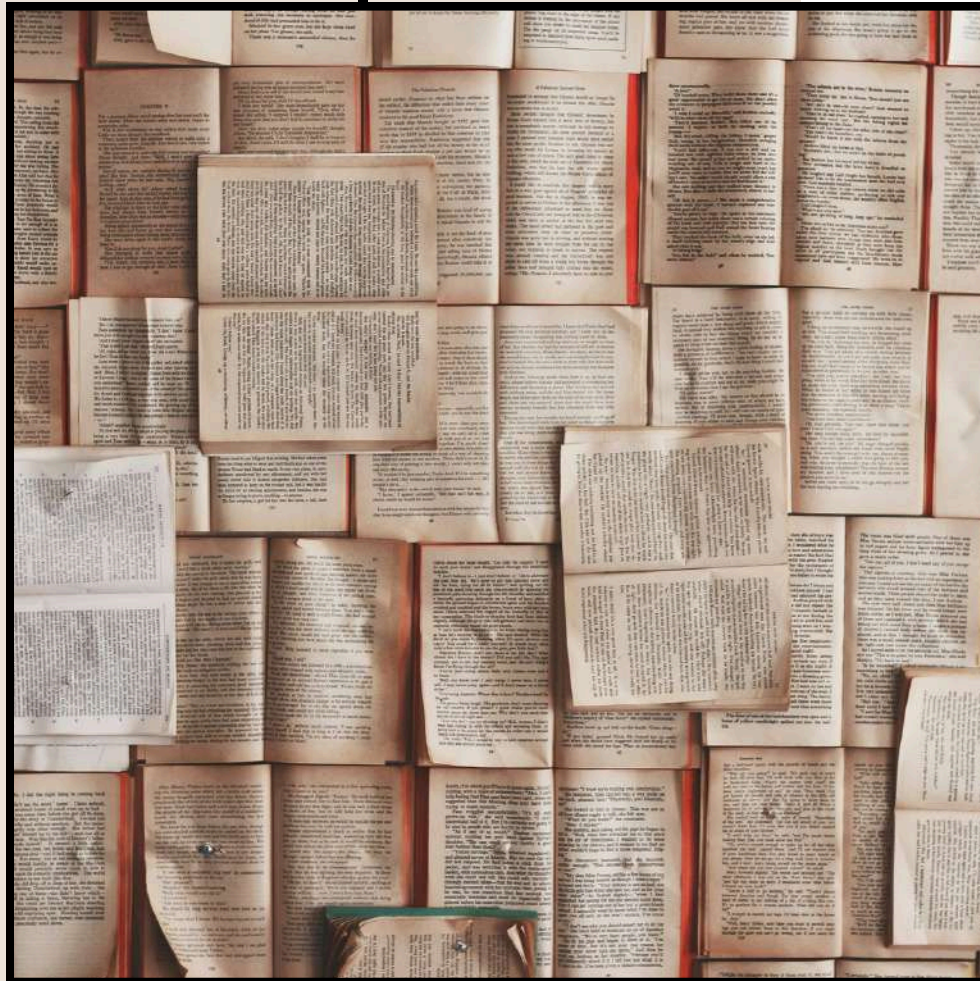


Not writing about war

Prof. Kate McLoughlin

University of Oxford

Introduction



- Reasons why war ***cannot*** and ***should not*** be written about
- Reasons why war ***must be*** and ***is*** written about
- ***Not*** writing about war in action in two poems
- What happens when poets don't write about war: **the sublime**



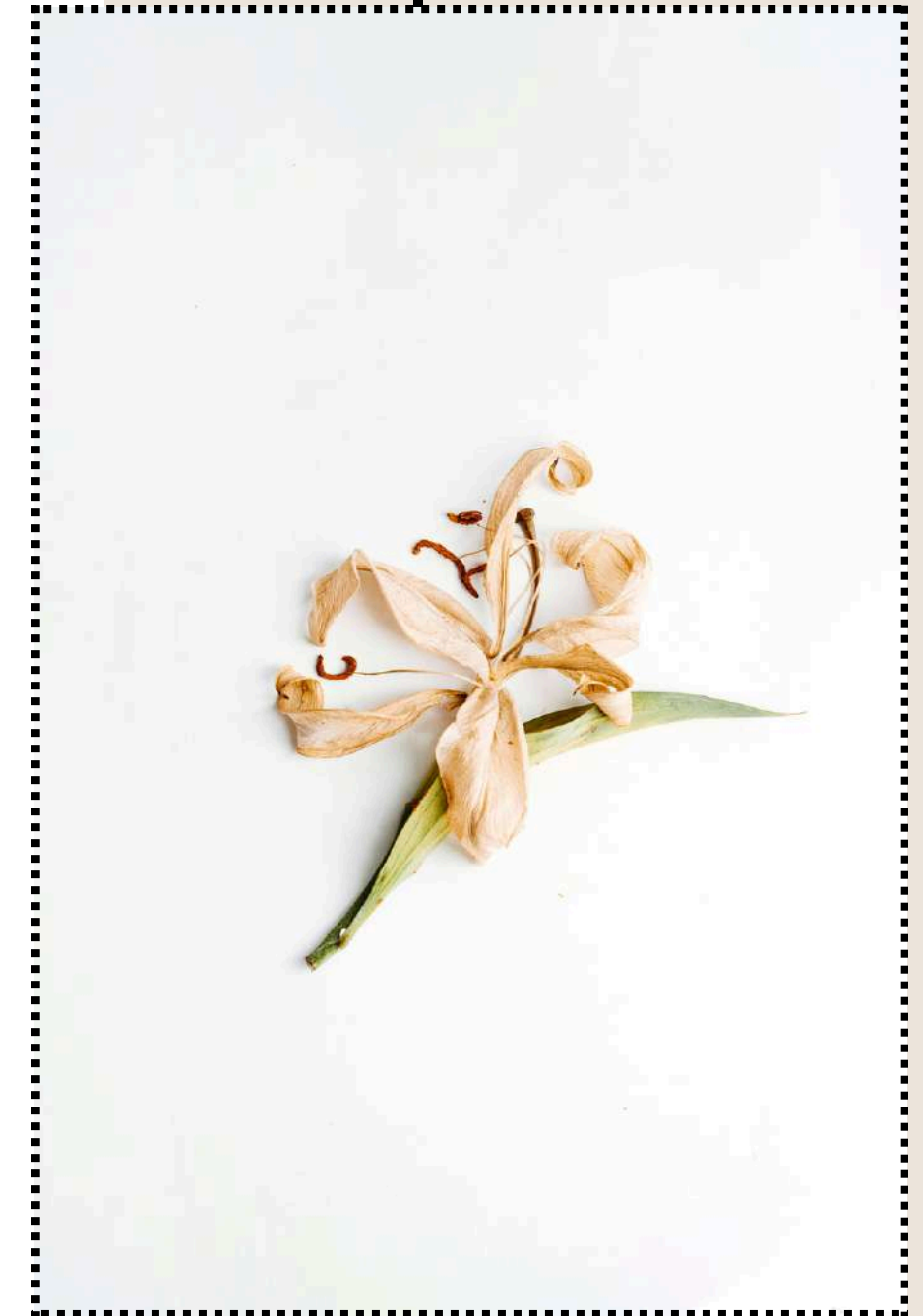
Why war **cannot** and **should not** be written about

- **logistical difficulties** of writing - armed conflicts too large to give a practical & political overview

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.**^[i]

BBC reporter Jonathan Marcus, covering second Gulf War in 2003

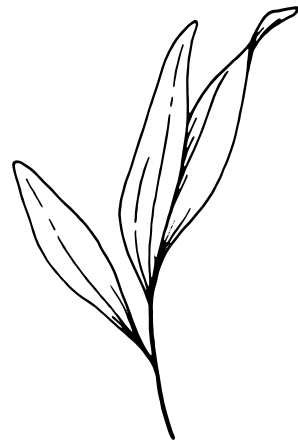


Why war **cannot** and **should not** be written about

- **importance of first-hand experience** & non-reliability of non-combatant accounts

Combat gnosticism is 'a construction that gives us **war experience as a kind of gnosis, a secret knowledge** which only an initiated elite knows'.[2]

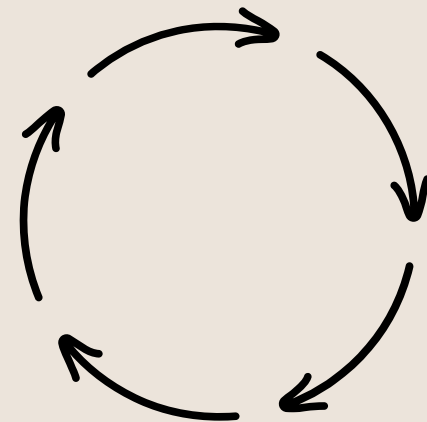
James Campbell, 'Combat Gnosticism', 1999



“

THE COMBAT GNOSTICISM TRAP

[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.



”

TWO ORDERS OF EXPERIENCE

“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” [3]

Sigmund Freud, 1915



but the accounts of both groups are important!



Robert Graves, 1930

[...] 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.[4]



Combatants' views are flawed

Participation in battles can distort the senses

displacement

loss

bombing



Civilians' experiences are also unique

... but civilians have to find other ways to witness war to be taken seriously

Why war **cannot** and **should not** be written about

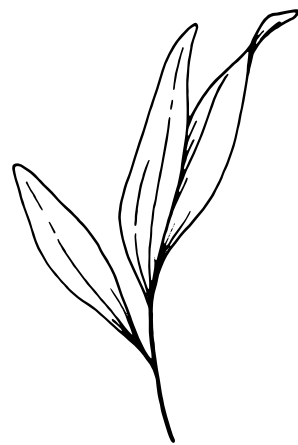
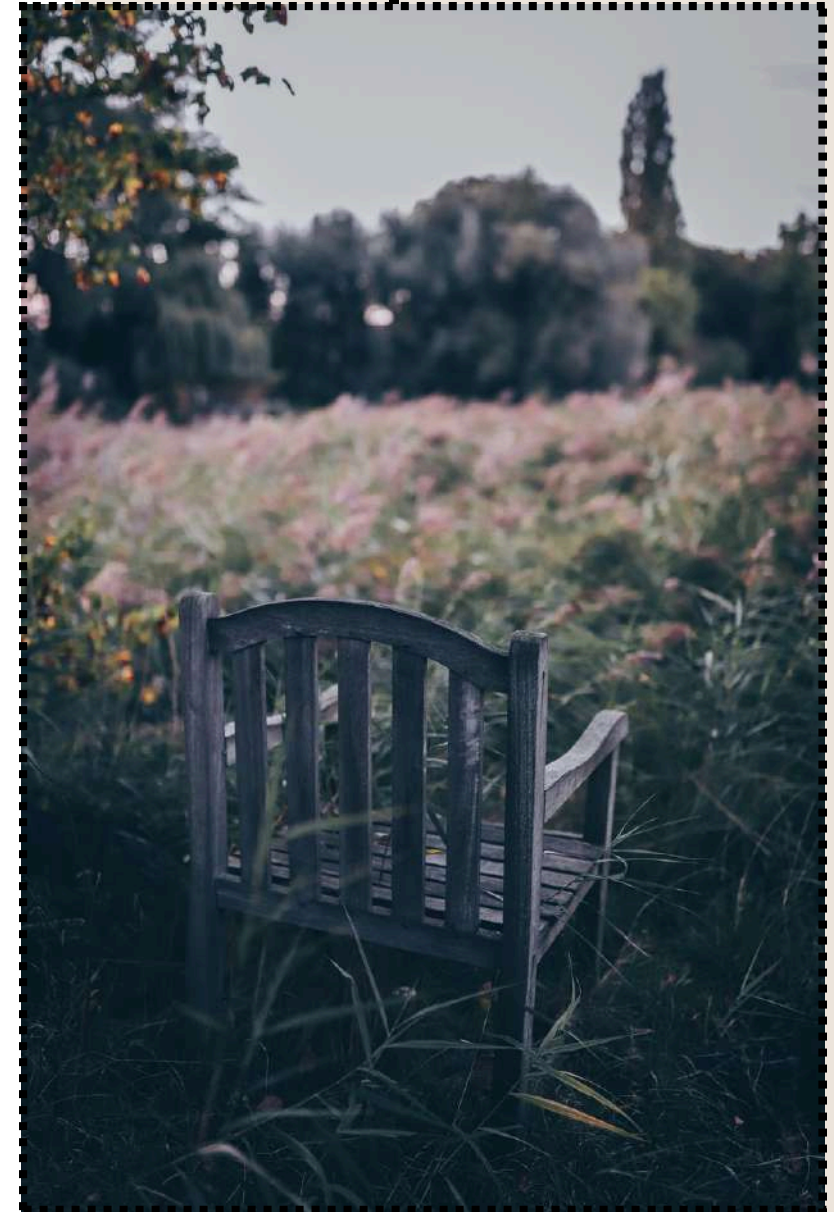
- **censorship & self-censorship** or not wanting to give bad news, at times politically motivated

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.

W.B. Yeats, *On Being Asked for a War Poem*, 1915

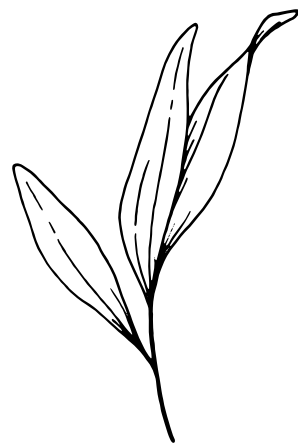


Why war **cannot** and **should not** be written about

- **feeling uncomfortable** to talk about the horrors of war in public

... if I were to speak of all the nameless horrors of that spring as plainly as I could, I should really disgust you... my memory prefers to dwell upon what was pleasing and amusing.

Mary Seacole, about her experience in the Crimea, 1857

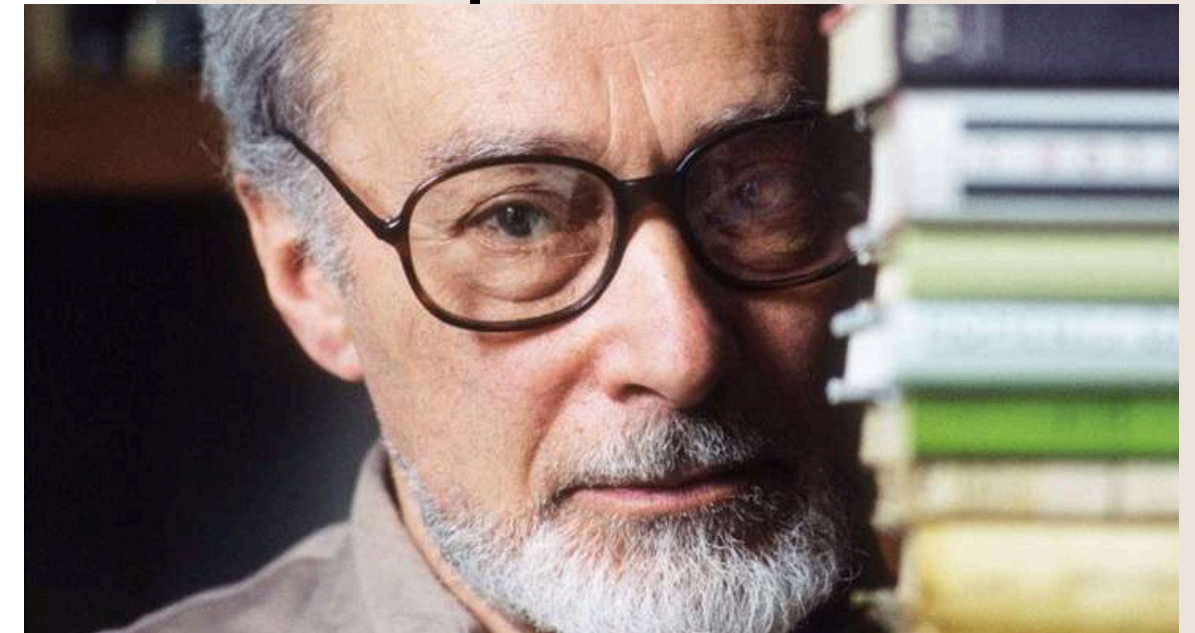
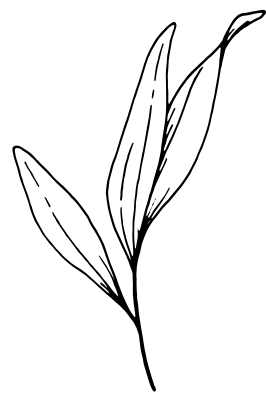


Why war **cannot** and **should not** be written about

- **trauma, inability to speak and lack of empathetic audience**

“Back then, in the concentration camp, I often had a dream: I dreamed that I’d returned, come home to my family, told them about it, and nobody listened. The person standing in front of me doesn’t stay to hear, he turns around and goes away. I told this dream to my friends in the concentration camp, and they said, “It happens to us too”.’[5]

Primo Levi, recollecting his captivity in Auschwitz





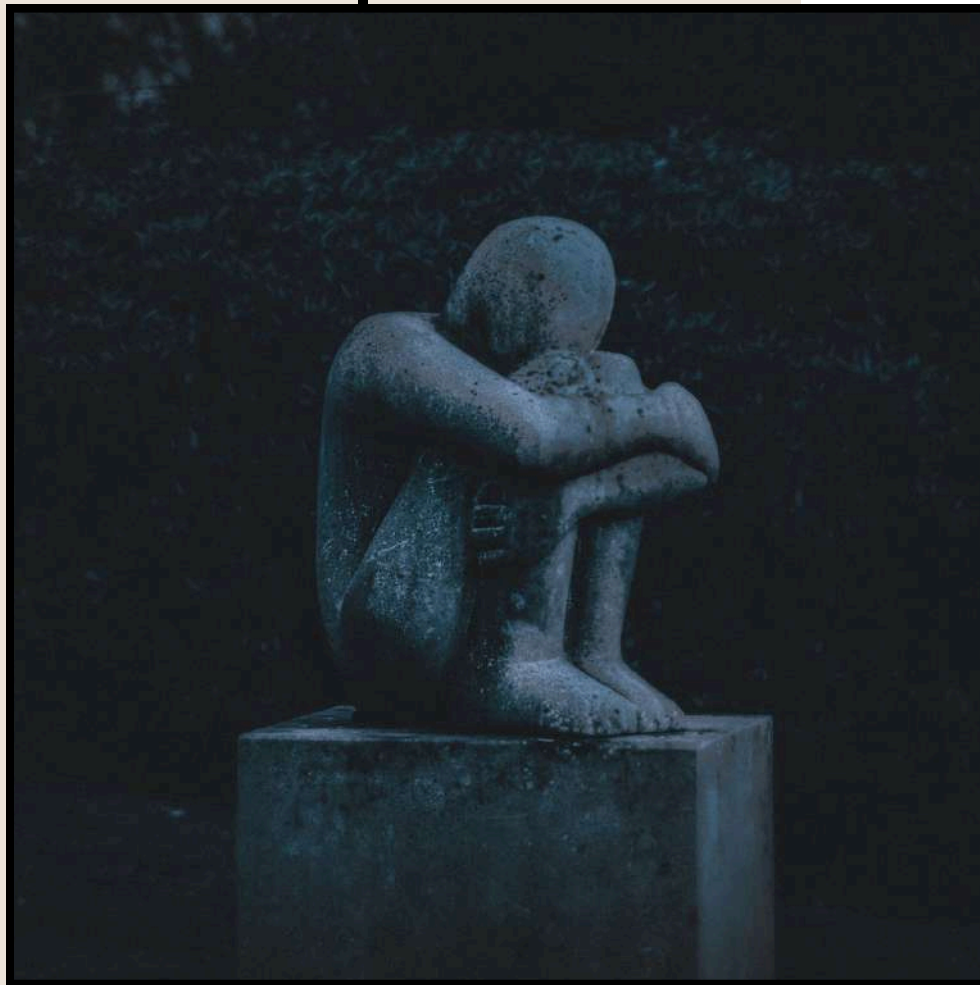
Why war cannot and should not be written about

- both mass and personal trauma
-

Why war **cannot** be written about

To recap...

- logistical difficulties
- combat gnosticism
- censorship and self-censorship
- lack of comfort
- trauma
- lack of audience
- scale





Why war **should not** be written about: ethical risks

- voyeurism (morbid curiosity)
- sadism
- bias (unfair opinion, or preference)
- exploitation of others' suffering
- invasion of privacy, and
- accommodation of atrocity (accepting violence as normal)





Why writing about war **is** necessary

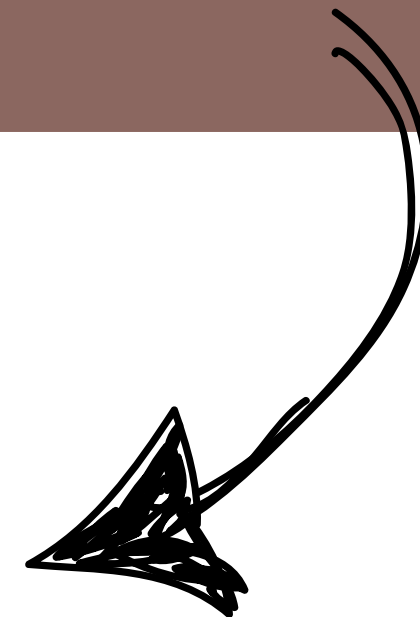
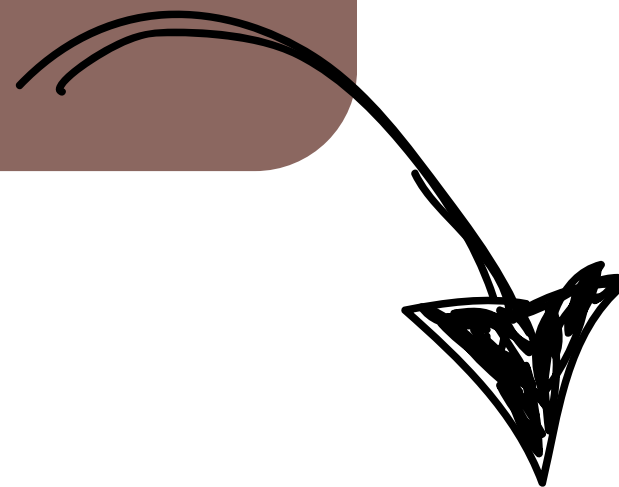
- as a form of protest
- warn against future wars & prevent them
- keep an accurate record
- remember and honour the dead
- give meaning to mass loss
- as a form of catharsis or therapy
- facilitate understanding between veterans and civilians
- ...

CONTRADICTIONARY IMPERATIVES

**WAR *CANNOT* BE,
AND *SHOULD NOT* BE
REPRESENTED**

**WAR *MUST* BE
REPRESENTED**

SILENCE



“

Not writing about war
in action

”



The Burial of Sir John Moore After Corunna (1816)

by Charles Wolfe

- Sir John Moore was a commander of the British Army during the Peninsular War (1808-1809)
- Battle of A Coruña (north-west Spain), 16 January 1809
- He led the British in retreat to the coast
- He was killed but most of his soldiers escaped



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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

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.



Writing on the outskirts of armed conflict

to avoid the 'red business' of actual fighting (Walt Whitman)

Euphemism

words with pleasant or positive connotations

Meiosis (downplaying)

- the grave becomes a 'bed'
- the earth a 'smoothed down ... pillow'
- death becomes 'sleep'

Emphasis

On what did **not** occur or was **not** present

'**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'

A Narrative of the Campaign of the British Army in Spain

by James Carrick Moore (1809)

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 9th Regiment, the Aides-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.

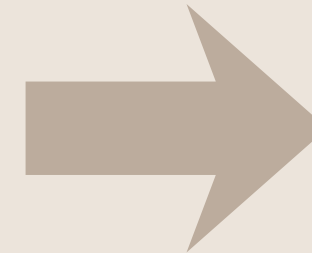


Different sources

A Narrative of the
Campaign of the British
Army in Spain (1809), by
James Moore



Edinburgh Annual
Register for 1808 (1810),
by Robert Southey



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

+ one detail: the burial
was 'hastened' (rushed)

why insist on the
absence of proper
funeral rites?

PARALIPSIS: the power of absence

stating and drawing attention to something in the very act of appearing to pass it over



I'm not even going to mention the fact
that you haven't done the washing up

PARALIPSIS: letting readers imagine the unnamed



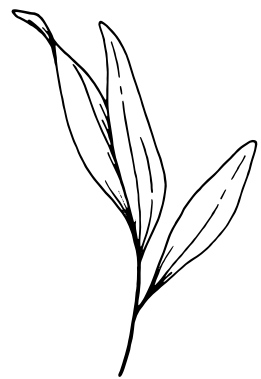
Rudimentary burial
Lack of ceremony



Respect
Victory in a bloody battle

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

- Author of some of the best British poetry on WW1
- Served at the front ("trench poet"), then sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital (Edinburgh) to be treated for shellshock
- Met Siegfried Sassoon, who helped him develop his poetic voice
- Returned on the frontline in 1918, was killed in action one week before the signing of the Armistice



Anthem for Doomed Youth (1917)

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

---Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle

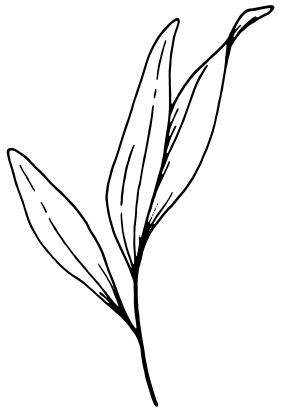
Can patter out their hasty orisons.

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.

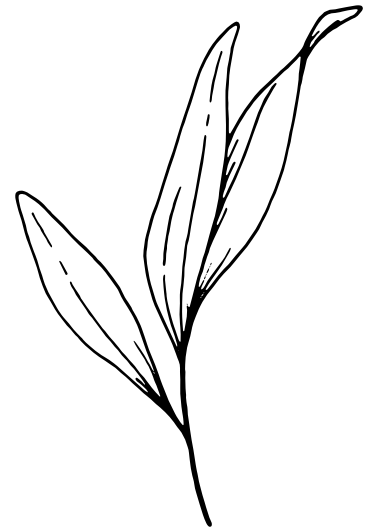
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;

Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,

And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

A trench poet, but...

- No word about trenches
- No word about mud, barbed wire, or No Man's Land
- No blood or broken bodies
- No injuries or body parts
- No funerals either



“

Anthem: ‘ a song, as of praise or gladness’

Oxford English Dictionary



dirge or anti-anthem: not gladness but sadness

‘wailing’, ‘calling’ mimic the sound of grief

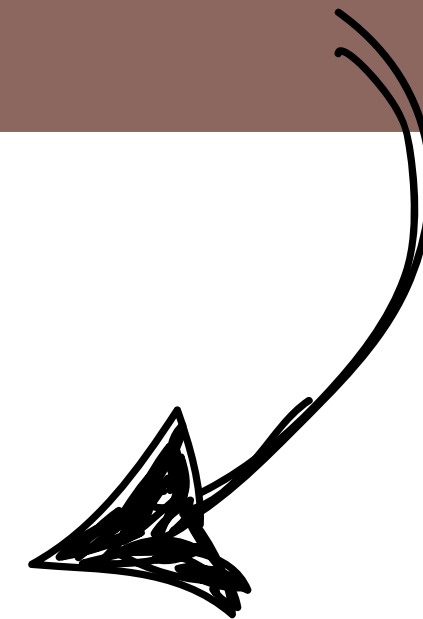
”

ANTHEM FOR...

DEAD YOUTH
(OWEN)



DOOMED YOUTH
(SASSOON)



DOOMED = DEAD YET TO COME



the funerals are for people who aren't dead yet

Anthem for Doomed Youth (1917)

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

verbs missing

ABSENCE

long dashes: pauses

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.



Anthem for Doomed Youth (1917)

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

funerals that are not funerals

- **guns** instead of bells
- **rifle-fire** instead of prayers
- **wailing shells** instead of church choirs

What candles may be held to speed them all?

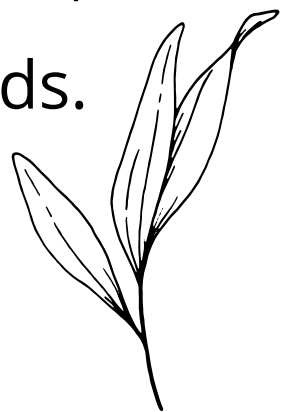
Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes

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.



Anthem for Doomed Youth (1917)

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

- **shining eyes** instead of candles
- **pale faces** instead of palls
- **patient thoughts** instead of flowers
- **falling of dusk** instead of the closing of curtains

funerals that are not funerals

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**.



Anthem for Doomed Youth

A poem about First World War that doesn't mention actual armed combat directly, that talks instead about funerals - or, rather, the absence of funerals, and is full of gaps and inconsistencies.



“

What **else** happens
when poets don't write
about war?

”

THE SUBLIME

things that seem beyond our
imaginings, **that are indescribable**



Immanuel Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime*

in *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790)



mighty scene that can't be understood by imagination

sense of displeasure and powerlessness



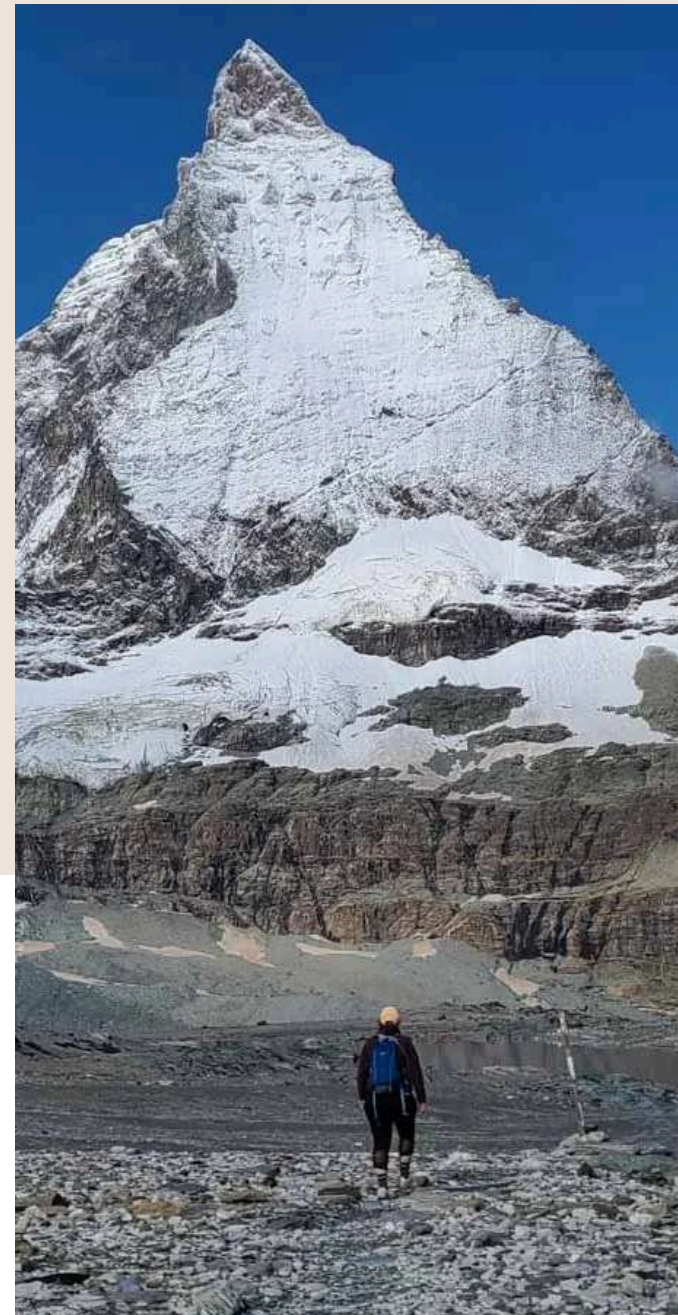
sublime can be understood through judgment

feeling of pleasure

SUBLIME



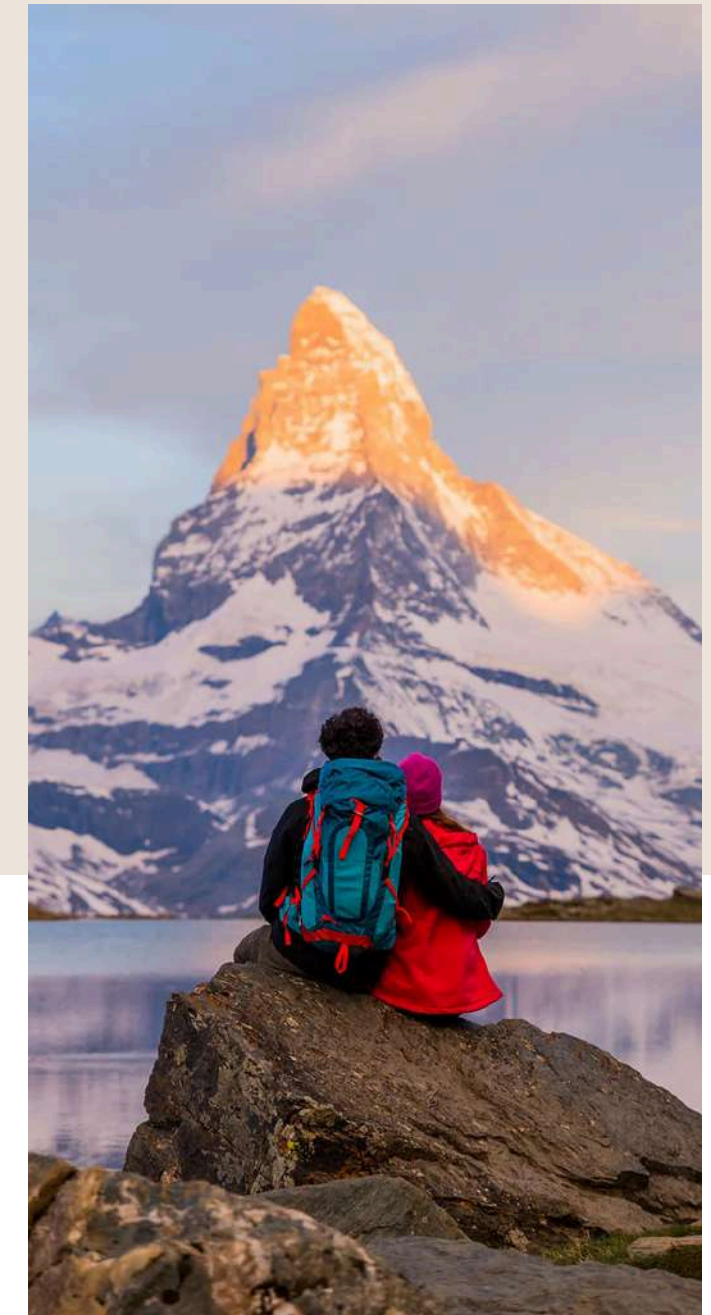
MATTERHORN



FEELING of
INFERIORITY



UNDERSTANDING



PLEASURE

KANTIAN SUBLIME VS INDIRECT (SUBLIME) WRITING



SIMILARITIES

Both rely on strong and overwhelming **emotional effects**

a natural phenomenon so vast and powerful
that is beyond human understanding

the reader's imagination fills the
gaps in extreme ways

KANTIAN SUBLIME VS INDIRECT (SUBLIME) WRITING



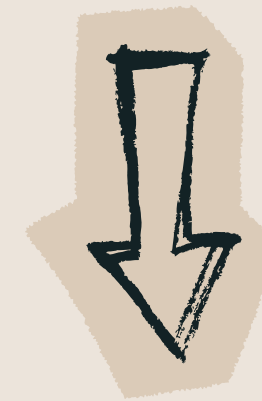
NATURAL PHENOMENA & DISASTERS



MAN-MADE DISASTERS



the **safe** bystander



the **uncaring** bystander

iSSUE

KANTIAN SUBLIME VS INDIRECT (SUBLIME) WRITING

KANTIAN SUBLIME

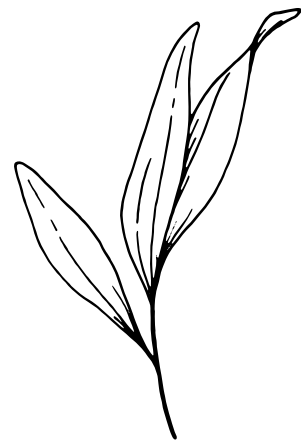
natural phenomena beyond our understanding

BUT

human ability to judge, reflect
on something that is overwhelming



**COMFORT
FEELING IN CONTROL,
SUPERIOR**



KANTIAN SUBLIME VS INDIRECT (SUBLIME) WRITING



PRIDE

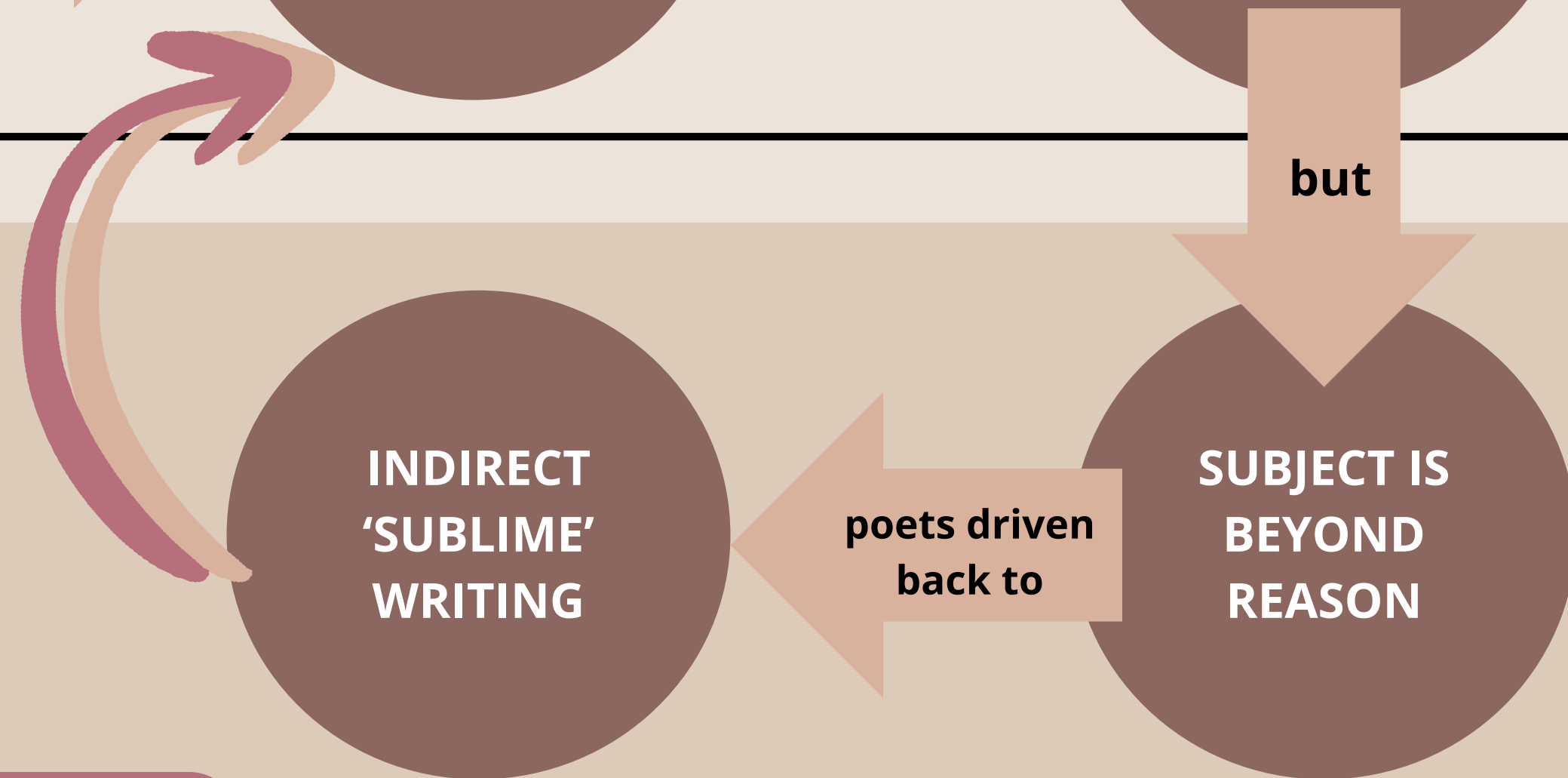
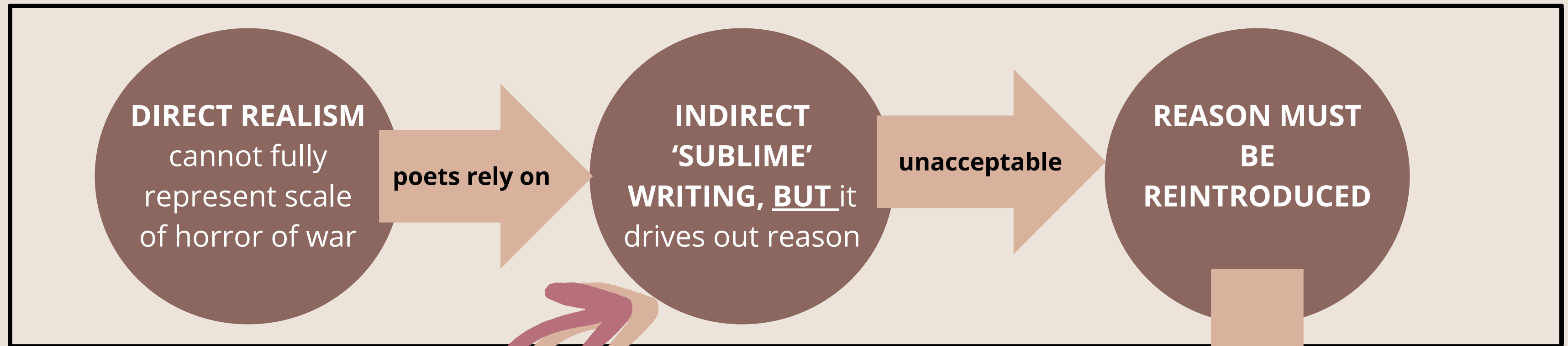
Human superiority over inside and outside nature
through reason and moral judgement



SHAME & DESPAIR

After Auschwitz and Hiroshima, human reason and
moral laws **no longer** offer **compensatory pleasure** or
feeling of superiority

ISSUE



VICIOUS CIRCLE



Verse 1

Verse 1

SISYPHUS AND THE BOULDER

“

The sublime of war is a
matter of despair

”

KANTIAN SUBLIME

DISMAY

COMFORT
IN
REASON

DISMAY

NO
COMFORT
IN REASON

DISMAY

WAR SUBLIME

“

For the present, this third stage of despair must remain somewhat nebulous: all we can say for now is that **it incorporates both the dismay that comes from thinking through the causes and consequences of war and the dismay that follows when we realise how limited such thinking is.**

”

BATOOOL ABU AKLEEN

- 20 years old
- born and raised in Gaza City, evacuated this year, now in Paris
- bilingual collection of poems, *48 kg*, published in 2025
- each poem = a kilogram of her body weight: 48 in all



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 teach me
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.

References

- [1] Jonathan Marcus, 'Reporter's Log: Final Thoughts', BBC News Channel (19 April 2003) accessed 24 November 2025.
- [2] James Campbell, 'Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Criticism', *New Literary History* 30 (1999), 204.
- [3] Sigmund Freud, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death', trans. under the supervision of Joan Rivière, *Collected Papers*, ed. Ernest Jones (London: The Hogarth Press / The Institute for Psycho-Analysis, 1950), 291
- [4] Robert Graves, 'The Garlands Wither', *The Times Literary Supplement* (26 June 1930), 534.
- [5] Ferdinando Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, trans. John Shepley (The Malboro Press, 1989), p. 42





Thank You