

# Coming Home from World War Two, 'In Our Time': Post-memory, History and Narrative in Melvyn Bragg's *The Soldier's Return* and *Son of War*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Melvyn Bragg, British journalist, broadcaster and writer, portrays the aftermath of World War Two on family and community in *The Soldier's Return* (1999) and *Son of War* (2001). I contend that Bragg's apparently simplistic and minimalist style approximates what Michael Rothberg (2000) terms as traumatic realism. By blending the ordinary and the domestic with the extraordinary, he manages to evoke a meaningful absence and traumatic undertones at the same time as resonating with historical 'truth'. Thus, I conclude that through the tension between an outer naivety and underlying disturbances, Bragg's post-memorial discourse achieves a public disclosure which hitherto remained, primarily, in the intimate realm of postwar family life.

**Keywords:** Demobilization, Family, Post-memory, Postwar, Traumatic Realism, World War Two.

El regreso de la Segunda Guerra Mundial 'In Our Time': post-memoria, historia y narración en *The Soldier's Return* y *Son of War* de Melvyn Bragg

## RESUMEN

Este artículo examina cómo Melvyn Bragg, periodista británico, locutor y escritor, retrata las consecuencias de la Segunda Guerra Mundial en la familia y la comunidad en *The Soldier's Return* (1999) y *Son of War* (2001). Se afirma que el estilo narrativo de Bragg se aproxima a lo que Michael Rothberg (2000) denomina como realismo traumático. La mezcla de lo ordinario y lo doméstico con lo excepcional logra evocar matices traumáticos subyacentes así como su veracidad histórica. Por lo tanto, se concluye que a través de la tensión entre una ingenuidad externa y expresiones de ansiedad, el discurso post conmemorativo de Bragg logra divulgar una historia que hasta el momento se ha mantenido en el ámbito familiar de la posguerra.

**Palabras clave:** Desmovilización, Familia, Post-memoria, Posguerra, Realismo Traumático, Segunda Guerra Mundial.

Melvyn Bragg is perhaps best known as a British T.V, Radio presenter and journalist and most notably recognised for his BBC Radio programme 'In Our Time', but he is also a prolific author of over twenty-one novels and thirteen non-fiction books. In this paper, I explore the first two novels of his fictional-autobiographical quartet, *The Soldier's Return* (1999) and *Son of War* (2001). These centre on the Richardson family, Sam, Ellen and their son Joe (Bragg's fictional alter ego), in the immediate post-war period, and interweave the painful journey of a boy's maturation with the difficulties of having a World War Two veteran as a father. In this paper I seek to show how Bragg reveals a historical human truth of how war reverberates through family and generations through the use of a hybrid form of modernism, and postmodernism hidden below a discourse of minimalist realism. I believe that by transposing Michael Rothberg's notion of traumatic realism to a critical analysis of Bragg's texts, we might better understand how the writer registers the psychic reality of authorial post-traumatic testimony.

Bragg immediately establishes a clear intertextuality with Homer in the opening scenes of *The Soldier's Return* as Sam comes home to his family in Wigton, Cumbria, after four years fighting in Burma. He portrays the soldiers on the train «on the last lap of their odyssey» (Bragg 1999:6),<sup>1</sup> and his story as «an old island story, centuries of the men going across the sea to fight, leaving the women to weave days, waiting at home» (Bragg 1999:2). Through this fictional prototype of historical truth, we might measure and judge the homecoming story of the more familiar and recent historical period of World War Two. We sense, however, that all is not well in this homecoming story, since «the boy could not truthfully remember his father» (Bragg 1999), Ellen was sometimes «glad for her independent life,» and «if [Sam] fought for any one thing it was to get back to her. And now the battles were over» (Bragg 1999). Another kind of battle, on the domestic front, is evidently about to take place. Through his portrayal of the last time Joe will share a bed with his mother, common place while the men were at war, in which he describes «the film of sweat on her brow,» how her son «held on more fiercely» and, as he rolled over, how a «sword's width» (Bragg 1999:5) «channel» (Bragg 1999) formed between them, Bragg creates a tone of unease and painful rupture set to occur on Sam's return. The traumatic turmoil caused by this enforced separation, along with the consequences of his father's war trauma, as we shall see, is all-encompassing and pervasive within his experience of growing up to be a man.

I position Bragg, born in 1939, among contemporary British post-memorial writers of World War Two, such as Michael Moorcock, Graham Swift and Ian McEwan, who seek to reconstruct «through an imaginative investment and creation» (Hirsch 1997:22) the narratives that they could not remember because they were too young, or in Marianne Hirsch's own words, «preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated» (Hirsch 1997:22). These writers, chil-

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<sup>1</sup> All further references will be to these editions and given parenthetically as *TSR* (*The soldier's Return*) and *SOW* (*Son of War*) in the text.

dren of fathers who served in WWII as combatants, feel that the war shaped their lives and their identities. They share archetypal concerns with post-generational Holocaust writers, such as unveiling family secrets and reconstructing fragmented stories and vague memories. Similarly, Bragg seeks to lay bare the turbulence festering beneath the surface of the seemingly post-war happy family and evoke his own painful memories of growing up at this time. As Thomas Childers puts it in his documentary fictional work «the last great battle was fought [...] in parlors, kitchens, and bedrooms, buried in the deepest personal privacy» (Childers 2009:3).

Natasha Alden highlights how these post-generation writers reject historical relativism at the same time as maintaining a «political and memorial function» (Alden 2014:10). They speak to a more «verifiably historically accurate historical novel» (Alden 2014). Certainly, Bragg's archival research into the history of the war in Burma and of demobilization, along with loyalty to historical detail would support this viewpoint.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, despite his concern for exploring psychic traumas and emotional reverberations of the war, he identifies himself as a realist and naturalistic writer. At first sight, this does seem somewhat contradictory and, as Paul Crossthwaite notes, «the challenge of representing the war at the end of the century turns on a profound incompatibility between realism and the [Lacanian] Real» (Crossthwaite, 2009:14). Then, how does Bragg's realist narrative observe historical verisimilitude at the same time as approximating psychic reality and the inexpressible 'real' in the Lacanian sense of the word?

Certainly, the lingering influence of modernism can be distinguished in Bragg's extensive use of avoidance tactics, and his hyper-realist, and minimalist «tip of the iceberg» technique in which 'less is more' and «plain speaking was [...] in the stylistic air» (McCloughlin 2011:149). By blending indirect discourse, and direct speech Bragg places his characters into the centre of consciousness, and thus alternates between the pragmatic exterior façade to interior thoughts. We are also given access to various characters' subjective voice, which furthers Bragg's post-memorial drive to offer new and more varied perspectives, such as Ellen's or Sam's as well as Joe's. In addition, his 'matter-of-fact' tone bound up with local dialect and the language of the time, such as «brownd off,» «have kittens,» «not a sausage» and «daft noggin» renders a naïveté and innocence to his narrative, creating not only a realistic and believable fictional world in a Northern English working class environment, but also a post-memorial evocation of an impossible return to a lost time, an irreparable rupture with the past, and an attempt to salvage memory.

Yet like many post-generational Holocaust narratives, Bragg's texts seem to lie somewhere amid realism, modernism and postmodernism. Michael Rothberg explored the juxtaposition of the everyday with the extreme in such works, placing them in «the in-between place that ties together the present and the past» (Rothberg 2000:10). Traumatic realism reworks «realism under the sign of trauma» (Rothberg 2000:118) permitting the traumatic to become more visible through the presence of mundane objects and unassimilated experience. Indeed, Rothberg's notion arises as

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<sup>2</sup> See interview with Melvyn Bragg in *Writers at Warwick Archive* (1999).

a response to classify a representation that interweaves extreme experience with the mundane, symbolically revealing the ungraspable and a Freudian 'missed encounter' with the real, echoing Hal Foster and Lacan. It embeds the psychological impact in a continuous thread of ordinariness; «trauma lies not in the extreme event itself [...] but in the familiar and the radically foreign» (Rothberg 2000:136). Thus, exploring Bragg's novels through the notion of traumatic realism allows us to identify how Bragg similarly portrays unassimilated traumatic experience, fused into the everydayness of family life.

To a certain extent Bragg's aesthetics resonate Sebald, where life itself appears as a series of traumatic encounters and daily hurt, along with historical wounds firmly embedded into the everyday. Spots of 'visceral sensations' to use Geoffrey Hartman's term, lie within the mundaneness of Bragg's realist discourse, as «moments of hyperarousal» (Hartman 1995:543), fusing both the unreachable violence of war, the sexual awakening of the young boy Joe, and a post-memorial position of ethical enquiry. This can be perceived in one particularly powerful, extended scene, which is useful to examine in order to explore how traumatic undertones evade a seemingly commonplace, but historically laden event. Mr Kettler incites Joe, in the presence of a young girl, Bella, to partake in drowning kittens in a bucket of water, echoing Sebald in its evocation of strangeness, ethical perceptions and historiographical detail (Rostan 2006:181). The scene works on several symbolic levels: as a rite of passage, a post-memorial exploration of moral boundaries, and arbitrariness in death or survival. It also serves to register the belated traumatic impact of an event which refuses to be simply located (Caruth 1995:9). I will explore here how Bragg depicts this seemingly commonplace event at that time, charging it with traumatic undertones, and furthermore, manages to establish a contemporary relationship to the event, only fully understood in retrospect.

Firstly, through Joe's complicity with Kettler in euthanizing the cats, Bragg ties the scene into a 'rite of passage' to becoming a man, with Joe «considering it a privilege to be invited to assist» (*TSR*:211). Egged on by Kettler, «mellow from the pub» (*TSR*), the young boy participates in a show of manliness in which Kettler «smiled at Joe, an amiable, man-to man smile, flicking his eyes toward Bella, rolling his eyes a little» (*TSR*:212) while he drowned the kittens. Nevertheless, by clearly indicating Joe's reservations to fully join Kettler as collaborator in this cold and heartless deed, and the boy's compassion both to Bella's feelings and the pitiless taking of life, Bragg highlights not only its moral ambiguities, as I will discuss below, but also the prospect of a new kind of post-war manhood in which Joe will form a part.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Kettler's indifference, Bella's crying «disturbed Joe»

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<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth discussion of *TSR* and *SOW* in the light of masculinity studies, see Martin, Sara. «Odysseus' Unease: The Postwar Crisis of Masculinity in Melvyn Bragg's *The Soldier's Return* and *A Son of War*.» *Odissea* 9. September (2008): 133–144. Print. Martin concludes that «the sons of WWII veterans may feel simultaneously grateful and sorry for the father's sacrifices, as Bragg no doubt feels, but they have a good reason to feel that way, as they are freer and more complete men than their parents were» (Martín, 2008:143).

(TSR:211), and as she pleaded with Kettler to stop, her «words sawed through Joe» (TSR), yet seemingly without conviction «he stayed in his post, helping Kettler» (TSR), stressing the boy's own sense of ambiguity. If only he could hold the kitten under the water like Kettler, then he would show off his manliness. However,

Joe's stomach felt queasy with excitement and dread, the sight of the soaked black kittens, the fluffy white patches somehow disappeared into the water, the fur so very thick and smooth, pasty. He glanced at Bella to laugh her away as Kettler did, but he was not successful (TSR:213).

In addition, by viewing the Freudian conception of trauma as the «very origin of consciousness and all of life itself» (Caruth 1996:104) and, as I have already mentioned, life as a continuous confrontation with traumatic episodes, the scene suggests Joe's sexual awakening, a Freudian «wake of desire» (Hartman 1995:539). In other words, it suggests a traumatic missed encounter in which the young boy experiences a shock, a «falling into the chaos of the real» (Caruth 1996:539); imbuing the sexual awakening of Joe with the undertones of violence resulting from the war. This is plainly symbolized by Bella who, so distraught by the scene, «churned the hem of her cheap print summer cotton dress and pulled it up, showing the big green knickers which made Joe hot to see and her left hand was clenched into a fist, pounding the air in front of her» (TSR:213). Bragg's imagery and the short, desperate cries of Bella to make them stop alludes to a sexual encounter in which, at the end of the scene, Bella finishes «squatting in the corner worn out, sobbing noisily, her dress wide open, dangerously strewn up her fat adolescent thighs» (TSR:215). Bragg's final closing dialogue «'Get yourself decent, Bella,' said Kettler, as he swung the knotted blanket over his shoulder, 'you clueless tart.'» (TSR) further resonates a traumatic rape scene and a depreciating show of manliness. Thus, this episode locates Joe as a sensitive boy vacillating on the verge of manhood, with an unconscious traumatic «wake of desire» (Hartman 1995:539) as he hesitantly participates in an act of violence as a rite of passage, but nevertheless tacitly coming to an understanding that being a man lies not in violence and killing, but rather in «learning to deal with one's own fears» (Martin 2008:142). On the surface, however, Bragg's discourse simply describes the seemingly mundane action, at that historical time, of drowning cats in water in order to control their over-population, thus disclosing historical truth but at the same time, invoking more traumatic resonances. Furthermore, for today's readership, sensitive to issues pertaining to animal rights and abuse, this scene undoubtedly generates a purposeful sense of unease.

Secondly, this disturbing scene seems to reflect Bragg's contemporary, post-memorial standpoint in its exploration of the fragility and arbitrariness of moral boundaries. Certainly the characterization of Kettler, portrayed as possessing an «easy manner» yet «could be nasty» (TSR:211) seems reminiscent of Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil'<sup>4</sup>. Kettler, as an ordinary, poor man, following orders,

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<sup>4</sup> See Arendt, Hannah (1963): *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. 2006th ed. Penguin Classics.

doing his job and «a publican a favour» (Joe's father) drowned the innocent kittens «all cuddliness and charm and life gone in that short time» (*TSR*:212) and then, mirroring the concentration camp perpetrators, he «chucked [the kitten] on to the pile» (*TSR*). Once again, this scene's ordinariness lies on the surface as a bucketful of euthanized kittens. Yet, as Mark McCulloh suggests in his analysis of Sebald's Austerlitz, «[...] All beings suffer. As in the case of the lost moth, forlornly clinging to a bedroom wall at Andromeda lodge, we in no way belittle the suffering of the one by acknowledging the suffering of another» (McCulloh 2003:134. Qtd in Rostan 2006:182).

Finally, Joe's rescue of one of the kittens, symbolizes a randomness of death and survival in wartime, echoing that of his own father, and an acknowledgement of the meaning of life and death. Later, in *Son of War*, the only surviving cat would embody the trauma of survival, human love and traumatic loss, but also perhaps, hope as Bella, dying of tuberculosis, finally learns that the survival of the cat was «the best of the life she was leaving» (*SOW*:196). On the surface then, the ordinariness of the drowning of the cats appears mundane, but it beholds a darker side of humanity, a state of anxiety, and articulates an unconscious knowledge reaching out to encounter with the real, a truth of loss and the trauma of survival, sexual awakening and the passage into manhood, as well as a moment of traumatic memory for Joe. This key scene figures as a negative epiphany as a memory of «what has not been or cannot be adequately experienced» (Hartman 1995:540).

Further examples abound in the novels. Mundane objects denote both the absence and the presence of the real, «evok [ing] it as a felt lack, as the starting impact of that which cannot be known immediately» (Rothberg 2000:104). The bush hat, for instance, which Sam sees a veteran wearing on his visit to Jackie, a traumatized ex-serviceman in the veterans' hospital, sparks in Sam a Proustian-like experience; «the hat itself [...] triggered a cloudburst of memories, so that, for a few moments Sam felt that he was losing his self-control. Something about the bush hat undammed him» (*TSR*:237). The hat brings to mind Ruth Kluger's image of the socks caught on the barbed wire in the concentration camp, which Rothberg employs as an example of the ordinary conjuring up the extraordinary, mediating between the everyday and the extreme. Analogous to Rothberg's analysis of Kluger's socks, the object also represents the coming after of extreme events, survival and persistence beyond the extreme (Rothberg 2000:138). Like the socks, the hat's presence in the contemporaneous time and space of Sam's world «reveals a tangled legacy of differentiation [from the Burmese front line to Wigton] from which it is impossible to extricate oneself» (Rothberg 2000:135), as well as the belatedness of traumatic experience (Caruth 1996). The hat cannot bring the reader into Sam's experience directly, but «programs readers to recognise the absence of the real» (Rothberg 2000:104).

Likewise, the presents which Sam brings back from Burma, as if he had been on holiday, of a «ruby leather satchel embossed on the back with tiny yellow elephants walking in line [...]» (*TSR*:17) for Joe, an ivory necklace for Grace, a sandalwood box, given to Sadie, «light brown hair in curlers topped by a turban of scarf [...] one stocking already half mast, pom-pom less slippers shuffled paper thin» (*TSR*:19) express a contrastive strangeness, a rare encounter with an alien culture, a fleeting

moment of affect in which two different worlds collide, and Bragg's realist description of local characters highlights this rather absurd contrast. In addition, Bragg's post-memorial narrative permits an historically knowledgeable reader to capture the underlying traumatic implications behind the elephants, employed to move heavy objects and the trainset, also given to Joe, as signifiers of the harrowing experiences of British prisoners of war during the building of the Thai-Burma railway. Nevertheless, these Burmese objects have an entirely different evocation for our post-war fictional protagonist Sam, which only *he* could possibly sense. Once again, they point towards «a necessary absence» (Rothberg 2000:104). For Sam, these items are part of his inexplicable experience, like Barthes *punctum* beyond the object; a meeting of two worlds.<sup>5</sup> To Ellen he gives a silk Sari, which Ellen throws into the air, bringing the colour and exoticness of Burma into the Wigton home. Not only do these Saris contrast with the Northern English scene, but as they were worn by seemingly more 'exotic' women in their favours to British soldiers in Burma, they hold meaning beyond the frame and are an indirect reference to an unknowable experience. These objects pull at the ordinary awareness of 'something else', as Kathleen Stewart points out in her work on *Ordinary Affects* they «pop out of the ordinary» (Stewart 2007:19). Stewart refers to such objects as «still lifes» (ibid), which like Barthes' notion of the punctum, can fill one with a «strange malaise» (ibid). The reader, however, perceives an absurd contrast, impalpable but nonetheless present of a difference between the universe of war in Burma and that of Sam's new reality in Wigton. Thus, by introducing these Burmese objects into the mundaneness of the English provincial town of Wigton and its inhabitants, Bragg imposes both traumatic and historical meaning; highlighting both the cultural and geographical abyss and the unsurmountable impasse in understanding between Sam's war and their own experience.

The narrative flashes back and forth between Wigton and Sam's war in the Burmese jungle, allowing the reader to access what Sam cannot express once home in Wigton. Bragg similarly employs traumatic realist techniques to convey the inexpressible horror of the fighting. In an episode in the midst of the Burmese jungle, Sam's fellow soldier Ian, shouted «Cha's up!» (TSR:300) invoking an image of homeliness, Englishness, familiarity and comfort; a shared cultural meaning, which renders the soldier's traumatic war experiences even more shocking. 'Cha' mediates between the extreme and the everyday, the «familiar and the radically foreign» (Rothberg 2000:134). Furthermore, the scene following the soldier's tea drinking describes the slaughter of a group of children, captured by the Japanese who had «tied them to trees with barbed wire and then bayoneted them to death» (Rothberg 2000). Bragg juxtaposes this harrowing episode, in which Sam understood «what it was to go mad, to lose your mind» (TSR:303), with the peaceful tranquillity portrayed at the beginning of Part Four of the novel as Sam, home in Wigton and having «a quiet time to himself before the morning shift» (TSR:307), «sipped the hot tea silently» (TSR), strengthening the perception of connectedness yet absurd divergence between Sam's recent war experience and his new situation at home.

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<sup>5</sup> See Barthes, Roland (1981): *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang.

To conclude, through the absence of words, the «negative space» (McCloughlin 2011:153), economy of expression and a contemporary brand of realism invoking traumatic undercurrents, Bragg's post-memorial recreation emerges from within the family novel, allowing us to see the effects of war as a historical traumatizing force within the family. It permits a new understanding of an era that goes beyond encyclopaedic fact to a more human truth. This reworking of realism into a narrative of banal and familiar events makes more salient the undertones of war and, furthermore, places historical trauma firmly into a continuous traumatizing experience of life itself as well as into the everydayness of survival.

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