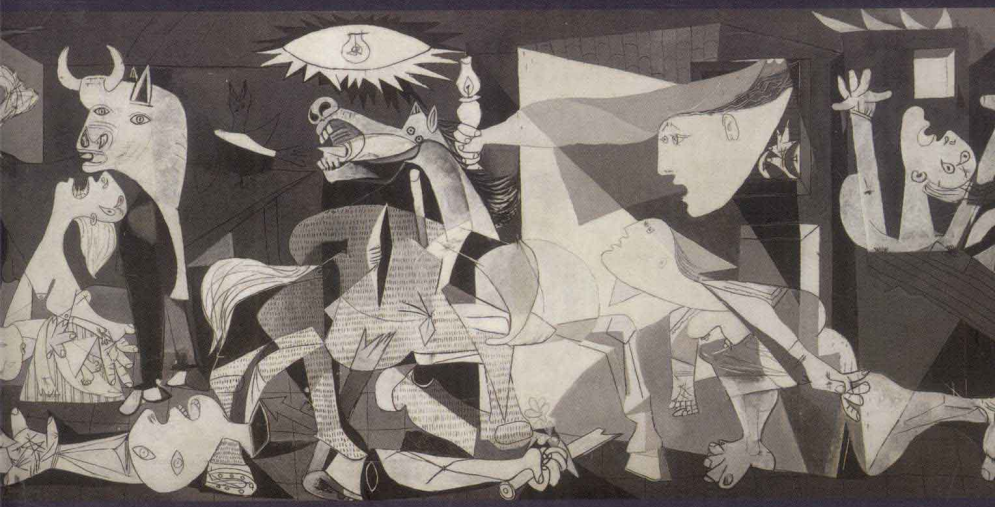
conflict, nationhood and corporeality in modern literature



bodies-at-war

edited by petra rau

First published 2010 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978–0–230–23152–8 hardback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

Acknowledgements

This edited collection had its beginning in a symposium on war writing and the body held at the University of Portsmouth in 2007. While not everybody who contributed to this stimulating event is represented here, I would like to express my gratitude to all participants for setting in motion and sustaining the lively dialogue that has made this project possible.

The Centre of European and International Social Research and the Centre for Studies in Literature at the University of Portsmouth have both opened their coffers to support the symposium and this collection, and I am very grateful for their generosity. Finally, I would like to thank the contributors for their patience with this most pedantic of editors.

Gloucestershire, 2010
Petra Rau

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Introduction: Between Absence and Ubiquity – on the Meanings of the Body-at-War

Petra Rau

War is about killing people. This is not necessarily the aim of war (other than in genocide), but it is its chief mode of operation. Governments authorizing war now go to great lengths to deny this simple fact by reiterating that advances in training, equipment and the technology of mechanized warfare have minimized casualties on either side, or they focus on the purposes of war rather than its cost – the defence of territory and borders, national honour or cohesion, the liberation of a people, or the containment of an ideology or religion perceived to be hostile to one's own 'way of life'. However, the creative response to war more often than not takes the perspective of the soldier, focusing on the physical conditions of war and their impact on the body. The disjunction between official ways of obscuring the physical destruction of human life and artists' and writers' insistence on representing the vicissitudes of the body-at-war is striking. This collection of essays is, in many ways, a critical response to this discrepancy of corporeal representations in our modern war culture. In this introduction I want to briefly retrace and contextualize this politically expedient vanishing act and juxtapose it with the ubiquity of corporeal suffering in visual and literary renditions of war.

'The body' has become a focus of renewed academic interest in the last thirty years. Through the rediscovery of Freud's theories and in the wake of Michel Foucault's influential studies *The History of Sexuality* (1976) and *Discipline and Punish* (1977), much work in the Humanities has focused on recognizing the body as a historically shifting cultural construction that signifies within a multiplicity of overlapping and intersecting discourses: medicine, law, religion, art and literature, even engineering.[1] In his 1991 essay 'History of the Body' the medical historian Roy Porter declared his impatience with the lack of interplay

between the study of vital statistics and methods of decoding corporeal representations in the pursuit of such an enterprise. Porter was dissatisfied with the lack of a cultural history of the body, criticizing both the work of literary scholars like Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985) for ignoring empirical evidence and medical practitioners' narrow interpretation of the body as a biological given.[2] Indeed, the conceptual gap between the body as an empirical, biological reality and the way it is made to 'mean' in culture has narrowed most noticeably when historians and literary scholars have brought the two into dialogue, most successfully in relation to the body-at-war.[3] John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* (1977) examined the physical conditions of men at war from Agincourt to Waterloo and the Somme. In *A History of Warfare* (1993) the structuring principle of his study remains the materiality of war (stone, flesh, iron, fire) and its effects on the 'warrior', even if his contention of the soldier as a tribal caste apart and as the origin of civilization may be controversial. Joanna Bourke's *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (1996) and *An Intimate History of Killing* (1999) paid close attention to the physical and psychological experiences of soldiers and how governments respond to them. Keegan and Bourke represent the different approaches to legitimate mass killing: that of the military historian and historiographer on the one hand, and that of the cultural historian on the other. The former is interested in the evolution of warfare as a technique or political strategy, the latter focuses on the experience of the individual soldier as a result of such developments. Whether 'evolution' is the right word for technological progress in the service of mass destruction is disputed by the contributors to George Kassimeris's edited collection *The Barbarisation of Warfare* (2006) who analyse the reasons for the degradation of military ethics and its consequences for its victims and the political landscape of Western democracies.

The concern that informs this collection of essays is the representation of the body-at-war (the body in uniform, the wounded and suffering body, the corpse) as well as its various appropriations by the nation and its signifying systems (a canon of national literature which suggests hegemonic readings of war; commemoration and cultural memory of war). Scarry's *The Body in Pain* remains one of the most influential studies even if her main thesis, that pain elides verbal representation, is surely contestable. However, her formulation that 'war is injuring' and that its perpetuation would not be possible without disowning this reality still holds, as we shall see.[4] While Scarry suggested that it is not merely governments authorizing war that are responsible for this

disavowal, her analysis of how injury disappears from view through strategies of omission, redescription and metaphorization has been tremendously influential for cultural historians such as Bourke and for political journalists, for instance in Stephen Poole's *Unspeak* (2006). That war and its official versions make language itself a casualty became a reason for modernists to be highly distrustful of a medium they saw abused by the liberal politicians who had endorsed the slaughter of the First World War, as Vincent Sherry has argued.[5] Examining the war writing of Helen Zenna Smith (Evadne Price), Enid Bagnold, Mary Borden and Vera Brittain, Jane Marcus traces one of the origins of the fragmentation often held to be the prime formal and stylistic innovation of modernist writing to the writing practice of women nurses and ambulance drivers.[6] Marcus also credits such women's war writing with an ability to foreground the corporeality with which middle-class literature representing civilian life and values continued to struggle.[7]

Bourgeois culture has constructed the (respectable) body as inconspicuous and invisible. The normative body 'means' precisely because it has gone from social awareness. Bodies in war, however, are neither respectable nor inconspicuous, not least because war is a rupture of cultural norms on so many levels. The body-at-war, then, becomes precisely the site in which such ruptures first become manifest. As a result, modern war writing remains obsessed with the physical ordeal and the indignities war imposes on the body: from the discomfort of lice-ridden bodies in Smith's *Not so Quiet* (1930) to the bloated corpses in Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel* (1920) or the grotesque dismemberments in Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire* (1916); from the debilitating humidity and filth in J.G. Ballard's Japanese internment camp in *Empire of the Sun* (1984) to the dull ache that plagues the freezing GI in Richard Bausch's *Peace* (2009). Yet there is also room for pleasure and physical delight: much joy is gained from the local wine in *Peace* and the local women in Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929). While the sex in Puzo's *The Dark Arena* (1955) is rough, it undoubtedly affords both participants distraction from the hunger and dereliction around them. Sexual opportunities along a wide spectrum of preferences and modes are not just a staple of contemporary re-imaginings of war – as in Joseph Kanon's *The Good German* (2002), Adam Thorpe's *The Rules of Perspective* (2005), Louis de Bernière's *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (1994), Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch* (2005) or Thomas Keneally's *The Office of Innocence* (2002) – but also informed the consciousness of wartime writers such as Graham Greene, Elizabeth Bowen, Patrick Hamilton or Henry Green. Santanu Das has also argued recently that sentient experiences

under wartime conditions between 1914 and 1918 were not uniformly awful, but affected soldiers' and nurses' subjectivities in manifold ways that shaped the way they wrote about the war in letters, poems and memoirs.[8] In her Kleinian analysis of First World War narratives, Trudi Tate argued that the relationship between the historical events of war and their creative rendition may be rather complex: 'moments of terror and suffering are remembered (or imagined) as producing oddly eroticised forms of pleasure': history and fantasy meet through the sight of the suffering human body.[9]

For Sara Cole, corporeal experiences are the common denominator for the participants in war and therefore undermine the binary oppositions war sets up: civilian and combatant, enemy and friend, man and woman, injured and healthy.[10] Perhaps this is the most compelling reason for officially obscuring corporeality from images and words in modern war culture. Yet in our visual age, it is images – TV reportage and war photography – that purport to represent reality and that shape our relationship to war. Their distribution or withholding condition our desire for different sorts of information about violent conflict. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), the late Susan Sontag argued, 'the understanding of war among people who have not experienced war is now chiefly a product of the impact of these images'.[11] It is not merely those ignorant and innocent of war whose idea of war is moulded thus. For Paul Fussell censorship of word and image also affects the manner in which writerly sensibilities relate the combat experience. The wider the gap between official (mis)representation and the soldier's own experience, the more incommunicable the combatants' experience of physical danger and destruction to the 'home front', the harder it is to write against a collective national consciousness of war from which he or she may feel entirely alienated.[12] There is, then, political significance in writing about the body-at-war. Not only do the literary analyses in this collection aim to reinstate the body to the centre of attention (irrespective of ideological or methodological positions); they also respond to ways of reading war and war writing that have appropriated the body for political expediency or have obscured its meanings.

Modern war and the vanishing body: embodiment, nation, technology

Let me illustrate my case with a very recent example of a vanishing body. On 5 October 2009, British Guardsman Jamie Janes from the 1st Battalion The Grenadier Guards was killed in an explosion while

on foot patrol in Helmand province, Afghanistan. Subsequently he, or rather his death, became the subject of a minor scandal between various stakeholders in the war in Afghanistan (the government, the military, the families of service personnel and the press). On the death of all service personnel killed in action while on operational duties, the British Prime Minister now writes to the bereaved families (the letters are drafted by military officials but handwritten by the Prime Minister). In the case of Guardsman Janes, his letter of condolence was ill-received by Janes's mother, who dismissed it angrily as 'a hastily-scrawled insult' in an interview with the *Sun* newspaper: not only was Gordon Brown's hand barely legible, the letter also appeared to contain other mistakes such as the misspelling of the Guardsman's surname.[13] The *Sun* printed a copy of the PM's letter amongst a flurry of headlines that included this gaffe alongside other offending signs of casual disrespect, such as Brown's failure to bow his head at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day. When the premier subsequently apologized for his poor handwriting in a telephone conversation, reassuring Mrs Janes that the mistakes had been unintentional, a transcript of the recorded call was posted on the *Sun*'s website, not least because it gave a wider audience to Mrs Janes's criticism of the government's alleged failure to better equip British troops.[14]

Unsurprisingly, in this proxy row over major issues, Guardsman Janes and his maimed body disappeared from view almost as soon as he had become an occasion for official appreciation, maternal grief and anger, political manoeuvring, and journalistic grandstanding in notoriously ephemeral forms of writing (letters, news items). He was written about badly, disrespectfully and hyperbolically. However, the stakeholders in this debate were in fact united in their attempts to give meaning to a military death because our culture's conflicted attitude to war demands that we justify licensed killing and dying: the more controversial the conflict, the greater the need to validate its corpses. The newsworthiness of the PM's etiquette blunders, commented the BBC's Nick Robinson, did not lie in his alleged unpatriotic lack of commitment to the mission in Afghanistan and, by implication, to the service men and women on duty in British campaigns in past and present wars. Rather, the story was a symptom of a widespread doubt about 'whether "our boys" are fighting and dying in vain'.[15] In the course of the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq we see a widening gulf between public criticism of the government's military policy and public empathy for the troops (an empathy that must necessarily put aside any doubts over a career choice in which individual agency is professionally suspended). Charity organizations have inhabited this disjunction to mobilize greater support for

ex-service personnel, renaming veterans 'heroes'.[16] In this strategy, the connotations with ageing men and with the temporal remoteness of the two world wars are replaced by an epithet that revives a concept of patriotism, honour and duty which those global conflicts dismissed as hopelessly outdated. Indeed, according to the website of the Royal British Legion:

> Heroes is one of those words that is bandied about too readily these days, devaluing and diminishing the actions of real heroes.
>
> The brave young men and women in our Armed Forces, especially those who are serving on the front lines in Afghanistan and Iraq, wake up every morning knowing that it could be their last. These are the people who are our true heroes.[17]

'Real' and 'true' heroes are those who do their duty in the face of mortal danger in the front lines of combat in remote areas. Part of the work of interest groups such as the British Legion consists in keeping in the public eye the troops' effort when it has long disappeared from headlines and television screens; in acknowledging their service as an act of patriotic bravery even if the conflicts in question are controversial; and in drawing attention to the inadequate financial provision and psychological care provided by the state for its corps post-service. Turning veterans and currently serving personnel into 'heroes' is a strategy to remind the public that the military is not synonymous with the government and that the former should not be held responsible for the latter's policies or failures. While both institutions represent a nation's citizens, they are separate corporate bodies operating in different spheres – the government at the centre of power, the military literally at the geopolitical borders to which this power extends.

It is perhaps more important to emphasize the consistency with which veterans throughout the twentieth century have remained marginalized socially and economically[18] despite annual rituals of commemoration and sentiment. Acts of remembrance such as the laying of wreaths at the Cenotaph allow us to forget war and conflict the rest of the time. In such rituals, however, the soldier's service is elevated to a national sacrifice, and the act of mourning and remembrance converted into a state function that requires strictly choreographed roles and gestures for the head of state and the head of government. Honouring a representative dead body invokes the continuation of the nation (in some way, he or she died 'for us'). This elevation of the soldier stands in stark contrast to the spectacular waste of human life that war produces.

It retrospectively validates this state-ordained wastage as 'somehow' necessary for the life of the nation: while many contemporary citizens in Britain and Germany are aware of the colossal loss of life in the First World War, few would actually be able to recall why this war was fought or what its war aims were.

These acts of remembrance, then, confirm rather than belie the absence of the soldier's suffering in the national consciousness for which the retrospective promotion to 'hero' is also meant to compensate. At best, soldiers' services remain at the margins of our awareness. In *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation* Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle argue that soldiers become sacrificial designates that ensure national cohesion by forming a class that allows societies to expel internal violence to a border of conflict with an external enemy.[19] In doing so, societies resort to a totemic practice that is both primitive and religious, while the predominantly secular self-perception of many Western nations helps to deny their capacity for ritual as well as the religious elements in the construction of national identity: 'At the behest of the group, the life-blood of community members must be shed. Group solidarity, or sentiment, flows from the value of this sacrifice.'[20] Marvin and Ingle's theory of sacrificial bodies and national symbols is the result of their trenchant analysis of how embodiment functions in the context of US history:

> The flag symbolizes the sacrificed body of the *citizen*. This label has meaning only in relation to the group that defines it, the *nation*. Blood sacrifice links the citizen to the nation. It is a ritual in the most profound sense, for it creates the nation from the flesh of its citizens. The flag is the sign and agent of the nation formed in blood sacrifice.[21]

This logic may sound more atavistic than it is, or rather, our scepticism towards such radical formulations may be grounded in a civilized delusion that wishes to see war as the last resort of political strategy rather than to acknowledge it as an essential element of nation-building and nationalism. We can see such potent embodiment at work in political iconographies outside the US, across a broad ideological spectrum, and on various levels of official acknowledgement. For instance, it is manifest in Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830). It explicitly permeates the entire inventory of Nazi semiotics from SS initiation ceremonies to political anthems, from annual mass events to architectural sculpture.[22] Nor is the flag the only symbol of national embodiment. As I have suggested above, commemorative events may

serve a similar purpose. British popular 'memory' of the Second World War – perhaps the most pervasive amongst the nations participating in that conflict – consolidates into a narrative of national unity entirely impervious to historiographical or literary revision precisely because it constitutes a cornerstone of post-war national identity and citizenship.[23]

For Marvin and Ingle, there is an inverse relationship between the invisibility of the sacrificial body at the border and cultural consciousness of it at the centre. It is entirely appropriate that military staff should be repatriated and buried in coffins draped with the national flag; but it is alarming when images of such rituals are disseminated, firstly because they highlight the cost of war that military rhetoric so studiously obfuscates and secondly because they allow for an identificatory link, via the flag, between the soldier's sacrifice and the civilian's responsibility: both are citizens of the same nation.[24] It is increasingly important for this sacrifice to be honourable and honoured whenever it does become visible. Hence the personal letters by state representatives, the pageants, the commemorations, the retrospective medals and recognitions, or the epithet 'hero'.

Paradoxically, this reclaiming of heroism *also* works on the basis of diminished corporeality such as maimed bodies, absent bodies and proxy representations (grieving families, photographs of service personnel and memorials). The Royal British Legion, which organizes the annual poppy appeal, recently launched a poster campaign with the mottos 'for his sake' (displaying a soldier in combat fatigues with a full leg prosthesis next to him) and 'for their sake', showing a serviceman's female partner and child in a domestic setting with a photograph of the deceased in uniform.[25] If charities foreground survivors and their families to personalize operational statistics, official government bodies focus on individualizing 'fatalities': the Ministry of Defence website lists all British deaths in service individually with date, place and circumstances of death[26] with a webpage for each service person outlining their career and life. Great effort is being made to counteract any hint that upon death, the soldier becomes a lifeless statistic. In fact, it is mostly upon death that the soldier becomes publicly visible. The response to death in service is often precisely a lot of (formal) writing: condolence letters and online obituaries, casualty lists and a bureaucracy of 'vital records', newspaper reports, names on memorials.

The corpse's vanishing act stands in contrast to the body's elevation at the beginning of a service career: many recruitment ads for the armed forces stress the necessity of physical fitness, and slogans such as

'99.9% need not apply' turn the career choice and the tough selection process into a contest from which the soldier emerges as superior to the civilian in physique, resolve and mental strength. The subsequent submersion of the individual soldier in the units organizing a corporate body that in turn represents the military forces of a nation may contribute to making the soldier's body vanish in literal and figurative ways. That armed forces represent nations is a relatively recent phenomenon, part of the development of modern nation-states. Feudal obligation, membership of a warrior caste or mercenary belligerence used to be the reasons for going to battle. By the eighteenth century, however, soldiers had become professionals and servants of the state. In the case of France and Prussia, the history of these countries and the history of their armed forces cannot really be separated. The cost and maintenance of a standing army required a centralized bureaucratic framework which enabled the crown to gain unprecedented control over economic resources and activities.[27] According to Michael Howard, a number of factors contributed to the coalescence of armed forces and nation: the introduction of compulsory military service; the rise of educational standards; population growth that allowed for a large standing army of qualified and trained men; technological progress that through the railway network and the telegraph system allowed for efficient troop movement, supply and communication; and finally, the formation of nation-states in which the idea of the 'country' as a set of values, customs and essences (*la patrie*; *Vaterland*) became a war aim that informed operations and was embodied in the head of state.[28] As early as the Napoleonic era, but certainly by the late nineteenth century, war had begun to have a much more profound impact on the entire population since its representative armed forces required the mobilization of all available resources. War was no longer an affair of armies; it had become total and involved entire societies. With the help of war reporters, the telegraph and daguerreotype, it was also brought closer to home: news often meant news of or about war. And reading about war often meant reading about someone who had been watching the spectacle of war and was trying to make sense of it.

Verbal and visual forms of (mis)representing war in official communications and journalistic reportage range from (pre-)censorship to fabrication; from omission to manipulation. Conflicting readings of war or of the outcomes of battle are not infrequent. It was not always easy to assess quickly who had gained or lost more territory and manpower. In situ post-battle interpretation of the fighting by generals and commanders might score victory where the result was at best a stalemate