of the healing process" is

tested outside the walls of Craiglockhart, and in *The Ghost Road* this is done "through the re-submergence of the 'success stories' [Prior and Owen] in the war zone" (Haider 55).

While under hypnosis Prior is able to relate the story of his breakdown to doctor Rivers. Apparently Billy broke down while shovelling the remains of two soldiers who got hit by an artillery shell into sandbags. The tipping point of his break down occurring when he discovers and picks up one of the men's eyes from underneath the duckboards of the trench and asking a fellow soldier, "what am I supposed to do with this gob-stopper" (*BS* 103). These words are the catalyst to his mutism. Because Prior has never fully experienced the traumatising situation when it occurred, but only visits it belatedly and indirectly, it is interesting to see that in his retelling he does use characteristics of trauma. One of these characteristics is found in the following excerpt: while holding the eye, Prior "could see his hand was shaking, but the shaking didn't seem to be anything to do with him" (*BS* 103). Prior's hands do not seem to be part of himself; he seemingly is dissociated from his body, and in order to escape the overwhelming experience takes on the role of observer to the event. A second characteristic of trauma is found in his final words, "what am I supposed to do with this gob-stopper" (*BS* 103). Instead of asking 'what am I supposed to do with Towers' eye', he refers to the eye as a gob-stopper and thereby distances himself from the gruesome fact that he is holding a human eye. Prior's mind thus seems unable to cope with the overwhelming experience and therefore tries to distance itself from the event. After clearing the remains of the soldiers Prior "wanted to say something casual, something that would prove he was all right, but a numbness had spread all over the lower half of his face" (*BS* 103). He apparently wanted to make a remark that would strip the event of its traumatic qualities, but although willing to, he is unable to put his experiences into words. This strongly echoes "the central dialectic of psychological trauma" as a "conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud" (Herman 1). While on his way to the clearing station Prior experiences "a sense of joy [...] of elation almost" (*BS* 103). Interestingly enough this forms one of the few moments in the trilogy where Prior is depicted as being cheerful.

Prior's physical inability to talk about the event lasts for several months after it first occurred, but quickly subsides when under the care of Rivers. A second obstacle that keeps him from talking about his experiences seems to be a mental blockade; he is unable to consciously recall what has happened to him. On top of this Prior has grown increasingly

bitter and negative, and the cheerfulness present shortly after he broke down seems to have vanished. His negative stance causes him to scorn the nurses and doctors who are trying to help him overcome his trauma, and make him unwilling to talk about his experiences to them. When finally opening up to Rivers and the hospital staff, his mental blockade persists and Prior urges Rivers to try hypnosis. This helps, and the lost memories are recovered. The nature of the event that caused Prior to break down, however, angers him and he cries out, "is that all" (*BS* 104). He somehow expected an event in which he was responsible for the deaths of two fellow soldiers; clearing up the remains of fellow soldiers was something that he had encountered repeatedly while in the frontline, and it seems strange that it should suddenly have the power to break him down. Rivers then explains: "You're thinking of breakdown as a reaction to a single traumatic event, but it's not like that. It's more a matter of ... *erosion*. Weeks and months of stress in a situation where you can't get away from it" (*BS* 105). In Rivers' opinion, Prior's experience thus was just one in a series of events which had traumatic qualities. Rather than being broken down by this single event, the 'gob-stopper experience' chipped away the final part of Prior's 'bank of courage'. Prior's other traumatic experiences are not directly discussed in the novels, but ghosts of earlier incurred traumas do seem to haunt Prior throughout the trilogy.

Although Prior knows to place his breakdown in his life's narrative after the hypnosis session, he seems unable to release himself from the enduring expressions of his trauma. Throughout *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road* he is depicted as struggling with flashback, nightmares, memory gaps and melancholia. He grows exceedingly negative and has a gloomy and depressed outlook on life. One instance in which the Western Front and the home front seem to merge is when Prior is walking towards his parents' house after dark:

> One moment he was striding confidently along and the next he was falling, sliding rather, down a steep slope into pitch-black. He lay on his back at the muddy bottom of the hole and saw the tall weeds wave against the sky. He wasn't hurt. But the breath had been knocked out of him. Gradually, his heart stopped thumping. The stars looked brighter down here, just as they did in a trench. He reached out for something to hold on to, and his groping fingers encountered a sort of ledge. He patted along it and then froze. It was a firestep. It couldn't be, but it was. Disorientated and afraid, he felt further and encountered a hole, scooped out of clay. *He was in a trench*. [...] He

> clambered out, over what he suspected was No Man's Land, and there, sure enough, were the enemy lines (*TEITD* 116-117).

Prior's unsuspecting mind is suddenly confronted with the war again. The experience does not just remind Prior of the front, but actually sets him in it for a brief moment. It also seems to symbolise how fragile the mindset of Prior, but also of other veterans, is. One moment you are walking 'confidently' through a street and the next moment you are not just reminded of the war, but set in the middle of it once again. This might be triggered by looking at the stars, but numerous other experiences could also trigger it. After climbing out of the trench Prior does not want "to admit how deeply the bizar incident had shocked him" (*TEITD* 117). He, however, is trembling and has "to hold on to the railings to steady himself" (*TEITD* 117). His confidence is completely shaken and instead of continuing his way home he now redirects his course to a pub: "He would do what other men do who come home on leave. Get drunk and forget" (*TEITD* 117). The experience seems to have shocked him in such a manner that he has to use the repressive tool of alcohol to be able to temporarily forget about it. Repressing and forgetting, however, again do not seem to be good long term strategies because a few pages later, after Prior has returned to London, he complains of "having bad headaches" ever since "his fall into the children's trench" (*TEITD* 124) thereby showing a definite setback in his mental state.

Stephen Wraysford is less easily identifiable as a traumatised individual due to the fact that he does not receive any professional help for his psychological state, and because of the absence of a clearly present physical symptom such as is the case with Prior. The exact moment of his traumatisation therefore is also harder to pinpoint. Different situations seem to have had traumatising qualities and the different experiences might also be part of his trauma. Throughout the novel, however, he shows signs of a less healthy mental condition; signs that gradually worsen as the story develops.

A definite traumatising experience for Wraysford, and possibly the experience that lies at the heart of his traumatisation, took place during the first day of the Somme. Although the reader is walked through Stephen's experiences chronologically (trauma usually resists chronological representation), Stephen showcases different characteristics of trauma throughout the day. At the end of the day when Stephen is asked by Weir to explain what has happened to him, the only thing he can utter is "I don't remember", "I don't know" (*BS* 238), phrases that strongly reflect the crisis of narrative theory as described above. Later

on in the story the first day of the Somme is also often referred to while judging the jollity of other soldiers that 'were not there that day'.

Shortly after going over the top during the first day of the Somme, Stephen is depicted as dissociating himself from his surroundings. At first he dehumanizes his fellow soldiers:

> He could see a long, wavering line of khaki, primitive dolls progressing in tense deliberate steps, going down with a silent flap of arms, replaced, falling, continuing as though walking into a gale (*BS* 226)

The men 'fighting' at his side become the uniform they are wearing or even "primitive dolls", and the gunfire they march into turns into a very strong wind. Dolls cannot die, and every doll that is blown over by the wind quickly rises again to reclaim his position in the line. Seemingly no one dies and no human beings are hurt.

Not long after turning men into dolls and gunfire into weather, Stephen also dissociates from himself:

> His feet pressed onwards gingerly over the broken ground. After twenty or thirty yards there came a feeling that he was floating above his body, that it had taken on an automatic life of its own over which he had no power. It was as though he had become detached, in a dream, from the metal air through which his flesh was walking. In this trance there was a kind of relief, something close to hilarity (*BS* 226)

All his fear subsides when detaching himself from his body, and his body seems to continue its strife automatically. Thus Stephen becomes the distant observer of his own suffering, and thereby only experiences the battle indirectly.

After dissociating from his body and his surroundings, Stephen is seen as mechanically going through different stages of the battle in a "dreamlike state" (*BS* 227). Although seeing and experiencing horrific things he does not become emotionally involved. When close to the German first line of defence, in a situation in which going on means certain death, Stephen loses track of what he has to do and makes a disoriented impression. He sits and waits, and observes what others are doing. Then without much thought he shoots a wounded man who is begging him to end his life; after which he retreats and meets up with Byrne. But before realising that he was expected to join in an attempt to get through the wire, he sees Byrne and the group of soldiers that joined Byrne perish in this attack. A few moments later Wraysford finds himself near a river and runs into it to quench his thirst

but also wonders how Byrne is going to drink with his head shot off: “would they pour water down the hole of his neck?” (*BS* 234). In a brief moment of clarity he then realises that Byrne is dead and thus is no longer in need of water. Fatigue then makes him lose his footing and the river carries him downstream together with a lot of German soldiers. He is then pulled out of the river by a British soldier and lies down in the grass. Realising that his mind is in flight, he “tries to focus on fragments of definite memory” (*BS* 235) and lets “Isabelle, the red room, his grandfather’s cottage” (*BS* 235) pass through it. Having re-established these things he is reminded of his mission and starts walking towards the German lines again, and then is knocked out by an unidentified impact. Some hours later he is found by one of Weir’s tunnelers who directs Weir to the shell hole Stephen is lying in.

When Weir finds Wraysford, the latter is able to re-establish control of his emotions. Interestingly enough it is Weir who is in need of solace and it is Stephen who provides this. Stephen takes on an almost motherly role when trying to soothe the emotionally shaken Weir. When letting his “exhausted mind slip for a moment” Stephen finds “himself go with the sound into a world in which there was only panic”. Realising this “he jerked awake, pulled himself back with an effort into the old life that could not be the same, but which might, if he believed in it continue” (*BS* 239). He must actively repress his emotions to avoid joining in the all-encompassing panic. In order to survive Stephen cannot yet let his emotional shock take control over him and therefore he needs to repress his emotions: “if he did not fight to control himself, he might never return to the reality in which he had lived” (*BS* 239). The soothing of Weir helps Stephen to re-establish control over his emotions. It seems that the comforting of Weir, like the focusing on definite fragments of memory earlier, diverts his attention from the death and chaos surrounding him to something which is actually comprehensible. Therefore it might be argued that these two instances are mental coping strategies. What happens to Stephen between the first of July 1916 and the winter of 1917 is left to the reader’s imagination. The manner in which Stephen deals with his experiences in the wake of the battle is not depicted in the novel.

Seemingly Wraysford has never had the opportunity to fully recover from the experiences he has had during that first day of the Somme, because when he is reintroduced in part four of the novel he explains that he “did not feel hardened or strengthened by what he had seen; he felt impoverished and demeaned” (*BS* 283). Colonel Gray also recognises this: “you’re tired in your mind, Wraysford. Aren’t you?” (*BS* 338). He forces Stephen to take

on a temporary staff job; later reflecting on this as "in my view you were battle weary" (*BS* 426). Before starting at his new job Stephen is given some leave. When in England, and out of harm's way, Stephen finds it exceedingly hard to assimilate to his new surroundings. It is also only then that he starts showing symptoms of PTSD. He is pestered with insomnia, flashbacks, dreams and nightmares, and his hands are described as shaking "like Michael Weir's during a bombardment" (*BS* 362). He also feels "himself overtaken by a climactic surge of feeling" (*BS* 362) and seems to be ill at ease wherever he goes. Even when returning to France early to meet with Jeanne, he does not seem to be able to find the peace of mind he was hoping for. When his leave is over his situation improves slightly up to the point of Weir's death, after which he is shattered and "he only managed to exist" (*BS* 390). Leaving his staff job behind and returning to his company again causes a slight improvement in his character. Shortly after his return, however, he finds himself stuck in the underground tunnels together with Firebrace. After being stuck for more than a week and having given up all hope of survival, Stephen is saved by a German group of diggers and learns from them that the war is over.

Through Stephen's offspring the reader briefly learns about his life after the war. Françoise, Stephen's daughter, explains: "well, it was ... difficult. He didn't speak for two years after the war'" (*BS* 494). She further clarifies that after he started speaking again, he still never spoke about the war: "from that day it was as though it hadn't happened" (*BS* 494). Stephen's life came to an end when "he was only forty-eight". It is also stated that "he never really recovered" (*BS* 494).

In view of trauma theory, Stephen thus appears to form a serious case of PTSD. His experiences during the first day of the Somme seem to lie at the heart of his condition. The immediate mental reaction to the horrors he encounters that day is flight; he dissociates from the experiences and represses any emotional involvement. Although the months after 'that day' are not featured in the novel, it seems that he has never learned to place his experiences into his life's narrative and therefore never really has recuperated from his traumatic experience. The enduring expressions of his PTSD surface when he leaves the routine life of the frontline and is on leave in England and France. But also when working behind the lines in a staff job Stephen seems unsettled and incapable of anything. This momentarily subsides when back in the frontline, but quickly returns when back in England after the war. When Stephen recovers his speech he continues to repress his experiences

and tries to go on with his life as if the war had never happened. Dying before his time he seems to never truly recover from his war experiences.

An interesting similarity between Billy Prior and Stephen Wraysford is the fact that they have already been through traumatic experiences long before the war started. Prior is depicted as being sexually and domestically abused, and Wraysford as being taken away from his grandfather and placed into an orphanage. These traumas play a decisive role throughout the novels. During and after the war an often heard explanation for breaking down in battle and not recovering afterwards was that the men suffering from this were already emotionally unstable before joining up; "the war was merely the trigger" (Wessely 282) that brought these 'flaws' to the surface. These emotionally unstable soldiers would have encountered problems even without the exposure to war. This by now refuted theory is further explained by Wessely: "if you did break down in war, but never recovered, the real cause was not the war, but either your genetic inheritance or your upbringing – the problem was you" (282). This theory, however, was cast aside after the Second World War and the Vietnam War. Both wars showed that "psychiatric casualties were no longer the fault of genes or upbringing", but rather of "the insanity of war itself" (Wessely 282). Prior and Wraysford's cases, however, seem to strengthen the initial argument on pre-war trauma and breakdown. Due to the traumatic experiences they had as children and adolescents, they already started the war in an emotionally less stable state than the general soldier. Breakdown, as well as prolonged psychological strain, during and after their service therefore seems unavoidable. Because trauma is seen as something that gradually grinds away one's personality, another take might be that the war-induced traumas forced Prior and Wraysford to re-explore their pasts, the traumas that they already carried with them and the origins of their personalities. Their war-induced trauma unsettled everything that they believed to be true about their pasts. To be able to work through their war-induced traumas they had to rebuild their life's narrative step-by-step, thus also reincorporating their earlier traumas.

Trans-generational Trauma

The First World War still plays a major part in British society. Some critics even argue that "for the British at least, the abject yet sanctified space of the Western Front stands as the physical manifestation of a still unresolved national trauma" (Scutts 921). An explanation

Birdsong seems to offer for this lasting collective trauma is that returning soldiers, such as Stephen Wraysford in *Birdsong*, often did not speak of their experiences when back home. Instead they resorted to silence. As seen in chapter one, the retelling of traumatic experiences is always problematic because the real event was only experienced belatedly. The retelling therefore is always a reconstruction of the real experience. Due to the silence of the returning soldiers, and due to the incompleteness of their memories and stories, it must have been exceedingly hard for the general public to get a truthful picture of what had happened in France. On top of that, the enormous death tolls that the war had claimed most probably caused the people at home to feel guilty and ashamed not to have shared in this suffering, and to have wilfully sent off a generation of young men to their deaths, thereby also creating an unwillingness to talk about the war and to try and understand the suffering of the soldiers with them. The national trauma that Scutts speaks of thus may stem from this silence and incapability to 'fully' comprehend what it must have been like to fight on the Western Front. The enormous amount of attention given to the occasion during the centennial anniversary of the war might indeed be interpreted as an effort to work through this national trauma, and to understand what it must have been like to participate in the war. Barker's trilogy and Faulks' novel therefore might also be interpreted as being part of the effort of transferring the Great War from the national trauma it now occupies into the domain of history.

One huge difference between *The Regeneration* trilogy and *Birdsong* is that the latter shows the effect of the Great War across generations. In the late 1970s parts in *Birdsong* the life of Elizabeth Benson, Wraysford's granddaughter, is interwoven with that of Stephen's war years. Already at Benson's introduction in the novel the parallels between the two stories become evident: "In the tunnel of the Underground, stalled in the darkness, Elizabeth Benson sighed in impatience" (*BS* 243). This fragment strongly echoes Wraysford's experiences in the underground tunnels during the war, and thereby shows that Stephen's war experiences are still, be it subtly and subconsciously, present in the lives of his descendants. After boarding the underground carriage Benson notes that "there was a madman in the carriage who began to sing old music-hall songs. 'It's a long way to Tipperary ...' He grunted and fell silent, as though an elbow had been applied under the cover of the darkness" (*BS* 243). Again an echo of the Great War reaches out to late seventies Britain, this time in the ghost of Jack Firebrace the tunneller. The 'applied elbow' here might also be

interpreted as the reluctance or inability of modern day society to come to grips with the history of their ancestors; the traumas of their predecessors still need to be worked through.

The effects of the silencing characteristics of the First World War are also found in the character of Elizabeth. At first sight, she seems rather ignorant when talking about the war with a friend, and she admits that she does not even "know when the wretched thing was" (*BS* 257). Her ignorance, however, only seems to restrict itself to the topic of World War One. That she is not completely out of touch with historical as well as cultural knowledge becomes clear when she knows to mention Albert Speer as Hitler's architect, and also seems to be able to compare Speer's building style to that of the monument to the missing of the Somme later on in the novel. It is also seen when she silently questions Stuart's comparison of the composers Ravel, Satie and Gershwin. The lacking general knowledge about the First World War is compensated with detailed knowledge about other subjects. Benson's lacking knowledge on the First World War can therefore not be attributed to an overall historical ignorance. The reason for being so uninformed about the Great War is again traceable to the silence of her ancestors on the topic.

Before Elizabeth starts actively delving into the life of her grandfather and the First World War she is depicted as leading an unhappy and solitary life that is strongly based on daily routine: "Elizabeth entered a routine so familiar that she found herself talking, smiling and behaving as though by predetermined programme" (*BS* 245). As mentioned in chapter two, a strong reliance on routine was a characteristic that was also present in frontline soldiers who were on the verge of breaking down and who were unable to continue thinking for themselves. Later Elizabeth contemplates on the reasons why she always feels ill at ease when meeting with friends in pubs, and explains that there is "something unfulfilled, something needing to be understood" (*BS* 254) inside of her. Next to that she seems to have lost touch with her family and therefore is unable to continue her own life, let alone bring new life into this world. To be able to continue her life and bring a baby into the world Elizabeth first needs to understand the omitted part of her identity and (re)connect to her family history. Because she does not know about her family history she is incomplete. There is a void, an unresolved trauma, in Elizabeth's personality that needs to be understood in order for her to carry on.

Elizabeth does not seem to stand alone in her unsatisfactory perception of life. Late seventies Britain and the whole of its community are depicted in a gloomy and almost gothic

way. People on the train are described as being "on the point of unconsciousness" (*BS* 399), and towns and cities seem in decay: "the car moved off over the glistening streets, along the front with its long dejected pier and crumbling Regency hotels" (*BS* 399), and the "gaudy surfaces" of "children's climbing games" are "sprayed with words formed from scripts known only to the sprayer" (*BS* 273). The latter fragment, of course, strongly parallels Stephen's notebooks which are also written in a language that is only understandable to the author. The children's climbing games that are dirtied with spray-paint are momentarily unusable for children, they first need to be cleaned. This seems to be a symbolic rendering of Elizabeth's trans-generational trauma. In order to have children and to move on, Elizabeth, as well as the whole of Great Britain, first need to come to grips with their family and national history. When that trauma is worked through the climbing games will again be useable.

In the 1970s part of the novel other characters than Elizabeth also seem depressed, unfulfilled and burdened down by the past. Erich the clothes designer working for Elizabeth originally comes from Austria and seems to have fled because of the growing Nazi-sentiments. He is described as chain-smoking and carrying with him "an air of compressed weariness" (*BS* 252). Elizabeth's father roams Africa and makes one bad investment after the other; her mother is homebound and also seems cut off from her past, and Bob, the translator of Wraysford's notebooks, seems more interested in ancient history than in modern life. Something seems amiss in the Britain of the late seventies. Arguably the communal trauma of the First World War is weighing down British society. Great-Britain and its inhabitants are still in search of a way to deal with the trauma of the Great War; just moving on and forgetting about it seems to have been impossible.

Another similarity between Elizabeth's story and that of Wraysford is the reaction of the people around them when they try to address the First World War and Stephen's war experiences. Where Stephen is encouraged by Jeanne to forget about his suffering, Elizabeth is encouraged to not delve into her grandfather's history. Elizabeth's friend Irene tells her that "It is morbid to dwell on it" (*BS* 257) and calls it "ancient history" (*BS* 257). The old Captain Gray also meets her query with distrust and cries out: "what do you want to know about all that for? Good heavens, it was years ago" (*BS* 397). Repression seems to be thought the best way to deal with the war. Interestingly enough the reason for Elizabeth's quest to find out more about the war and the life of her grandfather originates from the

initial repression of the war, and her sudden interest therefore seems to be born out of the need to fill in the silence that for so long had dominated the topic of the Great War. Elizabeth, however, seems unable to articulate the reasons behind her quest but instead only has "a vague idea [...] that it might explain something" (*BS* 275).

As said before, the storyline of *Birdsong* alternates between the First World War experiences of Wraysford and the late seventies life of Elizabeth, highlighting different parts of their lives and experiences, and leaving other parts to the readers' imagination. Time therefore does not follow a linear pattern, but instead jumps back and forth from one time sequence and one character to the other, putting forth the idea of the presence of the First World War in late seventies Britain. On top of that, the story does not give a full biography of the main characters and never claims to give all the facts. In addition, the war is also textually present in Elizabeth's England. While Elizabeth rides on the tube it is stated that "the train of the Central Line fitted its tube like a bullet in the barrel of a rifle" (*BS* 251), and later the cart she boards is described as "the shell of the carriage" (*BS* 251). This tendency is also seen at numerous other instances in the novel. The form of the novel thus also seems to strongly suggest a trauma reading of *Birdsong*. Due to flashbacks and nightmares traumatised patients habitually re-experience parts of their pasts up to the point where they are arguably haunted by their pasts. The past therefore is very much part of their present. The alternating storyline shows that Elizabeth's family is still haunted by Stephen's experiences during the First World War, and it might even be said that Britain is still haunted by the Great War. Elizabeth is also seen rediscovering her grandfather's life through some of his journals. By doing this she tries to fill in the void in her family history, and the void that the First World War had left in Great-Britain. Through these journals the past is, of course, not fully accessible. She, however, does succeed in finding closure to the traumatic history of her family and shows this at the very end of the novel by naming her newborn son after Jack Firebrace's son John, thereby fulfilling her grandfather's promise to Firebrace and showing that now Stephen's life is given a place in the family history she is able to continue his bloodline.

The *Regeneration* trilogy also seems to be part of the process of working through the collective trauma of the First World War. By setting the trilogy outside of the warzone Barker emphasises the fact that for many survivors war does not necessarily cease to be part of their day to day reality after a peace treaty is signed, or when they are removed from the

conflict. Because of this Barker's trilogy is still very much a war narrative although it does not show much direct conflict. It also shows how the patients construct a history of their traumatic experience for themselves. Mukherjee explains, "the goal of therapy is to convert traumatic memory into narrative memory. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as 'traumatic memory' because memory is necessarily narratable and continuous" (Mukherjee 51). Survivors thus need to construct a story around their traumatic experience. Because the experience is only accessed belatedly and indirectly, a full rendering of it is impossible. Alden writes, "our access to the past is, inevitably, mediated" (190); it is impossible to actually return to the event and re-experience it, therefore memories, stories and recreations have to serve when trying to understand the past. This is also true for the readers of the trilogy. It is impossible for readers to fully comprehend what it must have been like to be part of the First World War, because they simply were not there. A historical narrative therefore must be created to give insight into what the people were going through and to give faces to the numbers and figures of the history books. Although novels will never be able to fully recreate events and readers will never be able to fully understand what it must have been like, Barker and Faulks know to put the experiences of the soldiers into words and thereby they give the modern day reader an insight into what it must have been like to fight in the First World War and be part of the infamous battles fought then.

Conclusion

As my analysis of the novels has shown, there seems to be a connection between the concepts of trauma and mental coping strategies represented in the *Regeneration* trilogy and *Birdsong*. As expected, due to the difference in setting, *Birdsong*'s focus lies on mental coping strategies where the *Regeneration* trilogy in turn explores the field of trauma more thoroughly. Both the *Regeneration* trilogy and *Birdsong*, however, do also overlap with regard to settings, and therefore also with respect to their main point of focus; the *Regeneration* trilogy in some sections leaves Great Britain for France, and some of the characters in *Birdsong* go to England while on leave.

Different characters from the *Regeneration* trilogy and *Birdsong* employ a variety of the mental coping strategies as listed by Watson. The in the novels most commonly featured strategies mentioned by Watson are repressing of emotions, use of religion and becoming fatalistic. Two other mental coping strategies that are not described by Watson, however, also feature abundantly. Firstly, there is the use and abuse of alcohol, and secondly, the act of writing. The use and abuse of alcohol is mainly featured in *Birdsong*. Soldiers fighting in the frontline seem to apply this strategy for two reasons; on the one hand, it helps characters to find the confidence to talk about what they are going through while at the front; on the other hand, it helps characters to suppress their emotions and to forget certain experiences for a brief moment in time. Alcohol thus features as a therapeutic as well as a repressive tool. The second mental coping strategy that is present in the novels but not discussed by Watson is that of writing. Many characters from the four novels examined here keep diaries, write poetry or perform other acts of writing. At numerous occasions the process of putting experiences into words seems to have therapeutic effects on the characters applying this technique. Writing therefore is interpreted as a mental coping strategy as well as a way to work through trauma. There are, however, also characters who seem to avoid writing about 'the worst parts of the war'. Their writing therefore loses its therapeutic potentials and becomes yet another way in which feelings and emotions are repressed, and possibly also a way to escape their day-to-day reality.

The novels also seem to suggest that mental coping strategies were not applied at random; instead a certain preordained order in which they were applied exists. The first

coping strategy that soldiers applied when unable to cope with the circumstances they encountered was that of repression, and the final strategy they would resort to would be that of fatalism. This, however, does not mean that the adoption of one strategy excluded the use of other strategies; strategies seemed to be used separately as well as together. In addition the novels give the impression that the appliance of mental coping strategies mainly happened subconsciously. This seems to substantiate Wessely's claim that men possessed an exhaustible bank of courage, or, in other words, a limited bank of mental coping strategies that assisted them through these stressful periods. When that bank of mental coping strategies was used up, breakdown quickly followed.

Billy Prior and Stephen Wraysford are two of the most important characters in the novels. As seen in chapter three of this thesis, they share some interesting similarities, but also differ on a number of significant trauma-associated points. Both Wraysford and Prior, for example, are officers who actively take part on the Western Front of the First World War. Both characters seem to repress their experiences, and both are also sent home due to their mental conditions. When confronted with traumatic experiences both officers react similarly: firstly, they use euphemisms to describe what they are going through; secondly, they dissociate themselves from their bodies and their experiences, and they become witnesses to, instead of participants in the situation; and finally, they are unable to place their experiences in a chronological 'narrative', and therefore cannot consciously recall what has happened to them. Furthermore, Prior and Wraysford have already had traumatic experiences before they joined the army. This makes them prone to the argument that it was not the war that caused men to break down, but that they were already psychologically unstable before they went to war. The war only brought something to the foreground that was already there, and that likely would have also evolved without the war. Although this old-fashioned notion has long been refuted, the *Regeneration* trilogy and *Birdsong* do seem to partially substantiate this theory in the characters of Prior and Wraysford. They, however, also present trauma as a condition that destroys characters' personalities and thereby forces them to reinvent their histories and through their histories also themselves. The reason for their breakdown therefore should not be sought in the fact that they were traumatised before. Earlier incurred traumas only arise in the process of reinventing histories and personalities.

Where Prior receives professional help for his condition, Wraysford does not. Under the care of doctor Rivers, Prior improves dramatically. When discharged from the hospital his condition, however, slowly deteriorates again, and he starts re-repressing his emotions and experiences. So, although Prior knows to overcome the immediate symptoms of his traumatisation (his inability to speak and remember the incident), the enduring expressions (nightmares, depression and others) of it worsen when continuing his service. In contrast to Prior, Wraysford never stops repressing his emotions and experiences, and he is also never taught how to avoid repression. Because of the lack of professional help Stephen seems unable to place his experiences in his life's narrative, and therefore never recovers from his trauma. As is the case with Prior, Wraysford, when away from the war, suffers from the enduring expressions of his traumatisation. Even after the war he never really recovers from this. When in the frontline, however, both characters adapt to the situation, and mental as well as physical survival seem to out rule most enduring expressions of trauma. Therefore, it is also there and then that they feel most at ease.

Another important trauma-based similarity between the novels is that of trans-generational trauma. Both writers deal with this phenomenon in their own manner, and illustrate the impact of the First World War across generations. Their novels can therefore be interpreted as voices that help to relocate the First World War from the national trauma it has incorporated, and possibly still incorporates, into the field of history. Their fictional accounts give modern day readers an idea of what it must have been like to be part of the First World War and what effects wars can have on people.

The answer to the thesis question "how do trauma and mental coping strategies feature in *Regeneration* and *Birdsong,* and is there a connection between both concepts in the novels" raised in the introduction to this thesis, therefore must be that both novels are immersed in mental coping strategies and trauma theory, and a definite connection between the two is present in both texts. At some instances mental coping strategies seem to go hand in hand with characteristics of trauma, and at other moments they help to relieve the traumatised mind for brief periods of time. Mental coping strategies are thus not necessarily just applied before psychological breakdown, or before traumatic experiences which caused soldiers to break down, but instead are used prior to, during and after psychological collapse. At various instances in the novels both theories even seem to overlap. An example of this tendency is found in Prior's use of the euphemism 'gobstopper'.

Where euphemisms as such can be interpreted through the lines of mental coping strategies they can also be viewed from a trauma perspective as the starting points of the process of dissociation from the experience. This clearly shows how tightly knit the study of mental coping strategies and trauma is in the novels, and leaves little doubt to whether mental coping strategies should be taken into account when studying *Birdsong* and the *Regeneration* trilogy, and possibly other novels dealing with psychological trauma.

Faulks' *Birdsong*, like Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, forms a captivating read in the light of trauma studies. Despite the difference in setting and the different genders of the authors, no big differences in the representation of trauma and mental coping strategies are present in the novels. Therefore MacCallum-Stewart's assertion that there is a definite difference in male and female writing on the war seems to be undermined by this comparison. Yet, where MacCallum-Stewart's gender remarks do not seem applicable to the novels discussed here, her argument that certain parts of the war are being overtly represented in literature does seem relevant for both *Birdsong* and the *Regeneration* trilogy. Characters that incur trauma die while fighting in the war, or never seem able to shake off their condition and become psychological casualties of the war. Moreover, the majority of men in the novels seem to be highly sensitive characters with artistic interests and a passion for homo-social and homo-sexual bonds. Although various characters do also seem to harbour different, non-stereotypical, characteristics in their personalities, these often form background traits that have no dominant part in their personalities. Nonetheless, there are a few background characters who do seem to consist more of "stoicism, bravery and endurance" than "shellshock and protest" (MacCallum-Stewart 86). They, however, are heavily outnumbered by the characters who do not share in this. As MacCallum-Stewart noted above, this tendency could indeed lead readers to form a limited idea about life in the trenches. *Birdsong* and the *Regeneration* trilogy show little inclination of countering this. These topics, nonetheless, were a definite part of the First World War, and the stressing of these elements in literature seems to be part of the message that war is futile and knows no winners; a message which is far harder to convey when focusing on bravery and heroism.

By combining historical facts with fiction Faulks and Barker manage to interest their readership in historical events that tend to be just remembered by the name of the place where it happened. In *Regeneration* Prior states, "language ran out on you, in the end, the names were left to say it all. Mons, Loos, Ypres, the Somme. Arras." (*RG* 90). Barker and

Faulks show that it is again possible to put the experiences into language, and are able to go beyond the infamous names. This fictional rendering of the war helps to fill in the silence that for so long has dominated the field and helps today's society find closure to its traumatic past.

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