



## NOT WRITING ABOUT WAR

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- This afternoon my subject is Not Writing About War.
- That might sound a bit strange: writing about war sounds reasonable enough, but what is *not* writing about war?
- Well, *not* writing about war is a route that many writers choose, and I'm going to argue that *not* writing about war is an effective way *of* writing about war.
- You've probably all heard of military diversion tactics.
  - o *Literary* diversion tactics work in the same way.
  - o Attention is directed away from the main action, but with the inevitable consequence that the true target eventually becomes clear.
- What I'm going to do this afternoon is, first, suggest some reasons why war *cannot* and *should not* be written about, and then suggest some more reasons why, nevertheless, it *must be* and *is* written about.
- Then I'm going to look at not-writing about war in action in two poems from different centuries: Charles Wolfe's 'The Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna' (1816) and Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' (1917) [HO]. **[Hopefully, you've had a chance to look at these already, and they're reproduced on your handout.]**

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- After that – the most difficult bit – I'm going to try to suggest what happens when poets don't write about war and that will involve thinking about a very ancient literary and philosophical concept, the sublime.
- I'm going to speak for about 45 minutes and, at the end, there'll be time for questions.
- So, why is it that war *cannot* and *should not* be written about?
- For a start, war cannot be written about because the logistical difficulties of doing so are impossible to overcome: the sheer scale of armed conflict is prohibitive.
  - o This makes an overall view – a synthesis – practically and politically problematic to obtain.
  - o The BBC reporter Jonathan Marcus experienced this difficulty when covering the second Gulf War in 2003 [H01]:

You had this absolute avalanche of material from our BBC colleagues in Baghdad and with the actual units in the field,' Marcus wrote later. 'But in a strange sort of way a lot of it was like looking through a keyhole at a very small piece of the war. People wanted to know: [...] "Is it going wrong?", "Is it not going wrong?", "What does this particular bit of action mean?" Pulling all that together proved dramatically difficult in this particular campaign.'

- o Marcus is not alone in finding the sheer scale of war debilitating.

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- The inadequacy of representational space is, for obvious reasons, most apparent in drama.

- Shakespeare, in the Prologue to *Henry V*, has to go so far as to issue a disclaimer in advance [H02]:

But pardon, gentles all, [he writes at the play's opening]  
The flat unraised spirits that hath dared  
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth  
So great an object. Can this cockpit hold  
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram  
Within this wooden O the very casques  
That did affright the air at Agincourt? (Prologue: 11-14)

- Beyond these logistical difficulties, there is a premium on firsthand experience which undermines the validity of non-combatant representations. The right to write about war has to be earned through personal knowledge of it.

- The leading scholarly article on this idea is James Campbell's 'Combat Gnosticism' of 1999 (H03a).

- 'Combat gnosticism' is 'a construction that gives us war experience as a kind of gnosis, a secret knowledge which only an initiated elite knows'.<sup>ii</sup>

- Campbell describes the 'trap'<sup>iii</sup> to which this construction gives rise (H03b):

[T]hey [combatant-poets] cannot truly inform an audience who lacks the experiential basis for understanding their work, and the only way an audience can acquire such a basis is to experience combat, at which point they are no longer the noncombatant audience the poetry assumes.<sup>iv</sup>

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- Let's pause on the idea of combat gnosticism for a moment.
- I think there is no getting round the fact that battle *is* a unique order of experience, able to confer a particular authority on those who have undergone and seek to represent it.
- That the two orders of experience are qualitatively different cannot be doubted.
- By 1915, Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, was convinced of their qualitative psychological difference (**HO4**): 'A distinction should be made between two groups – those who themselves risk their lives in battle, and those who have stayed at home and have only to wait for the loss of one of their dear ones', he wrote.
  - o Of course, a generation later, in the Second World War in Britain, the lives of those staying at home were also at risk.
- But this is not the same as saying that representations by the former group should be privileged over those by the latter.
- Indeed, there is support for the view that the combatant's viewpoint is flawed as participation in battle can distort the senses and preclude a synoptic account: as the British trench-poet Robert Graves remarked (**HO5**):

what is meant by the *truthfulness* of war books? [...] I would even paradoxically say that the memoirs of a man who went through some of the worst experiences of trench warfare are not truthful if they do not contain a high proportion of falsities. High explosive barrages will make a temporary liar or visionary of anyone.<sup>vi</sup>

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- And, it should be said, experiences such as living as a civilian in a city under bombardment and war-caused bereavement, loss and displacement are also unique experiences, conferring similar authority.
- Whether this authority results in more insightful, accurate or useful accounts of war is another question that we might discuss.
  - o for now, I just want to register the widespread perception by reporters and recipients of information about war that the signs of combat experience enhance their accounts.
- And, of course, this means that those traditionally denied access to the combat zone have to find other ways to experience or witness war if they are to be taken seriously as recorders of it.
  - o There are obvious implications for women writers, as very few countries afford their women frontline combat experience, so women have been traditionally excluded from the canon of war writing.
- On top of these difficulties in writing about war, there is censorship and self-censorship, or even just the simple reluctance to be the bearer of bad news.
- Sometimes the lack of candour is politically motivated.
- But reticence has complex causes.
- The Irish poet W. B. Yeats, who thought the First World War was 'the most expensive outbreak of insolence and stupidity the world has ever seen', determined simply to remain aloof.

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- When asked in 1915 to contribute a poem to Edith Wharton's *Book of the Homeless*, a work to be sold to raise money for her war charities, Yeats responded with a mere six lines of verse.
- His poem 'On Being Asked for a War Poem' is a distillate of the politics and aesthetics of non-participation (**HO6**):

I think it better that in times like these

A poet's mouth be silent , for in truth  
We have no gift to set a statesman right.

- Diffidence in war representation can also be due to a not inconsequential squeamishness: conflict can just be too gruesome, especially for those who have participated in it, (publicly) to relate.
  - As a nurse in the Crimea, the Scottish-Jamaican Mary Seacole was accustomed to dealing with gore on a daily basis.
  - Nonetheless, she warned readers of her memoirs, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857), that (**HO7**) 'if I were to speak of all the nameless horrors of that spring as plainly as I could, I should really disgust you.'
  - She concluded, 'my memory prefers to dwell upon what was pleasing and amusing'.
- Beyond even these inhibiting factors, war also compromises individuals' literal ability to speak.

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- This is a well-documented psychophysiological response to trauma, a symptom particularly associated with grief.
- Physically shattering, war is also psychically shattering: it produces, like grief, the psychological sensation of breaking-down or falling apart.
- If sadness, the shattered self and speechlessness are the symptoms of trauma, they are exacerbated by the failure properly to listen.
- In Auschwitz, the Nazi death camp, the Italian chemist Primo Levi was caused 'desolating grief' by a dream in which he described his experiences to his family but they failed to follow him and spoke of other things as if he were not there.
- According to some psychologists, the traumatised require 'quiet listening'; a community of hearers who are 'strong, compassionate, empathetic'; or, simply, love.
  - o Such skilled listening is notoriously hard to find.
- Above all, the incommensurability of armed conflict lies in its capacity to inflict trauma on both a mass and a personal scale: as national boundaries are reconfigured and peoples decimated, parents, children and spouses die.
- So, so far, we've come up with the following reasons why war is impossible to write about:
  - o logistics
  - o Combat gnosticism
  - o censorship and self-censorship
  - o squeamishness
  - o trauma
  - o lack of audience

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- scale
- All these reasons – and you'll be able to think of others – mean that armed conflict can be known but, arguably, not put into words.
- And is also debatable whether it *should* be put into words.
- The ethical risks inherent in writing about war include:
  - voyeurism,
  - sadism,
  - bias,
  - exploitation of others' suffering,
  - invasion of privacy, and
  - accommodation of atrocity—that is, giving the impression that what has happened is somehow acceptable because it has been put into words.
- But at the same time, writing about war is absolutely necessary—for the following reasons:
  - to act as a form of protest;
  - to warn against future wars and even to prevent them (not that that shows much sign of happening!);
  - to keep an accurate record;
  - to memorialise the dead;
  - to give meaning to mass loss;
  - to function as catharsis or therapy; and

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- to reduce the gap in understanding between combatant and civilian (particularly so that the former may be re-integrated into the community upon home-coming).
  - Describing war, as this last point indicates, goes some way towards easing the lot of the returned veteran.
- So what arises is a complex situation in which war simultaneously cannot be, should not be, and must be represented.
- Not surprisingly, a common response to these contradictory imperatives has been to greet them with silence.
- The critic George Steiner, in 'Silence and the Poet' (1966), an early and still influential essay concerning silence as a literary response to the Holocaust, is specific about the inception of 'the most honest temptation to silence in contemporary feeling': the date he gives is 1914 – in other words, the onset of World War I.
- Silence in the face of war is powerful, not least when experienced as the ritual refraining-from-sound observed in many parts of the world on martial anniversaries.
- The London *Times* reported on what, in 1920, was only the second time the two-minute Great Silence had been kept on Armistice Day in Britain (**HO8**):

Time and space were obliterated, and the thoughts of men and women encircled the world... The tension was almost too great. When seconds seemed to halt people held their breath lest they should be heard in the stillness.

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- But silence as a representation of war, as opposed to a memorial response to it, is problematic.
- As the London *Times* article eloquently illustrates, silence requires words to record and even interpret it.
- 'When the words in the city are full of savagery and lies, nothing speaks louder than the unwritten poem [HO9],' states Steiner<sup>vii</sup> – but how can such unwritten poems actually be heard?
- At this point, let's now turn to our two poems, starting with Charles Wolfe's poem 'The Burial of Sir John Moore After Corunna' (1816).
- Sir John Moore was commander of the British Army during the Peninsular War from 1808 to 1809, and the battle in question took place on 16 January 1809, at A Coruña in north-west Spain.
- Under pressure from French forces headed by Marshal Soult, Moore led the British in retreat to the coast, intending to sail for home.
- Though Moore was killed, the battle was hailed as a British victory and the majority of his troops were able to embark safely, albeit still in retreat.<sup>viii</sup>
- The poem's **on your handout [HO]**. Let me read it out to you now:

**Charles Wolfe, 'The Burial of Sir John Moore After Corunna' (1816)**

Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,  
As his corpse to the rampart we hurried;  
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot  
O'er the grave where our hero we buried. <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

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We buried him darkly at dead of night,  
The sods with our bayonets turning,  
By the struggling moonbeam's misty light  
And the lanthorn dimly burning. [SEP]

No useless coffin enclosed his breast,  
Not in sheet or in shroud we wound him;  
But he lay like a warrior taking his rest  
With his martial cloak around him. [SEP]

Few and short were the prayers we said,  
And we spoke not a word of sorrow;  
But we steadfastly gazed on the face that was dead,  
And we bitterly thought of the morrow. [SEP]

We thought, as we hollowed his narrow bed  
And smoothed down his lonely pillow,  
That the foe and the stranger would tread o'er his head,  
And we far away on the billow! [SEP]

Lightly they'll talk of the spirit that's gone,  
And o'er his cold ashes upbraid him –  
But little he'll reck, if they let him sleep on  
In the grave where a Briton has laid him. [SEP]

But half of our heavy task was done  
When the clock struck the hour for retiring;  
And we heard the distant and random gun  
That the foe was sullenly firing. [SEP]

Slowly and sadly we laid him down,  
From the field of his fame fresh and gory;  
We carved not a line, and we raised not a stone,  
But we left him alone with his glory.

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- Now, the striking thing about this poem is that, apart from the title, it contains only a couple of oblique references to the battle in which Sir John Moore acquired his fatal wounds.
  - o Indeed, the battle is very much held at arm's length.
- Now, the depiction of the injured or dead body is part of a distinct approach in war writing: a concentration on the 'outskirts' of armed conflict, at least when combat is taken to be the central experience.
  - o This approach avoids what the American poet Walt Whitman called the 'red business' of actual fighting.<sup>ix</sup>
  - o Instead, it deals in such phenomena as eve-of-battle scenes, preparation, waiting and recovery, and aftermath.
  - o What is being described is not battle itself but the sign of battle's effects.
  - o In Wolfe's very choice of subject-matter – a burial, rather than the thick of the fighting – some kind of avoidance behaviour seems to be going on.
- Within the poem, Wolfe deploys euphemism, favouring words with pleasant or positive connotations over harsher or more offensive terms that would more precisely designate what is intended.
- In instances of the rhetorical down-sizing device called meiosis, Moore's grave becomes a 'bed', the earth his head will lie on becomes a 'smoothed down [...] pillow' and death becomes 'sleep.'

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- And note: the predominant structural unit of the poem is negative. 'Not a drum was heard', 'not a funeral note', 'Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot', 'No useless coffin enclosed his breast', 'Not in sheet or in shroud we wound him', 'Few and short were the prayers', 'not a word of sorrow', 'We carved not a line, and we raised not a stone'.
- Wolfe's whole emphasis is not on what did occur or what was present, but on what did not or was not.
- Now let me read you another account of the burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna.
  - o This is from *A Narrative of the Campaign of the British Army in Spain* (1809), by Sir John's own brother, James Carrick Moore.
  - o James Carrick Moore describes how six soldiers carried his brother in a blanket from the field of fighting outside the town – slowly, so as not to cause him pain by jostling his wounds – to his lodgings in Corunna, where he died some hours later, aware of the British victory.<sup>x</sup>
  - o Rather than 'hurrying' his corpse out for burial, Moore's military colleagues then deliberated over how to inter it with 'peculiar respect' and 'unfelt honours'.<sup>xi</sup>
  - o James Carrick Moore continues his account – and this is also **on your handout [HO]**:

At twelve o'clock at night the remains of Sir John Moore were accordingly carried to the Citadel [...] A grave was dug by a party of the 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment, the Aides-

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de-Camp attending by turns. No coffin could be procured, and the body was never undressed, but wrapt up by the Officers of his Staff in a military cloak and blankets.

Towards eight o'clock in the morning some firing was heard. It was then resolved to finish the interment, lest a serious attack should be made; on which the Officers would be ordered away, and not suffered to pay the last duties to their General.

The officers of his family bore the body to the grave; the funeral service was read by the Chaplain, and the corpse was covered with earth.<sup>xii</sup>

- Now, an account of Moore's death and burial very similar to this appeared in the *Edinburgh Annual Register* for 1808, published on 21 July 1810 and written by the poet Robert Southey.<sup>xiii</sup>

- It follows James Carrick Moore's version, with the addition of a single salient detail.
- This is that the interment was 'hastened' when the enemy firing was heard.<sup>xiv</sup>
- It was Southey's version, read to him by a fellow-student at Trinity College, Dublin, that would inspire the 21-year-old Charles Wolfe to compose his verses.<sup>xv</sup>
- Far from believing that 'not a funeral note' and 'not a word of sorrow' were heard, Wolfe would have been aware that Moore had received the full rites of burial, including the funeral service read by the Chaplain and the 'last duties' of his fellow-officers.

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- It *was* the case that no coffin or shroud was available, but the funeral ritual was *not* hurried half-way through, so the line 'But half of our heavy task was done' is misleading.
- The interment was *not* completed 'darkly at dead of night [...] / By the struggling moonbeam's misty light / And the lanthorn dimly burning' but was still in process early in the morning and brought to a conclusion so that the officers could pay their last dues.
- The claim made in the sixth stanza – 'Lightly they'll talk of the spirit that's gone, / And o'er his cold ashes upbraid him' – *ignores* significant subsequent memorialising of which Wolfe would also presumably have been aware:
  - a vote of thanks proposed to Moore in the House of Lords on 25 January 1809,<sup>xvi</sup>
  - James Carrick Moore's *A Narrative of the Campaign* published in July 1809, with twenty pages of eulogies from various military dignitaries to his brother;
  - a monument erected by the Spanish at Corunna over Moore's grave, later made permanent by the British;
  - the marking of the precise spot where he fell; and
  - the erection in 1809 of a public monument in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, on the orders of the government.<sup>xvii</sup>

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- What, then, motivated Wolfe to claim the exact opposite of these things, to insist – there are ten negatives in the poem – on the absence or lack of due obsequies?
- Of course, it's possible to point to a desire to sanitise the violence and to elevate Moore and it's also possible that Wolfe is making a comment about the vanity or transience of earthly glory.
- But I also think it's likely that his motivation was his recognition of the power of indirection.
  - o Wolfe's technique is a species of paralipsis: the rhetorical trope of stating and drawing attention to something in the very act of appearing to pass it over.
  - o So if I say to my husband, 'I'm not even going to mention the fact that you haven't done the washing up', I'm using paralipsis: mentioning something in the process of not mentioning it.
  - o This trick depends upon the power what is absent: conjuring up what is not there by naming it *in absentia*.
  - o Every element listed in Wolfe's lines is felt as something missing and therefore summoned into virtual being.
  - o Hence the rudimentary burial evokes the respect due to the great warrior, the lack of ceremony evokes the famous victory.
  - o The poem points beyond its ostensible subject-matter of a modest burial to trace the contours of a bloody battle.

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- Almost exactly a century later, another poem was written about what was not available by way of obsequies to those killed in armed conflict.
- Wilfred Owen had served at the front in the First World War for some eighteen months before he was posted, suffering from shellshock, to Craiglockhart Hydropathic Hospital outside Edinburgh where, with some help from Siegfried Sassoon, he composed 'Anthem for Doomed Youth.'<sup>xviii</sup>
- It's on your **handout** [HO] and I'll read it out:

### **Anthem For Doomed Youth**

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
---Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,---  
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?  
Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes  
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.  
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;  
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,  
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

- Now Wilfred Owen is well known as a trench poet, and around the time of the First World War centenaries—2014 to 2018 in Britain—there was some dispute as to whether the trench poets represented the reality of the War.
- But look at what Owen doesn't mention.
  - o There's no word about trenches in this poem.

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- No word about mud or barbed wire or No Man's Land.
- No blood or broken bodies.
- No injuries or body parts.
- In France and Flanders during the First World War, corpses were routinely used to prop up dug-outs, form parapets, and line trenches – no mention of that either.
- Like 'The Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna', 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' avoids direct engagement with 'the red business' from the outset.
- Instead Owen talks about funerals.
  - In fact, he doesn't even talk about funerals.
  - He talks about the absence of funerals – about a lot of missing things.
- Let's look more closely at the text, starting with the title.
- 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' was suggested to Owen by another famous First World War trench-poet, Siegfried Sassoon.
- The first thing to note is that this is not an anthem.
  - The Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'anthem' is 'a song, as of praise or gladness'.
  - What we can hear in this poem is sadness: the beseeching quality of the questions in lines 1 and 9 ('What passing bells ...?', 'What candles ...?'); the long vowels of 'wailing' and 'calling' which mimic the inarticulate sounds of grief.
  - This is a dirge or an anti-anthem: the anthem of the title itself is missing.

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- Owen's original title for the poem was 'Anthem for *Dead* Youth'.
- Sassoon changed it to '*Doomed* Youth'.
- Note the effect of the change: first aurally – the long vowel of 'doomed' sounds like a death knell.
- Note also the temporal effect: the dead are already dead but the doomed are the dead yet to come.
  - o People may be dying like cattle right now – but the amended title makes the point that there will be plenty more of them in future.
- This futurizing effect is reinforced by the word 'shall' in lines 11 and 12: 'Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes' and 'shall be their pall'.
  - o 'Shall' in the third person, as it is here, indicates an emphasised future.
  - o The only other verbs in the poem – the modals 'can' in line 4 ('can patter out') and 'may' in line 9 ('may be held') – do not function as temporal markers.
  - o So the funerals that aren't proper funerals are for people who aren't even dead yet. These are burial rites that are both inadequate and deferred.
- Let's carry on to the body of the poem.
- It opens with what seems to be a rhetorical question – 'What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?'
  - o Note there's something missing here: a verb.
  - o It draws a reply in the form of another incomplete sentence: 'Only the monstrous anger of the guns'.

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- Let's pause for a moment on incomplete sentences.
  - o There's another in the four lines starting at line 5: 'No mockeries now for them'.
  - o In the final couplet of all, the verbs have to be understood from the 'shall be' in line 12.
- This is further evidence of there being something missing.
- Look, too, at Owen's use of long dashes.
  - o They have the visual appearance of marking a space where something should be.
  - o Acoustically and cognitively, they create pauses – absences where there should be sound and sense.
- The poem proceeds to list what's absent or insufficient.
- In the octave – the first 8 lines – these are the inappropriate replacements of the battle-field for elements of mourning:
  - o guns instead of bells
  - o rifle-fire instead of prayers
  - o wailing shells instead of church choirs
- In the sestet – the last 6 lines – the replacements come from the home front:
  - o shining eyes instead of candles
  - o pale faces instead of palls
  - o loving, patient thoughts instead of flowers
  - o the falling of dusk instead of the respectful closing of curtains

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- The home front stand-ins are all very tender and soothing – I'd suggest that they work as palliative replacements for what's missing.
- And given their palliative qualities, I'd further suggest that they work rather like euphemisms.
- To use the Canadian poet Anne Carson's metaphor, euphemism 'throws white paint' over its subject, concealing it from view rather than illuminating it.
- Note too how the absences are reinforced by the effect of the negatives in the poem:
  - o 'no', 'nor' and 'not' are placed prominently, at the beginning of lines, and are repeated.
  - o The words 'only' (which is also repeated) and 'save' also emphasize the inadequacy of the funeral substitutes.
- So we have a poem about the First World War that doesn't mention actual armed combat directly, that talks instead about funerals – or, rather, the absence of funerals, and that is full of gaps and inconsistencies.
- OK, so much for our poems.
- In the last part of this talk, I want to try and suggest what exactly is happening when a writer states – or implies by means of one or more of the avoidance strategies we've looked at – that he or she cannot or will not write about war.
- What I've been suggesting so far is that not-writing about war is apophatic.

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- This means representation that works in relief, such as the artistic technique of painting everything except the central object so that that object occupies the space that is left.
- But I'd like to suggest that something beyond this is happening when poets don't write about war.
- This involves an appreciation of the workings of a literary and philosophical concept of ancient standing: the sublime.
- The term 'sublime' can be applied to things that seem beyond our imaginings, and that are therefore indescribable.
- I'm going to concentrate on Immanuel Kant's massively influential 'Analytic of the Sublime,' contained in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790).
  - o Kant's theory is that when we see something sublime, something so huge or mighty that it is beyond our imaginations, we feel an immediate sense of displeasure, dejection and even powerlessness.
  - o But at the same time that we lament the failure of our imaginations, we sense that we can apprehend what is sublime through our judgement.
  - o This gives us a feeling of pleasure.
  - o So, to give you a concrete example, let me refer back to my recent holiday in Switzerland.
    - In the town of Zermatt, there's a moment when you first spot the Matterhorn.
    - It's just breathtaking – I just gasped aloud when I saw it. Kant would say that, at that moment, I was experiencing a feeling of

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inferiority, not being able to take in the height and grandeur of the mountain.

- But a moment later, that feeling disappears and pleasure takes over – pleasure in being able to appreciate the grandeur after all.
- The tactics of not writing about war we've been considering accord with Kant's theories of the sublime.
  - When Charles Wolfe omits to describe the circumstances leading to Sir John Moore's death or Wilfred Owen neglects to provide graphic details of the First World War trenches, we, as readers, must pause to revise preconceptions and recalibrate our sense of the atrocities.
- The suggestive power of what is absent is well documented: if we're told that a terrible accident has taken place, we will imagine the worst that we're capable of imagining – the reality might not be anything like as bad.
- Similarly, a reader informed that a particular battle is too shocking to be described is likely to envisage horrors exceeding anything that straightforward description could invoke. ]
- The German writer Gottfried Lessing, discussing Homer's *Iliad* in *Laocoön: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), noticed precisely this effect (HO10):

When, for instance, the gods who take different sides in the Trojan war come at last to actual blows, the contest goes on in the poem unseen. This invisibility leaves the imagination free play to enlarge the scene at will, and picture the gods and their movements on a scale far grander than the measure of common humanity.

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- Hence, when Wilfred Owen asks ‘What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?’, he immediately invokes loss on a scale that defies commemorative marking;
  - o by concentrating on memorialising substitutes, he empowers the reader to fathom the possible scale.
- But I need to strike some notes of caution.
  - o Kant’s original analysis of the sublime related to natural phenomena, including natural disasters.
  - o When his theories are applied to man-made disasters such as war, and their representation, certain problematic consequences arise.
  - o The person that Kant imagined confronted with the sublime was an edified but unscathed bystander.
  - o The astonishment induced in this bystander by natural grandeur, Kant argues, ‘is, in view of the safety in which he knows himself to be, not actual fear’.
  - o When the object of scrutiny is armed conflict, this position of serene aloofness can come to connote negative qualities ranging from uncaringness to voyeurism to worse.
  - o As the critic Gene Ray remarks [HO11], ‘[t]o be able to find pleasure in avalanches and fissured glacier fields sets English nobles and bourgeois travelers on the Grand Tour apart from Swiss peasants for whom such natural features are a despised daily danger’.
  - o What is true of Alpine hikers is also true of civilians diverted by watching or reading about men at war.

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- In addition to encouraging aloofness, the Kantian sublime creates a sense of being 'superior to nature within us, and thus also that outside us'.
- But the excesses of man-made conflict in the modern era undermine any claims to the superiority of human reason.
- As Gene Ray points out, for Kant, the pain of imagination's failure before the power or size of raw nature was compensated for by reason's reflection on its own superior capacities.
  - o Hence 'Nature's threat to dominate the human was contained by human capacities for self-admiration'.
  - o After Auschwitz and Hiroshima, however, human reason and its moral law can offer no compensatory pleasure or moral superiority.
  - o In Gene Ray's words [HO12], 'the terror of the sublime becomes a permanent, ghastly latency, compounded by the anguish of shame'.
- A questionable sense of superiority is not the only troubling aspect of Kantian reason in the face of the sublime.
- In his 'General remark on the exposition of aesthetic reflective judgments', Kant argued that, if someone calls the sight of the starry heavens sublime, his definition must be grounded, not on a scientific understanding of stars, but on a perception of them as inscrutable and beyond understanding.
- Here, Kant seems to be approving of an exercise of the reason that is simultaneously self-congratulatory and *unthinking*.

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- If the former quality overlooks the victims of conflict, the latter conceals the causes and consequences of battle.
- When a reader, plunged into despair at his or her imagination's inability to grasp the scale or horror of war, subsequently rejoices at his or her capacity to judge it, there is a risk that the joyfulness is unattended by any thought of what led to the wars in the first place or of the ramifications for the victims.
- These difficulties arising, it is unsurprising that the Kantian sublime has been critiqued in the light of the mass, man-made disasters of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
- But what might neutralise this risk?
- If graphic realism in war representation appears to be called for, it is quickly dismissed by the thought that realism, whether graphic or not, is extremely problematic as a representational response to conflict.
- What is left is a logical impasse or, rather, a number of impasses:
  - o Simply put, the sublime (incarnated in the various diversionary tactics we've looked at) drives out reason.
  - o This is unacceptable in the face of war: reason must be reintroduced.
  - o But the very subject is beyond reason.
  - o Hence those who would convey war are driven back to sublime or indirect representations and the whole circular argument starts again.
  - o Indeed, the task of the war writer resembles that of the mythical Sisyphus, forced constantly to roll the representational boulder uphill, watch it fall and descend to retrieve it again.

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- The sublime of the humanly-wrought disaster – the sublime of war – is not a matter, finally, of delight, but of despair.
- It is therefore the negative of Kant's sublime or, rather, to Kant's two-stage experience of dismay-joy it adds a third stage that is a return to dismay.
- For the present, this tertiary stage of despair must remain somewhat nebulous: all we can say for now is that it incorporates both the dismay that arises when the causes and consequences of war are thought through and the dismay induced by the realisation of the limitations of any such through-thinking.
- I want to finish by reading you a poem by a young poet from Gaza.
  - o Batool Abu Akleen is 20 years old, born and raised in Gaza City—she evacuated from there this year and is now in Paris.
  - o This year, her bilingual collection of poems, *48kg* was published.
  - o Each poem represents a kilogram of her body weight: 48 in all.
  - o I'm going to read you the poem that's titled 39kg.
  - o As it's not in the public domain, I can't give you the whole thing on the handout, so you just have the last lines.
  - o As I'm reading, think about what the prospect of an unburied body says about the circumstances it was written in.

I want a grave with a marble tombstone  
my loved ones irrigate it  
they place roses on it  
they weep when longing stings their eyes.  
Their tears can't reach me

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so I don't get sad.

I want a grave in a cemetery where all of my neighbours  
are people who have taken their fun from life  
wrapped themselves in life  
then planted two kisses on life's cheeks  
& died.

I want a grave  
I don't want my corpse to be  
decomposing in the middle of the street.

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<sup>i</sup> Jonathan Marcus, 'Reporter's Log: Final Thoughts', BBC News Channel (19 April 2003), [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in\\_depth/world/2003/reporters\\_log/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/world/2003/reporters_log/default.stm), accessed 24 November 2025.

<sup>ii</sup> James Campbell, 'Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Criticism', *New Literary History* 30 (1999), 204.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, 210.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid 210.

<sup>v</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death', trans. under the supervision of Joan Riviere, *Collected Papers*, ed. Ernest Jones (London: The Hogarth Press / The Institute for Psycho-Analysis, 1950), 291

<sup>vi</sup> Robert Graves, 'The Garlands Wither', *The Times Literary Supplement* (26 June 1930), 534.

<sup>vii</sup> Steiner, *Language and Silence. Essays 1958-1966* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 76.

<sup>viii</sup> Charles Esdaile, *The Peninsular War. A New History* (London: Penguin, 2003), 141-55.

<sup>ix</sup> Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, 417.

<sup>x</sup> Moore, *A Narrative of the Campaign*, 358-65. Moore quotes letters from Captain Hardinge and a Colonel P. Anderson.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid, 366.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid, 366-7.

<sup>xiii</sup> See Harold A. Small, *The Field of his Fame. A Ramble in the Curious History of Charles Wolfe's Poem 'The Burial of Sir John Moore'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), 1; Robert Southey, *New Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. Kenneth Curry, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), vol. 1, 515. The present writer has not found evidence to corroborate the hypothesis that Southey read James Carrick Moore, but the resemblances between the accounts are remarkable. Southey drew on his historical contributions (covering the years 1808-11) to the *Edinburgh Annual Register* in writing his *History of the Peninsular War* (1823-32). The account of Moore's burial in this *History* also contains the word 'hastened' (*History of the Peninsular War*, 3 vols. (London: J. Murray, 1823), vol. 1, 805). The critical view of Moore's competence that Southey expressed in the *History* angered Sir William Napier, prompting him to write his rival *History of the War in the Peninsula and in the South of France from the Year 1807 to the Year 1814* (1828-40) (W. A. Speck, *Robert Southey: Entire Man of Letters* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 191-2) – but Southey is not the only commentator to have cast aspersions on Moore's command. Small, for example, enquires, 'Might he not have beat the French, and not merely beat them off, if he had sent for reinforcements instead of empty transports?' (*The Field of his Fame*, 1). A negative view of Moore's achievements as a military commander would produce a different reading of Wolfe's poem, but there is not enough evidence to speculate here as to whether Wolfe shared Southey's negative opinion.

<sup>xiv</sup> 'Chapter XXIII', *Edinburgh Annual Register* 1 (1 January 1808), 458-9.

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<sup>xv</sup> C. Litton Falkiner, 'Introductory Memoir', *The Burial of Sir John Moore and Other Poems by Charles Wolfe* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1909), xxv-xxviii.

<sup>xvi</sup> See Hansard HL Deb 25 January 1809 vol. 12 cc133-8, 'Vote of Thanks – Battle of Corunna'.

<sup>xvii</sup> John Sweetman, 'Moore, Sir John (1761-1809)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eds. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, 60 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), vol. 38, 979.

<sup>xviii</sup> Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen* (London: Oxford University Press and Chatto & Windus, 1974), 188.

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