Jiří Pondělíček, *Portrayal of World War I in British Literature in the 20th Century*

**BA thesis**

**Supervisor:** PhDr. Zdeněk Beran

**Supervisor's report**

WWI is a theme that resonates in English written fiction throughout the 20th century, most frequently in the years following the war and then in the last decade of the century when the topic appeals to a number of contemporary issues. J. Pondělíček examines literary products of both periods, sampling two texts of each. His approach is not that of a literary historian, however; he focuses on problems conflating literary and more general, sociological and psychological, aspects of war representation. His two major concerns are heroism and justifiability of a war waged on such a scale. Supported by relevant publications dealing with the Great War in and outside literature, he proves able to discuss these topics with sufficient complexity.

The axis of the first topic is the Falstaff-Hotspur polarity, suggested by Bergonzi, which provides Jiří with an opportunity to debate how concrete harsh conditions helped to change attitudes towards man's role in a war conflict and even how traditional concepts were challenged at that time. To this it would be advisable to add a reflection on how especially the values manifestly connected with the idea of the British Empire (specifically Kipling's stoical definition of manliness in terms of endurance and self-control which implies control) were crumbling down in postwar texts. The war then should be understood as a moment of profound crisis and profound transformation (of the whole society, not just a rite of passage for individual participants).

The last chapter deals with more literature oriented questions, namely the way in which the war theme figures in the four selected texts. The chapter often tends to sum up the ideas of the previous parts and present rather general characteristics of the novels, avoiding thus an opportunity to reflect on broader questions for which the figure of war is used as an ample instrument. What I mean is for instance the fact that Aldington's *Death of a Hero* is not only polemical with social tradition (Victorian values represented by Winterbourne's family) but also with literary tradition, an attempt to create a new form of “jazz” novel. Two names loaned from Hardy's *The Woodlanders* (Winterbourne and Upjohn) also indicate that Aldington argues with the late Victorian understanding of such terms as “victim”. Aldington's irony, moreover, involves Winterbourne himself and his own (dubious) prewar set of values. Barker's novel also offers a number of opportunities to go beyond the mere “novel of ideas” concept: What is the meaning of replacing a battlefield by a mental asylum in a portrayal of war? What role does Rivers's witnessing of Dr. Yealand's treatment of mute shell-shocked soldiers play in his own secondary shell shock (or epiphany)? Why is Prior's story paralleled with Sassoon's? I believe that what Prior represents in the novel is not only regeneration of his voice but also of his desires, of his “carnality”, i.e. his body, while Sassoon's story is a story of intellect and the response (and regeneration?) of intellect to atrocities. These and other questions are worth pursuing in the final part of the thesis, to make the distinction between the four texts more evident.

To conclude: I recommend the submitted BA thesis for defence and suggest to mark it as very good (“velmi dobrá”).

PhDr. Zdeněk Beran

2 September 2011