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"Prefer not, eh?": Re-Scribing the Lives of the Great War Poets in Contemporary British Historical Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Although the First World War has become history by now, the memory of the war continues to be repeatedly fictionalised: retrospectively inspired narratives are often regarded as more genuine and far-reaching than historical or documentary accounts in their rendition of the past. Yet, memory is creatively selective, reflecting a highly-conflicted process of sifting and discerning what should be remembered, neglected or amplified from the stream of war experience. In his book about Pat Barker, Mark Rawlinson argues that "historical fiction has been transformed in the post-war period by the way writers have exploited the porous and unstable demarcation between fiction and no fiction, stories and history" (14). Jill Dawson's *The Great Lover* (2009), Geoff Akers's *Beating for the Light: The Story of Isaac Rosenberg* (2006) and Robert Edric's *In Zodiac Light* (2008) have not become best sellers like Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy; yet, they too represent the predominant commemorative drift in contemporary British fiction about the Great War. Without doubt, these three authors have followed in Barker's steps in their purpose of holding a mirror to real people and real events in the past and of deciphering the deleted text of 'the war to end all wars.' However, while Barker chose to write about the often-anthologised Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, Dawson, Akers and Edric base their narratives on the writings, and lives, of Rupert Brooke, Isaac Rosenberg and Ivor Gurney respectively.

My discussion of these three novels will explore the various ways in which the past can be accessed and interpreted from the present and represented in fiction. The authors' decisions as to what historical instances to unravel do not just reveal the relation that contemporary British fiction entertains with the Great War and with history, but also how the past erupts in the present to interrogate it. Taking three salient features of Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction" (1988)—intertextuality, parody and paratextuality—as my theoretical points of departure, I will explore the dominant frameworks and cultural conditions (that is the propagation of either patriotic or protest readings) within which the Great War has been

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narrated in the novels and the new approaches, opportunities and ethical implications of using historical and literary sources to re-scribe a previously non-existent version of the lives of the iconic Great War Poets.

Keywords: British war poets; First World War; historiographic metafiction; contemporary British historical fiction

1. Introduction

With the death of Claude Stanley Choules, the last known veteran of the First World War, on the 5th May 2011 in Perth, Australia, the age of the witnesses of the Great War, seemed to have given way to the era of the *war scriveners*. The passing of those who had, in Joan Scott's words, "the authority of experience" (1991: 780), not only marked the end of memory and the beginning of history (Kurschinski et al., 2015: 1), but essentially placed the burden of writing about the Great War on either historians or novelists. Many of the *war scriveners* have no personal connection to the war, yet they have experienced (and continue to experience) its lasting cultural and historical impact. I use the term "scrivener" in allusion to Bartleby, the enigmatic protagonist of Melville's novella. Bartleby, "[the] scribe who has stopped writing" (Agamben, 1999: 253), functions as an autobiographical reflection of the author's struggle with writer's block and, in a stricter sense, as a metaphor of the failure of words to communicate meaning, of the unbridgeable gap between language and reality.[1] The phrase "I would prefer not to" hints both at the possibility of writing and of remaining silent. This ambiguity towards the possibility of translating reality into words acquires particular urgency in the context of war representation. Those who have attempted to represent the Great War have been placed in a similar representational dilemma and felt, like Melville's copyist, a mistrust in language as the adequate expression of the war's horrific essence.

In *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (2011), Kate McLoughlin argues that "the representation of war is inherently anxiogenic" precisely because "even if it resists representation, conflict demands it" (6).[2] While Melville's Bartleby remains silent or bears witness only through his baffling passivity, war scriveners cannot stop telling war stories. Yet, because of the temporal and physical distance of the war, the peculiarities of memory and the interference of what Lyotard calls "metanarratives," both historical and fictional writers are caught in a continuous struggle to accommodate the experience of the Great War somewhere between the dominant frameworks and cultural conditions within which the war experience has been narrated and their present experience. These "metanarratives," or "grand narratives," of the Great War function as rigid and fossilised accounts of the conflict, frequently oscillating between either 'patriotic' or 'protest' readings, aimed at encompassing and explaining individual and diverse war stories within a totalizing—and legitimising—framework.[3]

The anxiety about the adequacy and appropriateness of language to represent the Great War points to two questions that are essential when scriveners enter the past: the question of "authenticity" (McLoughlin, 2011: 1219) and the ethical issue implicit in the call. Authenticity emerges as an imperative for war writing. Yet, even if historians rely

on *history***,** memoirs and autobiographies to recuperate the actual experience, there is always a struggle about the meaning of "what really happened," and about the meaning of memory itself.

The second "anxiogenic" issue in connection to war representation (McLoughlin, 2011: 6) is the ethics of writing about violence and death. The ethical issues involved in the representation of war are multifaceted, sometimes standing on the nebulous path between idealisation and disillusionment, sometimes oscillating between the need not to invade individual privacy and the urge to explore aspects of people's traumatic experiences that might be of interest to the readership. Being allowed to somehow 'fill in' the gaps in their reconstruction of the Great War, historical and fictional writers believe they have the duty to try to be as 'fair' as possible to it. Yet, they do not have any certainty in their commitment. The truth is not given as a whole; it is to be achieved in fragments, when possible. The contingency of the war experience robs scriveners inexorably of the assurance of veracity they are inclined to project on readers.

Due to this concern about the authenticity and ethics of war writings—and to some scepticism towards the monolithic authority of metanarratives—the understanding of the Great War in terms of a universal consensus on either 'patriotic' or 'protest' interpretations of the conflict, has given way to the need to stress "the role of ordinary people in making their own history" (Burke, 2001: 20). The inclusion of multiple and varying voices in the reconstruction of the past, "is not, or should not be," in Lynd's words, a "mere description of hitherto invisible poor and oppressed people: it should challenge mainstream versions of the past" (XI). This idea of "history from below" or of "people's history" has allowed for the development of new interpretative frameworks and for the publication of many war narratives that are not just history and not just memory, but stories that attempt a departure from both. In this context, literature represents, in Graham Galer's words, "a valid means, perhaps even more than history, of approaching the 'truth' of the past" (2008: 30). Unlike the purely documentary or historical texts, fiction gains power through its aesthetic qualities, providing a particular account of the truth, one that grants access to the experience of others, without claiming it to be true or misleading readers into believing in an arbitrary historical truth.

However, the recognition that the representation of the past involves the convergence of literature and history as narrative forms has problematised the understanding of the Great War.[4] Since the 1990s, the most prominent and enduring subgenre of Great War fiction has been the historical novel which, from the hand of writers like Pat Barker and Sebastian Faulks, has not only "unshackled itself from its earlier image as a somehow lowbrow cousin to serious writing" (Bradford, 2008: 83-84) but has triggered a series of enlightening and appealing re-readings of the conflict.[5] This persistent hold of the Great War subject on contemporary literature, which some scholars call "the second 'war-books boom'" (Ann-Marie Einhaus, 2013: 13), has also raised a more reflective awareness of the boundaries between history and literature and of how the Great War is represented today.[6] Such representations, subjective and unavoidable as they are, shape our contemporary understanding and response to the events.

The focus of my discussion is the historical fiction written by Jill Dawson (*The Great Lover*, 2009), Geoff Akers (*Beating for the Light: The Story of Isaac Rosenberg*, 2006) and Robert Edric (*In Zodiac Light*, 2008). Although these three authors have not reached

the popularity of Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, they too have fictionalised the memory of the Great War by producing retrospectively inspired narratives. In fact, they share a strong connection in terms of this overlap between the fictional world of imagination and the actual world of history. Not only do they provide valuable insights into the understanding of one of the most devastating and transformative conflicts of the twentieth century, they also rely on what Barbara Korte calls "sedimented images of the Great War" (2001: 122)—poems, memoirs, novels, films and historical evidence—and turn to real people and real events to craft their stories.

While Barker chose to write about the often-anthologised Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, Dawson, Akers, and Edric base their narratives on the writings, and lives, of Rupert Brooke, Isaac Rosenberg and Ivor Gurney respectively. The novels cover the war chronologically: Dawson creates a picture of Brooke's pre-war life in Grantchester, Akers follows Rosenberg to the battlefields of France and Edric deals with Gurney's traumatic wounds after the conflict. Despite the different temporal and geographical settings, the authors under study address the dual process of fiction being read as history and of history being read as fiction and, at the same time, the "anxiogenic issues" mentioned above, that is to say, the authenticity and ethics of 'appropriating' the Great War for the purpose of representing it.

This paper asks in what ways, and using what strategies, Dawson, Akers and Edric are able to establish representational spaces for approaching and reconsidering the lives of the poets Rupert Brooke, Isaac Rosenberg and Ivor Gurney in the context of Great War. My contention is that the three novels can be read in the light of what Linda Hutcheon calls 'historiographic metafiction' (1988). Hutcheon argues that the tension between the 'fictitious' and the 'realistic' or 'historical' is typically characteristic of postmodernist novels, "which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon, 2004: 5). The novels by Dawson, Akers and Edric are at the centre of this tension because they are both history and fiction, and because, in Hutcheon's words, "to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (Hutcheon, 2004: 110).

My critical engagement with Hutcheon's theory is grounded in the way the three authors position themselves in relation to the 'protest' and 'heroic' narratives within which the Great War has been narrated, and in their use (and abuse) of historical and literary sources as intertextual effects to re-scribe a previously non-existent version of the poets' lives. Therefore, I will attempt to analyse Dawson, Akers and Edric's novels in the light of three outstanding features of Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction: intertextuality, parody and paratextuality.

Overall, I contend that, by not treating the Great War as unrepresentable, the texts under study constructively manage the anxiety involved in war writing and allow for their own re-imagining and interpretation of the conflict and of the people involved in it to be a part of history. These texts go beyond the limits of the documentary or the historical to ethically engage with the issue of how these three Great War Poets can be accessed and interpreted from the present, making choices as to what instances to highlight and what interpretation to place upon them and uncovering new stances or perceptions that might otherwise go unnoticed. The historiographic metafictional quality of the three novels

might prove to be liberating for the writers as they can verbalise, in Hutcheon's words, "smaller and multiple narratives which seek no universalizing stabilization or legitimation" (2002: 24).

2. Facts, Fictions and Myths

While disappointment and disillusion set the criteria for what constituted war literature immediately after the Great War, the enormous bulk of propagandistic literature written during the war years cannot be ignored. These 'patriotic' grand narratives aimed at endorsing the idea of war as adventure and noble sacrifice, but also employed a manly rhetoric of character and heroic transcendence, with its ideals and eloquence, as a way of encouraging allegiance both of soldiers and civilians while the conflict lasted.[7] No doubt, however, that the main motivation for the endorsement of these propagandistic efforts was patriotic fervour, strengthened by the admiration for the literature written by young poets like Rupert Brooke or Julian Grenfell. Rupert Brooke's "War Sonnets"—particularly "The Soldier" and "The Dead"—appealed to society in general, despite political and social differences. As Tylee suggests, Brooke's early death in Greece at the beginning of the Great War paved the way for "his idealisation as both mythical Greek hero and national Christian martyr" (1990: 78) and for the creation of "the genre of the idealised and, to an extent, untouchable national soldier-poet" whose success expressed "the glamour of war for the War Generation, summed up in the imperialist religion of self-sacrifice 'For God, King and Country'" (1990: 77). The obituary published in *The Times* by Winston Churchill a few days after Brooke's death already started to press the ideal of the hero, as Miller writes, "transcendent in life and in death through his ability to 'do justice to the nobility of our youth in arms' by expressing their 'thoughts of self-surrender'" (2010: 143). The myth played on the image of Brooke as a 'sanctified figure' (Miller, 2010: 144), turning him into the most romanticised of the early soldier poets and the ultimate archetype of the 'patriotic' narratives.

The 'protest' narratives that came when the war ended, on the other hand, attempted to portray life in the trenches without any trace of patriotic sentiment, casting aside the exciting images of war that propaganda aroused and emphasising the disappointment and isolation that many soldiers experienced. Cynicism and anger inexorably replaced the jingoism of propagandistic literature. Moreover, the clear gap between past and present, between combatant and civilian, between the older generations and the youth that fought the war, reopened the debate around the representation of war, which now seemed to revolve around the ethos of Owen's *Dulce Et Decorum Est* and "the pity of War" (Preface IX).

The literature of 'protest' came to destabilise the dominant heroic discourse and operated as a counter-text that took many forms, including private letters, journalistic accounts, plays, diaries, memoirs, novels, paintings and films.[8] However, the contention that the writers spoke directly from the trenches, directly from the experience itself owes much to the poetry written by the trench poets, among them Richard Aldington, Edmund Blunden, Charles Sorley, Ivor Gurney, Edward Thomas, Herbert Read, Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen.

Unlike the other more acclaimed poets who were officers, Ivor Gurney and Isaac Rosenberg were enlisted soldiers, with worse food, worse conditions and worse pay. These much greater deprivations were compelling factors in their lives in the trenches and in their point of view as writers. Ivor Gurney's wartime poems were published in two collections, *Severn and the Somme* (1917) and *War's Embers* (1919). A selection of Gurney's later work, written after he got mentally ill, was edited by Blunden and published as *Poems* in 1954. He survived the war, but a physical, mental and emotional crisis ended in his attempted suicide in 1918. In 1922, he was sent to the City of London mental hospital where he died in 1937.[9] The fact that Rosenberg was bullied because of his Jewishness during the three years he was at the front did not alter his decision to pursue poetry or his strong grip on reality. He recorded everything he saw and sent poems off to journals. He died in the battle of Arras on 1 April 1918, yet his collected poems, together with some prose pieces and extracts from his letters were not published until 1937.[8] Both Rosenberg and Gurney's depictions of war invariably include mud, gas, rats, decaying corpses and shell shock, which have become embodiments for the 'protest' narratives of the Great War.[10]

3. Contemporary British War Fiction as Historiographic Metafiction

While the flood of war literature published during and immediately after the Great War found it difficult to rise above either the 'patriotic' or the 'protest' narratives, contemporary war fiction entertains a different relation with the past, counteracting one-dimensional readings and simplifications and constituting the arena for conflicting views and claims. In other words, the novels by Dawson, Akers and Edric demonstrate that stories outside the hegemony of the grand narratives of the Great War do exist, and also that 'patriotic' and 'protest' readings of the conflict cannot be described as entirely oppositional, as they tend to transgress their representational borders to converge and evoke similar, or even overlapping, responses to the conflict.

The three novels open a dialogue between the past and the present, based on the idea that the Great War cannot be objectively represented, that it can only be filtered through the narrative strategies, imagination and ideologies of the writers. Dawson, Akers and Edric only conceive the past in an indirect, subjective and selective manner which involves a dialogue with history in order to build a new historical understanding. However, that the three novels retain, at their core, an element of subjective judgement does not mean that the grand narratives are not powerful or that their position of dominance is not sustained. Because of having to face absent memories within the historical past they were researching, Dawson, Akers and Edric have been exposed to the mandates of what Ricoeur calls "forms of the manipulation or instrumentalization of memory" (2004: 69), as current politics and centenary commemorations often aim at turning the Great War experience into "a usable past" (Kurschinski et al., 2015: 5).[11]

From a historiographic point of view, however, the most notable aspect of the three novels is that they sit uncomfortably with the grand narratives of the Great War. This 'uneasiness' is associated with at least three discernible features that recur in the novels under study. Firstly, there is a heavy reliance on intertextuality. As Hutcheon suggests, "[the past] can only be known from its texts, its traces" (1989: 4). For readers trying to

understand the Great War, access to the past is inevitably textual; thus, past recreations like those of Dawson, Akers and Edric are almost necessarily intertextual and should be interpreted in the light of the war poets' textual artefacts by means of quotations, allusions or pastiche. Intertextuality allows the three authors both to destabilise the meaning conveyed in their texts and to expose the male-dominant discourse of the Great War era.[12]

Secondly, the novels utilise parody as an essential constitutive element of their structure. On a literal level, parody involves the application of a series of downplaying techniques (jokes, satire, mockery and sarcasm) to imitate and ridicule an original work, its subject, author, or style. In historiographic metafiction, parody works in a subtler way to guarantee that the literary and documentary texts that are referred to by the novels are critically reread and reassessed, allowing for the possibility of seeing these texts, their authors and ideology in a different light. In this regard, Linda Hutcheon affirms that "parody is not to destroy the past; in fact, to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it" (1989: 6). The utilisation of parody in the novels involves the 'deconstruction' of historical characters and events by telling the yet silent stories that have been excluded from the dominant discourse of the soldier poets and by including a growing range of people and social groups as historical agents (particularly women, workers and civilians). This way, Dawson, Akers and Edric not only manage to fit these characters and stories into the needs of the present time but to subvert "history's privileged status as the purveyor of truth" (Hutcheon, 1989: 10).

Thirdly, the novels incorporate external documents or paratexts. Hutcheon claims that in the postmodern novel, paratextuality is characterized by the use of "footnotes, epigraphs, prefaces, and epilogues; sometimes they are parachuted directly into the fictive discourse" (2002: 88). The three authors under study make use of several paratextual elements: photographs of the war poets, poems, preludes, authors' notes, among others, which seem to disrupt the linear narrative—that is, the readers' attempt to create "a coherent totalising fictive narrative" (Hutcheon, 2002: 81). Paratexts are not part of a main narrative, in fact they occupy an intermediary position between the reader and the text, but pave the way for a certain mode of reading and interpreting as they provide readers with a 'procedure' or a 'system of rules' on how to do it.

By incorporating intertext, parody and paratext of literary and historical or documentary writing into the novels, Dawson, Akers and Edric highlight what Hutcheon calls the "doubled narrative of the past in the present" (2002: 80), a duality that is essential to the understanding of the lives of the Great War poets and of the Great War in its ever-present traumatic impact.

3.1. Disputing the Myth of Rupert Brooke as National Hero

Although Jill Dawson seems to be aware of the significance of the Brookian myth within popular culture, she appears to endorse some historians' view that it "was essentially sentimental and false" (Jones, 2015: xi) and that it failed to grasp the true Brooke. In claiming that "each of the biographies [she has read] was different depending on the skill and subjectivity of the writer" and that "[she does not] believe in the idea of a definitive self" (Dawson qtd in Pellegrino, "Dead Poet's Society"), she supports Hutcheon's contention that meaning does not lie solely in historical facts, but rather in the way in

which historical events have been represented (2004: 122). Dawson strives to find the "truth about Rupert Brooke" (Scutts, "The True Story of Rupert Brooke"), to "rescue [him] from that myth-making but also trying to include the myth" (Kean, "Battle of the Heart").[13]

Set from 1909 until 1914, *The Great Lover* (2009) depicts the most turbulent of Rupert Brooke's twenty-seven years, including his stay as a student at the Orchard, a boarding house outside Cambridge, the death of his father and his experience as a schoolmaster at Rugby School, the tours advocating for workers' rights and his trip to the South Seas via Canada and the United States. Dawson essentially focuses on Brooke's chaotic life of sexual confusion, nervous breakdowns and unsuccessful relationships with both men and women. Among these relationships is a particularly short-lived but sweet affair with the fictional young maid Nell Golightly. Dawson relies on a variety of interdisciplinary sources and intertexts—"many of Rupert's actual letters and phrases from his own writings, and […] first-hand accounts and recorded words of others" (Dawson, 2009: 303)—to simultaneously reinforce and challenge the authority of the poet's eyewitness perspective into her retrospective narrative. Yet, the character of Nell is entirely imagined and, as Frances Spalding claims, "is threaded into the story in a way that enhances the reader's understanding of Brooke's dilemmas" ("The Great Lover").

The fictional creation of Nell Golightly though, is not the only element *in The Great Lover* that clearly operates as a parody of the hazy, romantic myth enveloping the life of the poet: Fact and fiction are set against each other dialogically from the very beginning. To the fictional letter written by Brooke's alleged Tahitian daughter, the elderly Arlice Rapoto, to Nell Golightly (Dawson, 2009: 1-2), Dawson opposes the original obituary published by Winston Churchill in *The Times* (2009: 3-4). The writer seems to want her readers to know that she will escape the imposition of the conventional patriotic-heroic reading—or, to put it another way—the she will not be so interested in what happened in the past, but in how the past has been textually mediated in the present. Dawson is aware that the disappearance of the collective memory of the Great War makes readers increasingly reliant on history's textuality. For her, this textual dependence seems to be an opportunity rather than a limitation.

In reply to Arlice Rapoto's request about finding her "father's living voice" (Dawson, 2009: 10), Nell expresses her distrust in biographies and newspapers, "a biography is written by a person and a person does not always understand another as well as they might think" (Dawson, 2009: 8), and suggests that the truth about Brooke is much more interesting than the biographical myths that have followed him: "[biographies] set too much store by facts and not enough about feelings" and "they spend so much time going on about the person's death" (Dawson, 2009: 8). By foregrounding the metafictional over the biographical nature of her narrative, Dawson self-consciously reminds readers that while events like Brooke's death did take place in the past, "we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning" in order to render them meaningful (Hutcheon, 2004: 97).

That is the reason why Dawson ignores Brooke's enlistment in the Royal Navy and his death on a troopship bound for Gallipoli, the events that led to his immortalisation as national hero in 1915.[14] Instead, she 'self-reflectively' chooses to fictionalise the poet's pre-war years, reliving his sedentary lifestyle at the Orchard, "bathing every evening,

breakfast on the lawn or on his bedroom, young men and women always calling up to the window or throwing a pebble to wake him; and a pencil and a book in his hand" (Dawson, 2009: 79-80). Whilst the setting seems idyllic—Brooke himself is made to describe the Grantchester vicarage as "Arcadia" (28)—the social and political turmoil of pre-war England is brewing "in the discussions of female suffrage, Fabianism, fighting and artistic freedom" (Harvey, "Beyond the Myth").

Dawson overlooks the supposed reliability of Brooke's 'heroic' grand narrative and focuses on his life in pre-war Cambridgeshire probably to disrupt this depiction of the Edwardian world as a *belle époque* and emphasise the continuities between the pre-war tensions and the war itself. To do so, she recreates Brooke's acquaintance with a host of notable Edwardian and Georgian figures (Augustus John, Edward Marsh) and with the culturally and politically-minded Bloomsbury group, who stand on the periphery of the action, but who embody pacifist ideas and certain themes of their later humanistic and aesthetic response to the Great War.[15] As Laura Barrett suggests, in this merging of history and fiction "reality, truth, and finally history are determined by [the author's] perspective" (2000: 802).

The same applies to the author's rendition of Brooke. The heroic, god-like portrait of "the handsomest young man in England," as Yeats called him, is then cast aside by a more grounded, quotidian depiction. Brooke's provocative comments and spicy hilarity, his Fabian pacifism—see, for instance, the poet's opinion of English government and society (Dawson, 2009: 151)—and his longing for a more democratic approach to the arts seem to dispute the received perception of the poet as an ardent patriot and reveal a more complex and intelligent figure than is often supposed. Dawson tends to imply that perhaps Brooke would have had a different reaction to the war had he survived to see how the conflict progressed and society's attitudes changed.

Apart from intertextuality, which the author uses to build on the authority of previous war writing and to challenge the traditionally authoritative male-dominant perspective, Dawson employs parody in her depiction of Brooke:

> Of course I made Rupert up, too, and he is 'my' Rupert Brooke, a figure from my imagination, fused from his poetry, his letters, his travel writings and essays, photographs, guesswork, the things I know about his life blended with my own dreams of him, and impressions. (2009: 303)

According to Hutcheon, parody works through "a double process of installing and ironizing, [it] signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (Hutcheon, 2002: 89). By bringing to the fore the poet's 'alleged' homosexuality, his mental breakdown at Lulworth in 1913 and by lending credibility to the South Seas period and to the romance with Taatamata, with whom he was reputed to have a daughter, Dawson turns the spotlight on the duality between Brooke's historical agency as public persona and his problematically entwined private self. Through its ironic overtones and undertones, parody allows Dawson both to subvert and to preserve the character of Brooke, favouring "a representation of Brooke that is rounded, human and humane" (Harvey, "Beyond the myth").

This decision to depict Brooke as a human being, rather than as "the super patriot of 1914" (Jones, 2015: 2), is further reinforced by the view that the poet was a "reluctant bisexual" (Kean, "Battle of the Heart"). From an original letter written to Lytton Strachey, providing minute detail about the episode in which he lost his virginity with his school friend Denham Russell-SmitH, Dawson 'presupposes' that Brooke preferred women to men: "[Denham] was lustful, immoral, affectionate and delightful… But I was never in the slightest degree in love with him" (Dawson, 2009: 88). In fact, the writer suggests that when she read the letter "[she] felt [she] could take [her] lead from that and show [Brooke's] feelings torn between the idealist women he [could not] have and the motherly one he [could]" (Dawson qtd in Kean, "Battle of the Heart"). By parodying the current interest in Brooke's homosexuality, the novel problematises the poet's gender identity and leaves it in ambiguity. Dawson imitates Brooke's narrative voice and adopts it for her own purpose, which in this case is to suggest that Brooke was a "closet heterosexual" (Kean, "Battle of the Heart").

Moreover, the fact that the novel is entitled "the great lover" might lead readers to assume it was inspired by the poem of the same name, or by the multiple stories of Brooke's homosexual and heterosexual entanglements, but in fact Dawson's initial inspiration came from a paratextual element mentioned in the "Acknowledgements" section: "a postcard of the maids who worked [at the Orchard House] in Rupert Brooke's time" (2009: 303), which Dawson bought while on a visit there. In effect, the postcard featured two of the maids; one of them evolved into Nell in Dawson's imagination. The text of the poem is also included at the end of the novel as a paratextual addition to draw an ultimate parallel between the real and the fictional Brooke (Dawson, 2009: 299). Brooke's emphasis on the life drive in the poem mirrors the spirit of the novel and works to offset death, or better said, to prematurely mitigate the effect that the Great War would have on the lives of people.

However, one of the most interesting ways to challenge the monologic discourse of history and open it to multivocality is through the narrative perspective of the novel which is interwoven by the stories told by the seventeen-year-old working-class Nell Golightly and the young poet himself. The narrative of the novel takes a form which can be put in opposition to the linearity of history as the two narrators include deviations, historical material and reported stories of other people embedded in their stories. This way, Dawson attempts to debunk the mythical cult of Brooke in favour of a more realistic version of his experiences. Readers are not only left with Brooke's first-person account; the poet and his circle of friends and acquaintances are also described by the "good" and "sensible" Nell, who is presented as a "well brought up and well-schooled" girl, "blessed with a few more Brains than most" (Dawson, 2009: 13). As an orphan from the Fens, who takes the job as a maid to support her younger siblings after their apiarist father dies, Nell has the ability "to face, very easily, the ugly facts of things" (Dawson, 2009: 14). For readers, Nell's storytelling becomes more trustworthy than the facts themselves, leaving the distinction between fact and fiction uncertain.

This double narrative point of view also gives readers two very different perspectives on the events and a clear portrayal of two strikingly different sensibilities and contrasting worlds. Through Nell's voice, Dawson portrays the rigidly fixed class system in Edwardian times and how pitilessly the working classes were exploited to provide for the

leisure and the education of the privileged. Nell’s narrative interrupting that of Brooke’s makes dialogism and fragmentation possible in the novel because she brings different interpretations to the events, exposing the limits of history written only from the perspective of men.

It should also be noted that most of Dawson’s fictionalised passages have their basis in historical fact and the author includes an extensive paratextual bibliography at the back of the novel to show readers where her ideas came from. By placing these paratextual “historical markers” to purposely install and destabilise such structures as causal connection, narrative continuity, and most importantly, opening and closure, Dawson acknowledges that she has participated in the challenging work of re-scribing the life of Brooke, and implies that the confrontation of various war narratives, mythical or historical, is part of the process of memory re-construction.

3.2. Re-assessing Isaac Rosenberg’s ‘Protest’ Narrative

Compared to the other two writers analysed here, Geoff Akers is perhaps the most loyal to the ‘protest’ narratives as he keeps most of the tropes and themes inherited from the canonical war writers. In doing so, he tends to contradict the views of more recent historians and literary critics who find themselves against what Douglas Jerrold regards as “this obsession of futility” (1930: 18) in favour of re-establishing historical truth, of restoring the authenticity of facts and documentary writings in the face of myth.[16] Yet, if readers look closely, they will realize that Akers’ reliance on the well-known also entails its imaginative rereading, as he uses the explicit power of fiction to weave new thoughts into the ‘protest’ narrative and somehow ruptures it from within.

Beating for Light (2006) follows Isaac Rosenberg, one of the less popular, yet more thought-provoking poets of the First World War, through the whole of his short-termed life. Starting from Rosenberg’s impoverished childhood in the filthy streets of a Jewish ghetto in London’s East End, Akers revisits his brief schooling and work as an engraver's apprentice, as well as his funded attendance to Slade Art School, an opportunity “he deeply yearned for” but which “had eluded him” in the past (Akers, 2006: 58-59). Readers are then taken to South Africa, where Rosenberg travels in 1913 to visit his sister, improve his poor health and make a living as a portrait painter: He had been eager “to escape London’s claustrophobic atmosphere and bitter disappointments—its cold winds and unrelenting poverty” (108).

The second part of the novel starts with Rosenberg’s enlistment as a private soldier in the Kings Own Royal Lancasters. Although the poet detests war and the idea of killing, he is unable to find work elsewhere: “Army pay is at least… regular” (133). From this point onwards Akers “return(s) us,” in Sharon Ouditt’s words, “to familiar terrain” (301-02): The author gives a glimpse into “the winding, muddy trenches” (204), “the petroleum-tainted tea” (193) “the stench of rotting flesh and the bloated flies and rats” (11), and “the crass incompetence of politicians and generals, as well as their indifference to loss of life” (259). The novel reveals shell-shocked Rosenberg’s final moments on the morning of 1st April 1918 during the German spring offensive: “Isaac knew very well what would happen and welcomed the prospect. Living was a burden he no longer felt able to endure” (301-02). The suggestion that the poet loses an internal battle for survival

reinforces what Akers earlier describes as "[Rosenberg's] self-conceived role as victim" (56).

Although Akers replays the most significant mythical motifs of the 'protest' narrative, he also departs from them in several ways. The writer's preoccupation to go beyond the documentary and "get inside Rosenberg's mind" (Akers, "Beating for Light:" 2009) denotes an interest both in learning about the poet from the inside out, and in making readers look at him from a different angle. The writer therefore relies on excerpts from Rosenberg's poetry, diaries and letters, which act as paratextual notes at the beginning of each chapter to, as David Herman suggests, "afford resources for interpretation, allowing readers to channel and delimit their inferential activities by situating texts within generic (or TEXT-TYPE) categories, historical epochs, authors' oeuvres, sociopolitical controversies, and so on" (2009: 190). Akers utilises paratext to guide readers chronologically through Rosenberg's emotional and physical journey to war and to turn them, in Hutcheon's words, "into […] aware collaborator[s], not […] passive consumer[s]" (2002: 84-85).

There is also the parodic recreation of real-life friends' opinions of the poet, for instance those of the Whitechapel writer Joseph Leftwich, who would later become one of Isaac's closest pals: "[Rosenberg] seems to be hardly capable of friendship. He is very self-absorbed and there is no lightness in him. […] Yet he talks interestingly of poetry" (Akers, 2009: 46). As in Dawson's novel, parody enables Akers to interrogate the discourse of traditional history, on the one hand, and it also offers new grounds for the writer to highlight 'hidden' aspects of Rosenberg's personality, revealing once more that there is no absolute truth or objectivity in the representation of the past.

Akers also adds abundant intertext that tends to illuminate the poet's self-restrained and introverted personality: some epistolary exchanges about poetry between Rosenberg and his distant, never-satisfied patron, Edward Marsh (2009: 5-14)—ironically, Marsh is also a recurring presence in Dawson's novel—and some fictional re-imaginings of the poet's constant "stuttering and hesitations" (59) and of his varied and unsuccessful attempts to gain the love of Sonia Cohen (58-62). This combination of more obvious and subtler intertext simultaneously honours and complicates Rosenberg's canonical status as a 'protest' poet. Akers revises Rosenberg's poetry and letters because they play an important role in the remembrance of the Great War, yet he uses these texts in ways that emphasise the possibility of retelling, to borrow Lynd's words, "*that* [other] past" or offering "other paradigms" (2014: 139).

The theme of class and racial discrimination, a long-disregarded aspect of the Great War, is recurrent in the novel. In telling the story 'from below,' from the perspective of a working-class soldier, Akers visibilises "the Tommy" and brings the experience of the "other ranks" into collective memory. The novel recounts both Rosenberg's daily life as a working-class boy in the East End of London—"his frequent ill health and harsh life experience in the poor Jewish community in London made him realize that life was a battle not only in wartime" (Kuzmanović, 2016: 74)—and his experience within the fighting troops, from fierce battles to moments of rest behind the line. He could not afford the privileges of the officer writers, therefore, "he had virtually no privacy or opportunity to write" and "poems were often scribbled on the backs of envelopes while his mates were asleep or temporarily distracted" (cf. Akers, 2009).

Akers also brings attention to the poet's Jewishness, which turns him into an outcast and deeply tests his endurance in the trenches: "He'd expected a degree of anti-Semitism, but was taken aback by the vehemence of the reaction" (Akers, 2006: 147).[17] Because of his incompetence as a soldier, his untidiness and absent-mindedness, he is never able to satisfy his superiors and he is constantly in trouble (2006: 257). It is in these circumstances, however, that he is able to produce his finest work: he was "reluctantly aware that his best poetry had been fashioned in adversity" (123).

To pursue this inside-out narrative perspective, Akers relies on the third-person omniscient point of view, which allows him not only to have access to the minds of all the characters but also to confront history by foregrounding what has sometimes been deliberately ignored such as the voices of marginalised characters—the poet's family, friends and lovers—and, more importantly, the poet's humanity as well as his inner doubts and fears. The concealment of the omniscient narrator's identity seems to suggest that other narrative forms—history, for example—are often received by readers without any information of who authored them.

Even if the narrative structure adopted by Akers accentuates the horrors of the Great War, it also fashions a peculiar engagement between war and peace: the story is divided into the "pre-war" and the "war" times and some of the war chapters are framed by peace sections. These framing sections sharply contrast with the strain of the warfront experience and are meant to depict more unambiguously the atrocities of the war by amplifying the impact of death and violence in the war scenes. Akers creates extremely effective visions of the slaughter. So much so that sometimes his exhibition of the carnage magnifies the reality of war to nauseating extremes: "when he looks again, the man's head is gone. Bizarrely, the body remains upright for a moment, its arms waving in the air as if searching for the missing part, before toppling over" (Akers, 2006: 14). The depiction of violence in the novel seems to function as a parody, not of history-writing itself, but rather of the conventions of 'protest' narratives. In the hands of Akers, 'protest' narratives are imitated not only in their intentions but in their intertextuality also. In this regard, the novel's "parody [of war violence] is a form of ironic rupture with the past" (Hutcheon, 1989: 5).

In 1955, Geoffrey Gorer identified what he called "The Pornography of Death." Drawing a comparable dynamic to that traced in sex by Foucault, Gorer notes that this excess of morbid representation is a form of pornography. Akers combines both sex and death: the images of the carnage in the trenches are alternated with those of explicit sexual content. Rosenberg's passionate encounter with Annetta Raphael while he is home on leave is an interesting example: "he could feel her feet gently playing with his erection. Nuzzling into her warm flesh, he willingly surrendered himself to the rapture of the moment as she pressed and rubbed him with fresh urgency" (279). The writer uses the human body as a mode of expression for lust in the peace sections, thus parodying the decadence, corruption and mutilation of the body in times of war. The paradox is that, in "Dead Man's Dump" (Akers, 2006: 1-4), the poem that paratextually precedes the novel and probably the most graphic in its description of death, the distinctions between living and dead bodies are broken down: their resemblance in death emphasizes their resemblance in life, thus questioning the ultimate purpose of war. It is from this poem that Akers borrows his title: "the blood-dazed intelligence beating for light" (line 74).

What is even more paradoxical, and tragic, is that because cruel suffering goes unnoticed and unpunished, the souls of the dead cannot find peace either.

Like Dawson, Akers clearly sees the distinction between his freedom as a novelist and his duty, in writing about history, to be as 'fair' as possible to it. At the end of the novel there is an "Author's note," which functions as a paratextual addition to the novel, in which readers are able to trace "the four excellent biographies of Isaac Rosenberg" Akers uses to bring Rosenberg to life (Akers, 2006: 311). Although Akers imagines aspects of Rosenberg's life that have not been recorded, the writer seems to be aware of what his ethical limits are and is quite 'rigorous' not to contradict or ignore what is on historical record.

3.3. Re-imagining Ivor Gurney's Life in the Age of Trauma

Except for the flashbacks and nightmares, Robert Edric's *In Zodiac Light* (2008) does not "physically" return to the horrors of the battlefield. The novel is set in the City of London mental hospital, in Dartford, where Ivor Gurney is committed in 1922, and focuses on a small segment of the poet's early institutionalisation: the spring of 1923, when his mental state was still not so desperate to friends and family. Edric tackles the "war's lingering psychological fallout" (Howe, "Elegy for Gurney") and shows the effects, both for trauma survivors and later generations, of a past that refuses to withdraw from the present and continues to haunt them. The novel endorses Fussell's claim that "the war detaches itself from its normal location and chronology and its accepted set of causes and effects to become Great in another sense—all-encompassing, all-pervading, both internal and external at once, the essential condition of consciousness in the twentieth century" (Fussell, 2013: 348). The traumatic nature of the war causes the past to exist as a very real present in Edric's novel.

The writer's selection of metafictional narrative techniques and strategies allows for the novel to become "self-conscious, self-contradictory and self-undermining" (Hutcheon, 2002: 1) and for readers to be immersed in a pervasive atmosphere of hopelessness. The historical past is seen as a fading light, being gradually obscured and displaced so as to point to its less concrete existence. Even the historical grounds and wards of Dartford Asylum are all too vaguely portrayed as if to draw attention to the illusory quality of the traumatic reality in the post-First World War world.

Edric also inserts historical events and personages into the novel, blending them with fictional characters to challenge the truth-value of the historical facts and to create alternative versions of them. Marion Scott and F.W Harvey are both real historical figures that emerge as "substitutes for [Gurney's] own family" in the novel (Edric, 2008: 121). Gurney met Scott at the Royal College of Music before the war and she became his professional guardian afterwards, collating his work and pleading with the doctors to help him continue it. She is parodied "as the tireless 'Mother Hen,' forever clacking around her charge" (Howe, "Elegy for Gurney"). So much so that, at a certain point, Gurney is made to call her "an insister" (Edric, 2008: 299). The poet F.W. Harvey was a Gloucestershire childhood friend, to whom "To His Love" was addressed. Edric suggests some of the implicitly erotic complexity of their relationship, yet the nature of their

interactions remains elusive and unclear, probably because Gurney's sexual life was a mystery to biographers as well.[18]

The story is told by the fictional Irvine, a well-meaning but reserved young psychiatrist in charge of Gurney's care. Together with a few of the poet's friends (his roommate and conscientious objector Oliver Lyle, the nurse Alison West, and the already mentioned Marion Scott and his fellow poet F W Harvey), Irvine trusts that, despite the mental breakdown, Gurney's creative power will remain unchallenged: "'He's a musician and a poet. I've read his poems. Listen to others, they'll want you to believe he's some sort of genius'" (Edric, 2008: 53-4). Comparison with Barker's *Regeneration* is inevitable, yet Edric's vision is more pessimistic: Gurney's regeneration is much less plausible than Sassoon's, mainly because Irvine's progressive therapy's is wryly censured by the villains in the story: his medical colleagues and the institution's orderlies. More preoccupied with advancing his career than with helping Gurney work out his war traumas, Osborne, the asylum's director, mocks the poet's talent and calls him "our budding Tchaikovsky" (Edric, 2008: 165). Similarly, Osborne's brutal assistant and morphine-addict, Cox, boycotts the inmates' treatment and abuses the men under his control. Being a war veteran himself, he seems to resent "all he had lost upon his return to civilian life" (Edric, 2008: 16).[19]

Like Gurney, Irvine is also struggling with the past: he has lost a brother on the Western Front; his parents have also died, and he feels insecure by the belief that he was never their favourite son. As Ruth Scurr suggests, the decision to approach Gurney "through the eyes of a sympathetic but culturally limited psychiatrist," is not only a clear example of doing history from the bottom up but also "a clever way of sidestepping the complex problems that await his biographers" ("A Poet Dwelling in the Shadows"). The most obvious use of silence within the novel has to do with Gurney's mind. Irvine avoids 'filling in the gaps' left by Gurney's inscrutable personality and, except for some occasions in which he comments on the poet's actions and exchanges, he is a non-intrusive first-person narrator, who objectively describes, as an observer following Gurney, what he sees and hears:

> On occasion, Gurney would pause in whatever he was doing, stand upright, his face raised, his eyes tightly close and he would murmur or hum to himself, perhaps composing something new or remembering an earlier composition; or perhaps simply remembering an earlier time when he had undertaken similar work elsewhere. I wished I could have spoken to him then, asked him what he as remembering. But I knew that if I had interrupted him, he would have said nothing, or at best made some excuse, keeping these necessary, sustaining secrets to himself. (Edric, 2008: 159)

Edric explores Irvine's world through the recollections of his childhood and of his father's passion for bee-keeping. Yet Gurney's soul remains inaccessible. As Howe states, the character of "Gurney works largely through absence." He is left secluded by the depth of his individual loss and tormented mind and there is "the overwhelming impression […] of a novel mourning the absence of its own hero" ("Elegy for Gurney").

There is, however, a great deal of intertextuality during Gurney's conversations with Irvine, particularly as his memories drift incoherently to the surface of consciousness in

response to Irvine's questions. These exchanges go through the fragmented facts of Gurney's life after war—"You were discharged from Napsbury in October—18, and committed to Barnwood House in the same month—22" (Edric, 2008: 178) and then through the poet's traumatic war memories—"'All I'd see would be that falling man' […]. 'That poor bloody bugger falling out of the sky like one of Lucifer's bad angels'" (198). Edric quotes very little of Gurney's poems, yet he draws up a pastiche attempting to re-create his poetic voice: "As he said this, his voice slowed and deepened slightly, and I heard an echo of several of his poems, as though he might even perhaps have been reading from one of them" (2008: 98).

Although the novel revolves around two main occurrences—the concert arranged by Scott in the asylum to play Gurney's works and the tragedy that ensues from Lyle's suicide—*In Zodiac Light* is mostly about the characters carrying the burden of war trauma, personifying this post-traumatic world as an alienating force. Yet, they all keep a wall of silence around their feelings; communication is cut off. Silence is recurrently put forward as a valid means of surviving the suffering inflicted by the war. Except for the scar Irvine shows to nurse Alison West, his war experience remains an unspeakable memory: "'And round here'—I patted my side—'I've got a constellation of small white stars, twenty-seven to be precise, pinpricks. Sometimes they look like a hand, and sometimes—and not entirely inappropriately—they look like a gun, a pistol'" (Edric, 2008: 84).

Readers only access the war indirectly; the traces and marks left by the war remain physically present. As Howe suggests, "scars, bruises and disfigurements are the metaphorical stock-in trade of a novel about war's enduring effect on both the individual and the collective consciousness" ("Elegy for Gurney"). It seems the characters have gone beyond the pity and turned into numbness; they are detached from the demands of the flesh and the soul, beyond suffering and pain. Gurney himself is accused of lack of pity before the burning of the beehives: "So what if I had no pity left? So what? There was no shame in that, not after everything I'd been through and seen. No shame at all" (Edric, 2008: 368).

In Zodiac Light revisits the traditional tale of the soldier's return,[20] yet Edric contradicts the ideas of atonement and peace that had often been associated with the homecoming tale in 'patriotic' narratives and places war trauma as the dominant literary construction. However, the novel goes beyond the use of trauma as subject matter or as part of characterisation by weaving it into the very fabric of the text. To describe this anesthetized world, numbed by the atrocities that it has witnessed and perpetuated, Edric turns to a "glacial, dispassionate prose that eschews histrionics" (Thomson, "Prisoners of Waterland"). This unadorned prose also allows Edric to depict the sphere of the natural, which is submersed, even defined, by the perturbation that permeates and extends beyond the characters. Edric's searching interest seems to be, in Will Cohu's words, the depiction of "the unity of people and landscape" and of "ghosts pressing on present lives" ("A Writer's life"). The episode of the beached whale in the Thames estuary that Irvine and the inmates go to see at the beginning of the novel not only reveals that "Edric is a virtuoso of atmospheric settings" (Howe, "Elegy for Gurney"), but stands as a straightforward symbol of society's impotence before extreme pain and loss: "There was neither tail nor mouth visible to indicate which end was which. A mud-covered protuberance that might

have been the remains of a fin had already been eaten away by the birds" (Edric, 2008: 21).

There are other, sometimes (too) obvious, symbols that illustrate life in the aftermath of war: a dragonfly trapped in a glass jar (Edric, 2008: 64) and "a speckled bird, a crow, being attacked and killed by others" (104). The symbolism of the beehives, however, also a recurring trope in Dawson's *The Great Lover*, constitutes the allegoric core of the novel. In the orchard of the asylum are "two dozen hives in a state of disrepair amid rank grass and overgrown brambles, most of the structures empty and abandoned, and the remainder half-filled with feeble colonies struggling to survive" (Edric, 2008: 27). When Irvine gathers a working party of inmates to work on the "resurrection of the colony" (142), there are clear connotations of damage, reparation and rebirth. Some of the hives have "collapsed beyond retrieval" (131), others "can be salvaged and repaired" (130) and maybe "allowed to survive, to struggle through the spring" (130) Yet, just as the title of the novel refers to "a very faint cone of light in the sky," the promised rebirth associated with the new day seems increasingly uncertain.[21]

Edric's novel has been criticised for "giv[ing] in too readily to the demands of fiction" (Howe, "Elegy for Gurney) and for changing some fundamental facts of Gurney's story, for instance, that Gurney completely lost his musical talent in the asylum: "half the staves [he shows to Irvine] were empty, and the remainder were filled with tailing lines of words and notes which ran off the right-hand sides of the sheets" (Edric, 2008: 300). Music scholars refute this idea, pointing out the brilliant freshness of Gurney's later musical work. Moreover, the novel suggests that Gurney could not possibly have written poetry at that time, while it has been historically proven that some of his best poems were written in Dartford between 1923 and 1926.

Although Edric uses paratext to identify the text as historical discourse (through the reference to Gurney's poetry in the title and the dictionary entry with a scientific explanation of "zodiacal light" on the first page), he undermines that association with a disclaimer: "This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact, any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, is purely coincidental." Yet, it might be argued that the writer's most significant accomplishments are, firstly, to have found a fictional form that allows for the voicing and working through of Great War trauma and, secondly, to have represented the mythical post-war scenario and self-consciously adapted it to the aesthetic needs and interrogations of his time.

4. Conclusions

Dawson, Akers and Edric's retrospective approach to the lives of Brooke, Rosenberg and Gurney should be viewed in relation to "other forms of engagement"—such as their literary, formal and ideological decisions—that mediate the authors' quest for understanding the past (Phillips, 2001: 12) and which are used to fill in the gaps and occupy the vacancies that memory threatens to break apart. The three novels exhibit a strong sense of their retrospective position and ask significant questions about their relationship to the past, particularly about the use of historical and literary sources to re-scribe a previously non-existent version of the poets' lives. Dawson, Akers and Edric's novels reflect on what the past means in the present, what aims they pursue by returning

to the Great War, whether the past can be adequately represented in fiction and if various war narratives can consistently coexist.

To attempt an answer to these questions, they rely on some of the literary techniques of Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, including intertextuality, parody, and paratextuality, and experiment with history in order to challenge the authenticity of objective facts and disrupt the boundaries between fiction and reality.

However, the consequences of this access to the past vary among the three writers. This draws different conclusions as to how this reconnection between past and present and between history and fiction is possible. While Edric's metafictional impulse informs the construction of his novel all throughout, giving his readers the chance to evaluate the implications of the experience of truth creation, the nature of Dawson's and Akers' relation with the past is less a matter of narrative experimentation than a concern with their duty to be fair to the historical events themselves.

In varying degrees, however, the three novels under study involve the manipulation of historical sources, the incorporation of other people as historical agents, the acceptance of the challenge of re-scribing memory in the post-traumatic age, and a reliance on the strong presence of the real poets as fictional characters. Dawson, Akers and Edric use historiographic metafiction to go beyond what they perceive as limits of the documentary or historical and to assert both their role as agents of memory and their own interpretation of events, not as one among many competing narratives, but as an accurate reconsideration of the past. The three novels have, therefore, accepted the ethical and representational challenge of portraying the lives of Brooke, Rosenberg and Gurney in the context of the Great War, making them available again as a poignant experience for readers.

Notes

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1. In *Bartleby & Co.*, Enrique Vila-Matas considers this "literary silence" to be a "syndrome" which he names after Bartleby himself. He reviews what he calls the "literature of the NO" to address the reasons why many writers decide not to continue writing.
2. For more on the ethical problems of writing about the war, see also Paul Fussell (1981: 189-194), Samuel Hynes (1992: 423-425), and Mark Rawlinson (2000: 9).
3. Lyotard defines "postmodernism" by its "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard XXIV), as these, of course, involve the risk of neglecting not only the diversity of voices and perspectives, but the uniqueness of the writer's insights and points of view.
4. Several critical approaches have developed in the wake of postmodernism. Among the theorists in this area are Hayden White (1973; 1974) and Lawrence Sterne (1988). They raise questions about the boundaries between history and literature, employing the term "meta-history," and maintaining that historians do use their imagination and rely on the narrative strategies of literary writers as they employ "plots" or "emplotments."

5. See Pat Barker's Great War trilogy (*Regeneration*, 1991; *The Eye in the Door*, 1993; and *The Ghost Road*, 1995) and Sebastian Faulk's *Birdsong* (1993).

6. The terms "war books," "war-books boom" and "war-books controversy" have been borrowed from Cyril Fall's *War Books* (1930) and Douglas Jerrold "The Lie about the War" (1930). They refer to a new phenomenon of publication of war novels and memoirs taking place during the late 1920s and early 1930s. The war books were survival accounts mostly written by the canonical "war poets" or with their work at their foundation. The canonical "war poets" came from middle-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds; many had been to public schools and served as officers at the front. They wrote the story of the Great War that came to be known as the 'truth.' The "war-books controversy" was a counter-reaction that argued that the "war books" falsified the true image of the First World War. Falls criticizes the limited number of experiences they portray, claiming that 'the soldier is represented as a depressed and mournful spectre helplessly wandering about until death brought his miseries to an end' (1930: XI). Similarly, Jerrold argues that "this obsession of futility" gave a false picture of the war; even when these books presented a relatively truthful picture of it, they distorted the core motivation of the conflict (Jerrold 18). Although Jerrold and Falls were the first to make visible and question this 'protest' narrative of the Great War, the idea that the Great War destroyed the representation of the soldier and war itself as heroic remained the standard version, the 'sacred national text', until today (Motion, 2003: XI).

7. When the Great War started, popular writers like H.G. Wells and Arnold Bennett hurried into writing pro-war literature without encouragement, but older writers of renown like Hardy, Kipling, Doyle, Galsworthy, Barrie and Chesterton were specifically recruited by the War Propaganda Bureau to promote Britain's interests at war. Buitenhuis describes in detail a secret meeting taking place in the afternoon of 2 September 1914 at Wellington House (Buckingham Gate) between C.F.G. Masterman, the chief of Britain's war propaganda bureau, and a number of prominent British writers "to discuss ways and means by which they could contribute to the Allied war effort" (Introduction XV).

8. Some of the names used to refer to the myth of war represented in the literature of 'protest' are: "liberal experience of war" (Leed, *No Man's Land* 25), "the great casualty myth" (Terraine, *The Smoke and the Fire* 35), the "Myth of the War" (Hynes, *A War Imagined* IX), "modern memory" (Jay Winter, *Sites of Mourning* 2), and the "loss, anger and futility myth" (Galer, 2008: 180).

9. The Georgian poet Gordon Bottomley selected and edited the first posthumous collection of Rosenberg's work, *Poems by Isaac Rosenberg* (1922) and collaborated with the critic D.W. Harding on the preparation of the *Collected Works* in 1937. See Bottomley, G and D Harding's *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1937).

10. "Shell-shock" is one of the greatest metaphors of the 'protest' myth. The term was coined during the Great War to refer to war trauma. It was believed at the time that the condition resulted from trauma caused by shock waves from shells. Yet the history of combat stress reactions and the different labels assigned to them—"soldier's heart," "battle fatigue," "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder" and "Gulf War syndrome," among others—have shown that they refer to psychological disorders resulting from the stress of battle. They have in fact transcended their particular time and place to frame the perceptions, judgements and attitudes of those who suffered war.

11. In January 2015, the U.K.'s Conservative education secretary, Michael Gove, proved that there is still "a continuing battle over the war's meaning" when he attacked the "'left-wing myths,' taught in British schools, that the war was a 'misbegotten shambles'" (Gove qtd in Joanna Scutts, "The True Story of Rupert Brooke").

12. Bakhtin's concept of "dialogism," from which the postmodernist concept of intertextuality was derived, had a similar purpose. See Tzvetan Todorov's *Mikhail Bakhtin: The*

Dialogical Principle (1981: 63).

13. In an interview given to Danuta Kean for *The Independent*, Dawson expresses her awareness of the different positions taken by those writing about Brooke's life: "biographers' interpretations of Brooke began with patriotic pride, moved on to discrediting his status as a War Poet (he died before seeing action) and more recently have reflected popular culture's obsession with sex" ("Battle of the Heart").

14. Despite his initial ambivalence to the war, Brooke got a commission in the Royal Navy in 1914. While preparing in Egypt for the invasion of Gallipoli, he was bitten by a mosquito and developed a blood infection. His health rapidly deteriorated and he died aboard a French hospital ship on 23 April 1915.

15. The Bloomsbury group began to meet about 1906 and included, among others, John Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Vanessa and Clive Bell, Duncan Grant, E.M. Forster, and Roger Fry. While they regarded themselves fundamentally as "a group of friends" (Woolf, 1964: 23), they shared a common "body of practice and a distinguishable ethos" that allowed for their growth and development as a "social and cultural group" (Williams, 1980: 40). Any serious analysis of the 'protest' interpretations of the conflict during and after the First World War must consider Bloomsbury as a significant influence, not only in its potential to undermine the ideals proposed by 'heroic' narratives but in the development of pacifist alternatives to the group's conviction that war only brought the destruction of art and intellect.

16. See footnote 6. In more recent years, new scholarship (Onions, 1990; Bracco, 1993; Dawson, 1994; Winter, 1995, 2006; Sheffield, 2002; Bond, 2008 and McLoughlin [2011] 2014, among several others), has challenged and sought to disprove the version handed down by the war poets. Some of the overlapping issues addressed by these scholars include the quest to redefine heroism, assuming that the concept itself still has meaning, the emphasis on an underlying unity rather than the discontinuity between pre-war and post-war experience, the conflictive relationship between literature and history in the representation of war, the idea that war has always been understood in the light of the "big words" and the theme of bereavement and mourning in the assessment of the past.

17. See letter written to Sydney Schiff in October 1915: "my being a Jew makes it bad among these wretches" (Akers, 2006: 141).

18. Gurney's friend, Arthur Benjamin, himself a homosexual, believed that Gurney was also homosexual, whereas Gurney never recognised it. Gurney's attitude towards sexuality may be compared to that of Owen, Sassoon or Graves: "Young men like Ivor Gurney and so many others were reared to believe that homosexual love was wrong, a sin that could only bring shame upon a man and his family" (Blevins, 2008: 75). He had no choice, then, but to seek some expression for his feelings through letters and verse.

19. In his review of the novel for *The Independent*, William Palmer suggests that "the constant insolence voiced by orderlies to doctors and nurses is quite unbelievable" and that "in the rigid hierarchy of hospitals at that time such insubordination would [not] have been tolerated" ("In Zodiac Light").

20. Several of Edric's most recent books are concerned with "war's inglorious aftermath." As Sara Howe claims, "*In Desolate Heaven* (1997), *Peacetime* (2002) and *The Kingdom of Ashes* (2007) are populated with men and women bewildered and resentful at having been inadvertently left alive" (2008).

21. The title of Edric's novel was borrowed from Gurney's "In Flaxley Wood" (1921): "I walked midsummer in Flaxley Wood,/And waited through the daylong night;/ Attendant of a world not come, And cast by dark in zodiac light".

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