From Heroic Soldiers to Geometric Forms and Suffering Wrecks: The Transformation of the Male Body in the Art of World War I

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World War I, remembered as the Great War in the English language and in British collective memory, is still seen as one of the most crucial events in the history of the twentieth century. "Historians often describe it as the world's first industrial war, which drew upon advanced technology to produce unimaginable new forms of violence and suffering" (Tate 1). The war, with its new technologies and weapons, and with years of trench warfare, caused the death of approximately ten million people who were mobilized "at an average rate of more than 6,000 a day for more than four and a quarter years" (Fierke 471).[1] The unprecedented carnage confused people and forced them to work out adequate responses. In a very general sense, there were two ways of reacting to the Great War: to remain loyal to the pro-war attitude, rooted in the traditional interpretation of war, or to counter the traditional approach by an anti-war, disillusioned, and ironic response.[2]

The Myth of the Great War, which provides the framework for the way the Great War was "produced" in various systems of representations and interpretations, as well as for the way it has been preserved in collective memory, is built up by the elements of these two modes of interpretation. Although this myth is a compound of dozens of discourses and representational strategies, arguably its focal point is the figure of the soldier. One constituent of the myth of the modern soldier as it was formed by the Great War remains the manly ideal that changed as a result of the experience of the Great War, which had an immediate and lasting effect on the notion of masculinity and on representations of the male body in different forms of art from war poetry to graphic arts.

The myth of the war had been in the making well before the war broke out—borrowing many of its elements from Victorian ideas and representations of war. As Paul Fussell argues in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, the Great War "was perhaps the last to be conceived as taking place within a seamless, purposeful 'history' involving a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future" (21). The First World War, therefore, can be considered as a turning point which led to a change in the general view of history as well as of war and thus in the dominant representational strategies and myths related to war. The perpetuation of older myths was especially crucial in the construction of the figure of the

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soldier, and the traditional images were slow to disappear, especially as in Britain the general attitude to war was positive at the beginning—to fight for one's nation was seen as a glory and an honor—and the Victorian images seemed perfectly adequate to describe the sentiments of most people.

Just as the dismantling of the myth of the hero soldier was crucial in what became the myth of the Great War, the experience of the First World War proved formative in the erosion and decline of the highly prescriptive and restrictive Victorian masculine ideal, mostly dominated by muscular Christianity and celebrating physical prowess and energetic masculinity, which was strongly associated with sharp mental abilities and chivalric ideals.[3] As the war advanced and the nature of modern warfare was gradually revealed, the hegemony of the traditional interpretation of war became increasingly criticized; many felt that the idea of the heroic soldier who goes to fight for freedom and glory was no longer adequate. Many artists felt that idealization was not suitable for the depiction of the Great War's massacre, and new representational modes appeared. For example, "the artist Paul Nash [found] the normal tools of his craft . . . insufficient: 'No pen or drawing can convey this country,' he remarked to his wife about the landscape of Flanders. The rejection of traditional form in art seemed to be the only honest response" (Eksteins 216). In writing the figure of the soldier was represented more often as a wreck than as a heroic fighter, while exaltation and the individual features of soldiers' faces started to disappear from paintings: the deconstruction of the male body as a new phenomenon appeared in writing as well as on canvas.[4] The traditional chivalric virtues that dominated Victorian representations were no longer an advantage for an average soldier—he could not profit from them in the world of the trenches; physical prowess and noble sentiments were increasingly seen as anachronistic virtues against poisonous gas, machine guns, and bombs. After the first months of the war, the feeling of disappointment spread, while it also became obvious that a promised rapid and easy victory was very far from the truth.

The changing representation of soldiers during the war must be examined in terms of several different discourses, among which war is only one and representations of masculinity as well as of the (male) body are equally important. The portrayal of soldiers is also inseparable from its medium, the different forms of art and the traditions of different genres (from memoirs through elegy to genre painting). In order to understand the nature and the extent of the changes in the concept of masculinity and in the representation of the male body, it is necessary to examine the relevant aspects of the traditional modes of representation which served as a basis of

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perception and self-image for many of the men who went to war in 1914. Soldiers had always been seen as the embodiments of perfect manliness,[5] and this equation also determined the conception of masculinity at the outbreak of the Great War. Consequently, the men who were not fit for service and could not take part in the war were seen as falling short of the ideal of manliness. To humiliate these men, "deaf or indifferent to their country's need" (Gullace 178),[6] women handed them white feathers condemning them with the sign of cowardice. This kind of stigmatization encouraged men to enlist and caused a profound crisis in men's masculine identity.[7] The most ironic aspect of this crisis, however, was that the men out on the front had to face the same problem, since mechanized warfare made it impossible for them to practice the virtues that had previously determined soldierly conduct, and they were unable to conform to the soldier hero ideal they had inherited.[8]

In *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, George L. Mosse states that "during its relatively short life—from the second half of the eighteenth century onward—the manly ideal changed very little" (3). World War I, however, brought about a radical change in how soldiers and men in general saw themselves and how they were seen. In the traditional interpretation that defined Victorian representations, soldiers were considered as masculine ideals both in their physical and inner features. In the arts, the manly ideal was represented by academic historical painting, heroic poetry, such as Thomas Babington Macaulay's famous "Horatius,"[9] and later by some poems of Rudyard Kipling and Rupert Brooke. For the children of the lower classes, the manly ideal was represented in popular literature, by, for example, H. Rider Haggard's or G. A. Henty's novels. Magazines at the end of the nineteenth century, intended for young male audiences, such as *Boy's Own Paper*, also aimed to provide their readers with "something heroic, exotic and bracingly masculine" (Tosh 174). By the end of the nineteenth century, the manly ideal had thoroughly merged with imperial and nationalist ideologies: "Whether in the real-life exploits of empire-builders, or in the adventure yarns of Henty and Haggard, the colonies now served to intensify the association between masculinity and empire, and correspondingly to weaken the imaginative power of the link between masculinity and domesticity" (175).

Among the many constituents of the masculine ideal, some had an important role in the vicissitudes of the masculine myth during World War I. The beauty of the muscular male body had been an object of admiration from ancient times, and the chivalric idea with its values had been part of a shared cultural inheritance since the medieval period:

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> The building blocks of modern masculinity existed, but they were systematized, formed into a stereotype, only at the start of the modern age. Now the importance of the actual structure of the human body became equal to—if not greater than—the importance of its adornments. The stereotype of masculinity was conceived as a totality based upon the nature of man's body. (Mosse 5)

The Victorian era with its normative systematization created the Christian soldier hero to define an idealized masculinity, largely in an attempt to counter the age's obsessive fear of degeneration. Partly as a result of the intensifying imperialist and jingoistic ideologies, in the Edwardian period "the 'muscular Christianity' of the mid-nineteenth century, which had emphasized such qualities as compassion, fairness, and altruism, had given way to secular and more aggressive ideals. Particular value was placed on stoic endurance, that is, the forbearance of pain and the suppression of sentiment" (Roper 347). Edward John Poynter's painting *Faithful unto Death* (fig. 1) is an iconic Victorian piece representing the thoughtful soldier hero who internally tests his integrity and faith before battle.[10] His figure, an extremely popular image in the second half of the century, can be seen as a normative example embodying a stoic attitude to self-sacrifice that is all the more courageous if motivated by stoicism. "The aspiration of a physically fit, muscular male body corresponded with what Sonya Rose has termed 'tempered British masculinity' of the 'good citizen,' which combined the virtues of strength, endurance, restraint and chivalry" (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 598). The masculine myth connected to the war is built of such elements as self-sacrifice; chivalric generosity; strong homosocial ties between men; the ability to bear all kinds of physical inconvenience, suffering, and pain; and the cult of physical fitness.[11] This traditional discourse appears in academic historical painting, which also served as a decisive force during World War I. Solomon J. Solomon's *Portrait of a Young Officer* (fig. 2) demonstrates the traditional academic style in which soldiers were portrayed. The figure of the officer is in the absolute center; his face is recognizable and unique, while his posture suggests strength and self-confidence. His uniform is impeccable, his face serene—similarly to Jacques-Louis David's *Léonidas* (fig. 3) or to Poynter's soldier in *Faithful unto Death*, he looks forward calmly to battle.

One of the most well-known British poets who adopted the traditional heroic poetic voice in order to represent the soldiers of the Great War was Rupert Brooke. He wrote Neo-Romantic poems, celebrating

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fighting and soldiers using a patriotic tone. His poetic voice is idealistic and optimistic, rooted in traditional war poetry. These poems were written early in the war, and mirror the general, overwhelmingly positive and hopeful feelings, "glory" and "honor" frequently recurring as keywords in his works. As Simon Featherstone contends in *War Poetry*, by 1914 the physical participation of the poet became just as important as his writings.[12] "Brooke was a different kind of military hero to the Gordons and Kitcheners of the late Victorian era. He was a non-military soldier, a 'poet-soldier,' as Churchill called him in a *Times* memorial that set the tone for the celebration of Brooke as a national war poet" (14). He died of septicaemia as early as in 1915, and his poems were published posthumously. His war experience was minimal but his figure became emblematic in war propaganda, as he was elevated into a paragon of patriotism.

His poems set a tone to be followed by most World War I poets despite their own horrifying experiences on the front in the later years of the Great War. His five famous sonnets, often referred to as the "Innocent Sonnets of 1914," recall almost all the conventional elements of earlier war poetry, celebrating the traditional Victorian manly ideal, including the chivalric tradition, and aiming to place the soldiers of World War I in the context of previous heroes and wars. The works of Rupert Brooke and those soldier-poets who remained loyal to the idealistic, patriotic writing tradition were, according to Featherstone, the "last gasp of an old order" (10). Therefore, these poems are just as essential constituents of the masculine myth which came to be constructed in and after the Great War as the poetry of Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon's works and anti-war writing which defined itself by taking over and reversing some traditional elements.

Brooke's "Peace" evokes the abstract idea of honor which is connected to the figures of those who went to fight.[13] As Fussell claims in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, "the Great War took place in what was, compared with ours, a static world, where the values appeared stable and where the meanings of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable. Everyone knew what Glory was, and what Honour meant" (21). Brooke's sonnet is traditional in the sense that it adopts all the traditional elements of the manly ideal to celebrate the fighting soldiers and to shame the men who are unfit for duty by stigmatizing them as sick-hearted and emasculating them, calling them "half-men" (6-7). The sonnet describes the soldiers according to the heroic tradition through metonymy and synecdoche: "With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power" (3), virtues crucial in combat between two men with traditional weapons. With the troops,

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however, stuck in trenches and slaughtered by advanced technology from a great distance, the soldiers' individual combat skills became almost insignificant; the best soldier could be killed in a gas attack just like any "ordinary one": the soldier was transformed from a warrior into a victim on many occasions and this turn was frequently reflected in literature (for example, in Wilfred Owen's or Siegfried Sassoon's poems and in Richard Aldington's, Erich Maria Remarque's, and Henri Barbusse's fiction).

The myth of the soldier-hero was still alive when World War I began, and the English common soldier was frequently connected to Christ while the English army was often represented as Jesus's ally and elevated to sanctity in numerous cases—assuring the divine approval and aim of the war thus creating the modern equivalent of the ancient demigod soldier-heroes.[14] Brooke's "Peace" represents war as the will of God, defining it as something divine and sacred. It represents the Great War as an awakening: "And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping" (2), which remains a crucial motif throughout World War I poetry. This awakening, however, survived in collective memory as disillusionment, as the realization of the inadequacy of the heroic ideal. Siegfried Sassoon, for example, in "To Any Dead Officer," suggests that while the war is on, "It's night and it's not worth while to wake" (71). Brooke's "unconscious prophecy" is a very good example of the close connection between the rhetoric of pro-war poetry and the discourse created by anti-war writings which grew out of the former and incorporates some of its elements.

Similarly to the links between pro- and anti-war writing, when paintings in the academic style and those following the more modern—and generally anti-war—representations of soldiers are compared certain innovative changes can be identified. William Orpen's *Self-Portrait in Uniform* (fig. 4), for instance, is traditional in the sense that the soldier has a determined expression on his face and his stance indicates both mental and physical fitness and alertness. Orpen represents himself with his own weapon, in the middle of artistic creation. There is, however, at least one disturbing feature: the figure, slightly to one side of the painting, looks out of the painting's frame straight at the viewer, creating the impression that he is recording us instead of the war's events. In this manner, the painter connects the painting's reality to the viewer's and does not allow the viewer to keep a safe distance from the frontline. The style, with its larger strokes and dabs of paint, is also closer to post-impressionism than Orpen's portraits. Another painting by Orpen, *Thinker on the Butte de Warlencourt* (fig. 5),[15] is a strange mixture, both in terms of style and content: the lonely soldier, represented

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against a swarming, cloudy or smoke-filled, sky and in a rather dramatic light, which is all the more surprising as the rest of the sky is obscured, is a totally inadequate evocation of Rodin's iconic sculpture. The gesture reflects ironically upon the topos of the pensive, as is shown in "Faithful unto Death," since this kind of melancholic thinking is certainly not a conventional frontline activity and one that is not part of the traditional idea of the heroic soldier. The realistic, traditional paintings in these cases represent some ambivalence in the way they relate to war.

Some paintings retain the realistic representation but break with the heroic poses, downplaying the unique individuality of the soldiers, thus their portrayal of the Great War is more (openly) ironic and could even be considered in some sense as anti-war. Instead of the main figures, it is the atmosphere, the world of the trenches, that dominates these paintings, and the soldiers, losing their individuality, melt into the background. This shift also manifests in the use of more innovative techniques and unrealistic representations as illustrated in Richard Nevinson's *Reliefs at Dawn* (fig. 6), which moves further away from realistic representation and, accordingly, the individualization of the soldier figures. The painting captures only silhouettes, with no hint of heroism, only a sense of weariness, and the postures of the figures are very far from classical poses. Their only identification is their uniforms: the helmets and tunics. Nevinson's painting, with its suppressed lights and monochrome tonality, represents a group of soldiers filing out of a trench to relieve others. "Since dawn was the favorite time for launching attacks, at the order to stand-to everyone, officers, men, forward artillery observers, visitors, mounted the fire-step, weapon ready, and peered towards the German line. When it was almost full light and clear that the Germans were not going to attack that morning, everyone 'stood down' . . ." (Fussell 46). The soldiers in *Reliefs at Dawn* seem to be exhausted and are not recognizable: they are either too far away and their faces cannot be made out or they stand with their backs towards the viewer. They are identical units, parts of a chain of movements not unlike a production line opening onto the open ground outside the trench. The rising sun paints a tiny white line on the horizon, and only the bayonets, standing out of the grayness of the picture, reflect its whiteness, which may ironically suggest that the only thing the new day would sooner or later bring for them is another battle. The low perspective close to the ground, which in classical painting gave solidity and might to the soldier figure, achieves the opposite effect here: that of hopelessness.

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Isaac Rosenberg's ironic poem "Break of Day in the Trenches" evokes feelings similar to Nevinson's *Reliefs at Dawn* by engaging with the traditions of pastoral poetry[16] but in a subversive way. As Fussell observes, "[W]hile looking back on literary history in this way, it also acutely looks forward, in its loose but accurate emotional cadences and in the informality and leisurely insouciance of its gently ironic idiom, which is, as Rosenberg indicated to Edward Marsh, 'as simple as ordinary talk'" (250). The poem opens with a depiction of the static trench world at dawn. The only living thing which brings life into the poem is the "sardonic rat" which touches the speaker's hand. The rat in this poem, however, is not repulsive and disgusting, rather well-travelled and sophisticated, emphasizing the irony created by trench warfare, which inverted the roles of humans and animals. In the "whimsical" Darwinian world of the war, the rat has a much better chance of survival than the average soldier stuck in the trenches, described ironically by means of the topoi of heroic representation:

> It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
> Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,
> Less chanced than you for life,
> Bonds to the whims of murder,
> Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
> The torn fields of France. (13–8)

The traditional masculine ideal appears in the poem through the imagined perspective of the rat, which has the freedom to move and to live in contrast to the soldiers, who are sentenced to immobility or to die at war, precisely because their human privilege, honor, obliges them to stay on. While the ideal of the athletic soldier appears in the poem ironically, the terror of the war, seen in the men's eyes, is depicted realistically:

> What do you see in our eyes
> At the shrieking iron and flame
> Hurled through still heavens?
> What quaver—what heart aghast? (19–22)

Perhaps the "animalistic instinct" of self-preservation is shared by rats and men—unlike the "heroic" ideal that goes against the natural instinct of survival. It is clear that there is no place for the absurd idea of bravery and heroic self-sacrifice in World War I as traditional manly virtues have become impracticable.

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A crucial feature of the war, which rendered the traditional representations of heroism impossible was the fact that the male body became invisible—at least outside hospitals and dressing rooms. The body was hidden underneath the uniforms, the heavy coats, the helmets, and the gas masks—partly because of climatic circumstances. Eric Kennington's sequence of drawings *Making Soldiers* also represents soldiers in their outfits ready to fight, portraying human bodies as invisible under the heavy burden of their equipment, making them almost identical. *Bayonet Practice* (fig. 7) represents a fairly conventional form of fighting in which individual skills were still significant. The central figure, however, turns his back towards the viewer, and his body is fully wrapped, protected against a counterattack. We cannot see the soldier's face, even his hands are in gloves, no personal feature appears in the drawing at all. He is in the middle of a mechanical movement, probably repeated many times during practice. The soldiers in their identical uniforms do not only lose their individuality but seem to adopt an inhuman, automaton-like, mechanical quality. As Michel Foucault argues,

> [b]y the late eighteenth century, the soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit . . . . (135)

By the time of World War I with all its new mechanized weaponry the human body seems to have adopted machine-like automatic functioning in order to survive. In *Bayonet Practice*, there are probably bombs in the sky—each falling at the same angle, reinforcing the similarity between the machine and the soldier's automaton-like, repetitive movements. The bags hanging in rows on the left-hand side of the drawing symbolize the enemy and prescribe how they should be seen as identical "items" to be destroyed one by one: "Soldiers as automatons were required only to act, not to think" (Englander 192). Another piece in the sequence, *The Gas Mask* (fig. 8), captures the moment before the soldier puts on his gas mask. His face is in shadow but his eyes stare blindly into the distance with apathy. It is the highly symbolic moment of transition from an individual human being to a mass-produced soldier. The gas mask is not simply "mechanical," but also monstrous with its uncanny and hideous similarity to a face—it dehumanizes, but not only in terms of the human-machine context, but also in terms of losing one's subjectivity and individuality.

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World War I with its extremely mechanized warfare created the feeling that it was no longer the guns, tanks, and airplanes that functioned as prostheses for the human body, extending its capacities to kill and maim, but the human body itself had become part of these machines, not ruling them but ruled by their strength. Nevinson's Vorticist lithograph *The Bomber* (fig. 9) "was one of few Nevinson prints to be executed in a quasi-Futurist style; a style the artist believed was suited to the subject matter" (Walsh 119). The ambiguous title may refer to the weapon as well as the person who operates it—suggesting an identification of the two. This print remains just as enigmatic as the title; since no clear form can be defined, we can only guess where the soldier's figure ends and where his weapon begins in the whirl of cold metallic colors. The dominating diagonal lines suggest force as if conveying the force of the explosion the bomb will cause, while the disordered forms of the picture imply its effects: "Specifically, the geometric forms that came to be characteristic of Vorticism were, on the one hand, sharply delineated, and on the other, constructed and arranged so as to suggest driving, rushing, forceful motion" (Hickman 32). The rails under the soldier's figure suggest that he is on the war's mechanical track of killing and he only acts as a machine according to prescribed rules.

Nevinson's *The Bomber* is similar to Jacob Epstein's sculpture *Rock Drill* (c. 1913-15) (fig. 10) in the sense that the boundaries between human beings and machinery are blurred. There was a tendency during the war to see the human figure as the embodiment of energy (Harrison 77) and so to see machines as metaphors for active, powerful qualities in human beings, as their movements characterized the construction of human figures (Harrison 79). *Rock Drill* stood as a celebration of modern machinery and masculine virility—the original sculpture represents a human-like figure on a rock drill with a head, a chest (even with the ribs in the upper body), arms, and legs. The reconstructed 1974 version by Ann Christopher and Ken Cook, however, displays only a torso with the actual rock drill missing: only the machine-like quality of the figure remains to evoke it.

The stylization in many of the paintings discussed so far reaches its climax in Nevinson's war paintings. Nevinson, a cubist and a futurist,[17] had been influenced by the style of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and others as reflected in his war work. In two of his futurist paintings, *Column on the March* and *Returning to the Trenches* (figs. 11 and 12), the individuality of the soldiers dissolves. The bodies cannot be distinguished from each other or from the weapons, and the painting is dominated by the rhythms and patterns of small geometric, angular shapes, created by light and darkness—the soldiers' faces

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are not distinct from these patterns but are part of them. These paintings are dynamic in nature precisely because of their repetitive way of tracing and the pulsating colors. The army, the "celebrated automata" (Foucault 136), seems to pass the viewer on its way to battle. The viewer, however, is not allowed to take a totalizing position, but rather only a subordinated one, and must look up to the army, while in the case of *Returning to the Trenches* the viewer is on the same level as the soldiers, which would seem to grant empowerment to the marching men. Yet, this is not the impression created by the painting: the huge and empty sky with its metallic color, also reflecting the color of the road and the mud, seems to dwarf the soldiers, miniaturizing them. *Returning to the Trenches* works with very different, warmer colors, with red and purple-brownish patches dominating, but the effect is no less dehumanizing as the bodies break down into geometric forms, and the geometric logic that emphasizes the movement of the whole regiment rather than the individuality of the soldiers suggests that the bodies are already dismembered and exploded. In both of Nevinson's paintings, the soldiers lose their individuality and their humanity because of the angular geometric forms which build up their bodies, until they seem to merge into one huge destructive machine. The weapons and the bodies are not separated: in smaller groups, the soldiers hold their weapons at the same angle, suggesting that they are extensions of their bodies, bringing them closer to being automata instead of living and feeling human beings.

Plan of War, featured on the cover of the war issue of Wyndham Lewis's avant-garde magazine *Blast* (fig. 13), goes even further. As Thomas E. Hulme puts it, "the human figure is perceived [only] in terms of a few abstract mechanical relations" (qtd. in Harrison 97)—the soldiers fully lose their human character and melt into their surroundings. "The angles, lines, and spears of the Vorticist paintings, together with titles such as *Plan of War* (as well as by the proximity of actual war in Europe at that moment) suggest battle, soldiers, discipline, hardness, and aggressive motion" (Hickman 95). The figures of the soldiers are only symbolic, embodying ideals as previously mentioned: their "function" thus remains the same as, for example, that of the soldier's in Poynter's realistic representation, of which only the form of expression seems to have become more militant, accommodating the new experiences of the Great War. Cubism, a product of modern technological development, was fascinated with technology and placed great emphasis on creating this special unity between humans and their weapons: "the new avant-gardes looked to the process of global modernization and imperialist expansion for tropes with which to shatter the confines of the decadent

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interior" (Nicholls 79).[18] The logic of the Great War paralleled these developments, calling forth a tendency in painting to deconstruct the male body, to invalidate the traditional athletic soldier-hero ideal, and to express the experiences of the war, which, as many felt, could not be depicted authentically with the devices of realistic representation.

The centralized, individualized heroic figure of the previous ages gradually vanished from World War I representations. The dissolution of the heroic ideal, on the one hand, was accompanied by the disappearance of the actual bodies under their uniform and by the portrayal of the men as parts of the great machinery of war. On the other hand, the death of the previously predominant heroic ideal became strikingly visible in the representations of wounded and dying soldiers. If the body itself is invisible in most paintings, this is certainly not the case with the representations of wounded soldiers, where the body is not simply visible but is all too visible. Being injured or receiving a fatal wound—or rather, bearing physical suffering in a manly way—had been an integral part of the manly ideal before the Great War, and the traditional representation of the glorious combatant was deeply rooted in models from antiquity: "The classical canon defined both the image of the fallen warrior and the public meaning of beauty, inspiring modern warrior myths, commemoration, and commercial beauty culture" (Carden-Coyne 6). The heroic soldier is always individualized and never loses dignity; solemnity lingers around his figure, and it is clear that his death is purposeful and his sacrifice will be remembered. The heroic tradition thus reassures the soldiers that their sacrifice is not in vain and they are giving their lives for the right cause, winning eternal glory.

In the large-scale massacre of the Great War, however, it seemed no longer certain that the soldiers' death was worth anything or even brought their nation closer to victory (and the value of this "victory" was seen as increasingly questionable, too). "Most Englishmen were utterly unprepared for the stalemate on the Western Front and the triumph of artillery, machine-guns and barbed wire over human 'valour.' For many Britons, after all, the Great War initially had promised to reassert the power of the moral over the mechanical, of the elite over the mass, of spiritual over material forces" (Bogacz 232). Soldiers were not only threatened by physical injuries, but also mental disorders, and many suffered from shell shock, recurring nightmares, and hallucinations and were deeply traumatized by the experience of war.

Literary representations of the shell-shocked soldiers—for example, Septimus Smith in *Mrs Dalloway* and Chris in *The Return of the Soldier*—suggest that the war reasserts the mechanical aspect which determines the soldiers'

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behavior and characterizes the circular, repetitive nature of trauma instead of the strict moral codes of the nineteenth century. The representations of the traumatized soldier figures thus link the mechanical workings of machines and humans from another perspective and point out the vulnerability of the human soul, which is just as important (or even more crucial) as the realistic representations of physical wounds.

In visual art, the horrors of the war and the destruction of human bodies appeared in cruelly realistic representations of wounds and suffering. "The dead and wounded stimulated cultural and artistic responses that permeated visual memories. Newspaper reports about wounded and disabled, as well as paintings and films, reinforced the idea of the male body as a site of pain" (Carden-Coyne 35). The celebration of heroic self-sacrifice and the individualization of the suffering soldier disappeared completely from many paintings and drawings: Nevinson and Kennington, among numerous other artists, broke radically with the idealization of the academic style, and soldiers were more often represented as helpless victims. Anti-war poetry started to complain about the meaninglessness of war, for example, Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting," "Asleep" and Siegfried Sassoon's "A Whispered Tale," "To the Warmongers" and "The Effect." Pity rather than hero-worship and admiration permeated many paintings and literary works, while the idea of self-sacrifice was totally reevaluated.[19]

Innovative representations of wounded soldiers include Nevinson's *The Doctor* (fig. 14) and *La Patrie* (fig. 15), Kennington's *Gassed and Wounded* (fig. 16) with all the realistic and shocking elements of the sufferings and healing. Instead of the tone of elevated calmness, which characterized some traditional paintings such as, for example, John William Waterhouse's *The Death of Cocles* (1869) or John Lavery's *The First Wounded, London-Hospital, August 1914* (1915), agony and an inhuman struggle for life dominate the pictures. *The Doctor* depicts the wounded soldier in the foreground with a painful facial expression "inspired by Munch's celebrated painting *The Scream* (1893)" (Black 22), which almost dehumanizes his figure, while the doctor, unlike the nurse in *First Wounded*, is tending to him with a cold medical interest. The setting and the stretcher invalidate the elevated dignity traditionally built around the figure of the wounded soldier. The injured soldier in the background with his trousers down, absolutely defenselessness and humiliated, represents the grotesque opposite, the obverse of the heroic soldier image. In the ironically and bitterly allegorical *La Patrie*, the abstract cause for which the soldiers fight appears as an empty notion. In the infernal darkness, completely disempowered suffering men lie on stretchers in what

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seems to be a temporary dressing station in an atmosphere of complete hopelessness. As in most of these paintings, no individual soldier is placed in the center: the bodies in pain are almost as identical in their suffering as the marching bodies in Nevinson's other paintings, and the factory-like atmosphere is the logical end of the road for all those marching infantrymen. The door which represents the connection with the outside world is not open for the viewer, and it does not provide a means of escape, it is a door for one-way traffic only, as another injured soldier is being brought in.

Nevinson did not only represent the horrors of the war in his paintings, but he also wrote about wounded soldiers in his autobiography, published in 1937:

> [the wounded in "The Shambles"] had been roughly bandaged . . . they lay, men with every form of terrible wound, swelling and festering, watching their comrades die . . . There was a strong smell of gangrene, wine and French cigarettes . . . They lay on dirty straw, foul with old bandages and filth, these gaunt bearded men, some white and still with only a faint movement of their chests to distinguish them from the dead by their side.
>
> (qtd. in Black 19)

His memories about the wounded and about their poor conditions echo the depressing atmosphere of his paintings. The soldiers with their swelling and festering wounds cannot be represented as heroic ideals dying with dignity on freedom's altar for a justified cause—their suffering, so physical and so merged with filth even in this short excerpt, cannot be elevated or purified and considered as a noble sacrifice for the homeland.

Kennington's *Gassed and Wounded* offers another demystification of the topos of the heroic soldier. The injured soldiers are all defaced, but the focus of attention is on the uniformed figure in the foreground who fails to become an individual, as his face and front are covered in darkness: the black patch or stain that appears where the soldier's character should appear is like an empty black hole, a denial of the active and distinct body. "Chemical warfare destroyed the Victorian notion of honour in battle" (Carden-Coyne 37) and was able to cripple men on a previously unimaginable scale: "although a 'silent' weapon, it resulted in visible, painful wounds, blistering the skin and stripping the body of flesh. An Australian soldier lived for five years in a saline bath after losing all his skin in a gas attack" (37).

Siegfried Sassoon's "To the Warmongers" shares the feeling of hopelessness represented by these paintings, and complains about the

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incomprehension of those who have not had first-hand frontline experiences. The short lines, like heavy blows, pulsate and create a tight, soldierly but melancholic rhythm. The speaker has just returned "from hell" to tell his terrible experiences (1):

> Young faces bleared with blood,
> Sucked down into the mud,
> You shall hear things like this,
> Till the tormented slain
> Crawl round and once again,
> With limbs that twist awry
> Moan out their brutish pain,
> As for the fighters pass them by. (5–12)

In the second part of the poem the general view of the public—drawing on the traditional, heroic representation of battles and soldiers in them—is confronted with reality, mocking all the great values considered worth dying for: "For you our battles shine / With triumph half-divine; / And the glory of the dead / Kindles in each proud eye" (13–6). Triumph, glory and shining battles are only appearances, and the poem's conclusion invalidates them by a simple, sorrowful statement appraising human life as more valuable than empty ideals: "And the wounds in my heart are red, / For I have watched them die" (19–20).

As Carden-Coyne argues, "[t]he First World War destroyed human bodies on an unprecedented scale. Modern technologies mangled faces, blew away limbs, and ruined nerves. Ten million dead, twenty million severe casualties, and eight million people with permanent disabilities, modern war obliterated with unsparing, mechanical efficiency" (1–2). The mangled face and the destroyed body were not only the face and body of millions of specific individuals, but also the body and face of an ideal: the experience of World War I brought radical changes in the traditional discourse which determined ideal manliness, especially in English culture in which rigid Victorian and Edwardian norms prescribed the terms of perfect masculinity. The Great War invalidated both the naive ideas about pure combat in which individual fighting skills could win eternal glory for a soldier and the figure of the athletic soldier hero. Heroism and self-sacrifice for a higher cause in the world of the trenches were no longer considered to be causes worthy enough to die for.

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Just as the destruction of the traditional manly ideal ran parallel with the destruction of the male bodies and nerves in the war, the hegemony of traditional modes of representation of the soldiers was gradually replaced by more innovative strategies both in poetry and painting. The figure of the physically or mentally disabled, disempowered soldier as a new phenomenon gained a central position during and after World War I, questioning the validity of the old patriarchal order. In visual arts classical beauty, highly praised even at the beginning of the twentieth century, lost its validity. Besides the classical, idealizing academic style new modes of depiction appeared, where formal experimentation was inseparable from the object: the dehumanization of human beings and human bodies, either in terms of making them cogs in a killing machine or in terms of the mangling and mutilation of bodies; the figures of the soldiers lose their dignity and even their human characteristics in many cases. World War I was a turning point both in human history and in the history of gender,[20] invalidating many previously unquestioned values, showing the absurdity and the unrealizable nature of the previously celebrated manly ideals[21] and bringing about more complex and fluid representations of masculinity.

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Notes

[1] J. M. Winter's works provide more information on the historical background. See, for example, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (1995), and *The Experience of World War I* (1988).

[2] It should be noted that, at least in the arts, there was no automatic allegiance between pro-war attitudes and conservative style. Cubist painting, for instance, said an emphatic yes to technological innovations, at least in some European countries; while Siegfried Sassoon's sonnet "Dreamers" is traditional in form in a genre deeply rooted in English literary history but clearly anti-war in content.

[3] On Victorian masculinity see Michael Kimmel's *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural and Historical Encyclopaedia*, Trev Lynn Broughton's *Men of Letters, Writing Lives: Masculinity and Literary Auto/Biography in the Late Victorian Period*, Emelyne Godfrey's *Masculinity, Crime and Self-Defence in Victorian Literature*, and J. A. Mangan and James Walvin's *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800–1940*.

[4] In *Rites of Spring*, Eksteins argues: "The most radical artistic response to the war came from a group of people who made a complete break with traditional loyalties and gathered in neutral Zürich in 1915 to found there the Dada idea—if one can speak of this nihilistic manifestation as an idea" (210).

[5] For a detailed account see Béla Pukánszky and András Németh, *Neveléstörténet* [The History of Education] (1999).

[6] Gullace quotes the 31 August 1914 issue of the Daily Mail ("Women's War: White Feathers for 'Slackers.'"). Also see Paul Ward, "'Women of Britain Say Go': Women's Patriotism

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in the First World War" (Twentieth-Century British History, 2001) and Virginia Woolf's book-length anti-war essay "Three Guineas" (A Room of One's Own, 2008).

[7] See A. E. W. Mason's novel *The Four Feathers*. The main action takes place from 1882 to 1888 and focuses on the main character's fear of being a coward. Harry Feversham, a lieutenant in the East Surrey Regiment, constantly doubts his masculinity while trying to meet expectations of his peers. His figure can be seen as an example of how numerous men felt when the Great War broke out.

[8] The figure of the traumatized soldier became a symbol of the Great War and it appears in many texts, for example, in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*, in Richard Aldington's short story "The Case of Lieutenant Hall," and in Pat Barker's 1990s *Regeneration* trilogy. The clash between the ideal and reality of masculinity is articulated in Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, in which he says goodbye to the absurd masculine ideals of Victorian and Edwardian Britain.

[9] Macaulay's poem was expected to be learnt by heart in English schools and it was often quoted and declaimed to awaken and strengthen men's courage and patriotism. For example, in Rudyard Kipling's "The Incarnation of Krishna Mulvaney," which takes place in India at the end of the nineteenth century, even an uneducated English soldier could recite a stanza by heart.

[10] The calm hero who faces death before battle had been the object of several painters before Poynter's work, for instance, Jacques-Louis David, one of the greatest painters of the French Revolution, had an effect on how ideal masculinity was constructed. In the center of David's *Léonidas at Thermopylae* (1814; see fig. 3) is a quiet, fearless hero: the "*soldat calme*, [who] contemplated the promise of eternity before going to battle" (Mosse 37). In the figure of Léonidas heroism and calmness are joined to moral beauty (Mosse 37). Poynter's soldier repeats Léonidas's position and represents the same values.

[11] For further details on the building blocks of ideal masculinity, see Martin Francis, "The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Masculinity" (2002); Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (1991); John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (1998); and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, "Building a British Superman: Physical Culture in Interwar Britain" (2006).

[12] About the changing role of poets in the war, see Simon Featherstone, *War Poetry* (1995).

[13] This connection is part of an old tradition that is already observable in the Crispin Day Speech in Shakespeare's *Henry V*: "If we are mark'd to die, we are enow / To do our country loss; and if to live, / The fewer men, the greater share of honour" (4.3.221). Barry Cornwall, ed., *The Works of William Shakespeare: Histories, Poems and Sonnets* (New Lenark: Geddes and Grosset, 2009) 187-236.

[14] The hymn "Onward, Christian Soldiers," written by Sabine Baring-Gould, is a good nineteenth-century example of depicting Christ as the supporter of the English army's cause: "Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, / With the cross of Jesus going on before. / Christ, the royal Master, leads against the foe" (1-3), and it assures the soldiers that they are fighting for a divine, noble cause: "Like a mighty army moves the church of God; / Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod. / We are not divided, all one body we, / One in hope and doctrine, one in charity" (9-12). Siegfried Sassoon's "Redeemer" and "Christ and the Soldier" are much more ironic in tone and emphasize the insuperable distance between Christianity, the figure of Christ, and the army with its soldiers. For further information see Jon Stallworthy, "Christ and the Soldier" (*Survivors' Songs*, 2008).

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[15] Orpen's *Thinker* repeats the pose of August Rodin's *Thinker*, but Orpen's painting breaks with the tradition in many senses. It is a question whether he wants to connect to the tradition with the famous pose or if he relates ironically to it.

[16] There is a long tradition in poetry of emphasizing the reunion of the heroic soldiers with nature as a consolation, a strategy which remained popular up to and during World War I. Examples include John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" and Rupert Brooke's "Safety." Nature and war are also connected in many poems by Edmund Blunden, but he usually laments over the impossibility of reunion; nature and war appear in antagonism in his works, such as in "A House in Festubert," "Illusions," and "Rural Economy."

[17] Nevinson is associated with the group of Vorticists in England—Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle. Vorticism combines certain features of Cubism, Futurism, and other Modernist styles, continuing Clive Bell's idea of significant form. According to Miranda Hickman, "Vorticism has traditionally been linked with the narrative of the 'men of 1914'" (51).

[18] Marinetti defines the relationship of their artistic tendency to war as follows: "We wish to glorify War; the only health-giver of the world—militarism, patriotism, the destructive arm of the Anarchist, the beautiful ideas that kill, the contempt for woman . . . . Art can be nought but violence, cruelty and injustice" (qtd. in Harrison 87). Futurist, avantgarde representations thus celebrated the connection by World War I between the mechanical and the organic—still they are not (necessarily) anti-war representations.

[19] The only element not questioned in connection with self-sacrifice was the sense of comradeship—it was only strengthened and revalued because of the previously unimaginable destruction of the war.

[20] The Great War not only had an effect on men's identity but also brought changes into women's lives as well. For more see Sandra M. Gilbert, "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War" (1983).

[21] After World War I a tendency to reconstruct the male body appeared, as the anarchy created by the war's experience was not satisfying and tenable without a counterpoint. See Ana Carden-Coyne, *Reconstructing the Body*.

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Figures

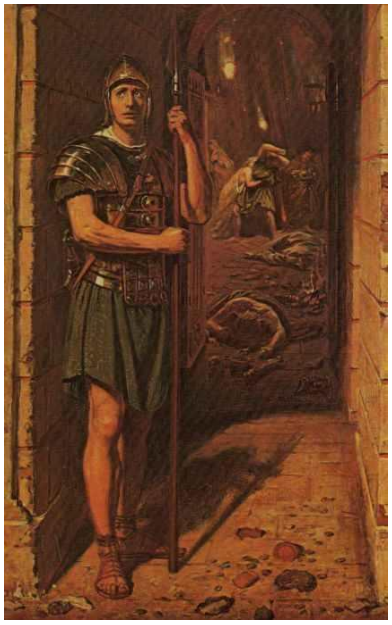

Figure 1. Sir Edward John Poynter, *Faithful unto Death*, 1865 (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool).

Figure 2. Solomon J. Solomon, *Portrait of a Young Officer*, 1913 (Private Collection).

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Figure 3. Jacques-Louis David, *Léonidas at Thermopylae*, 1814 (Louvre Museum, Paris).

Figure 4. Sir William Orpen, *Self-Portrait in Uniform*, 1917 (Imperial War Museum, London).

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Figure 5. Sir William Orpen, *Thinker on the Butte de Warlencourt*, 1917 (Imperial War Museum, London).

Figure 6. Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, *Reliefs at Dawn*, 1918 (Imperial War Museum, London).

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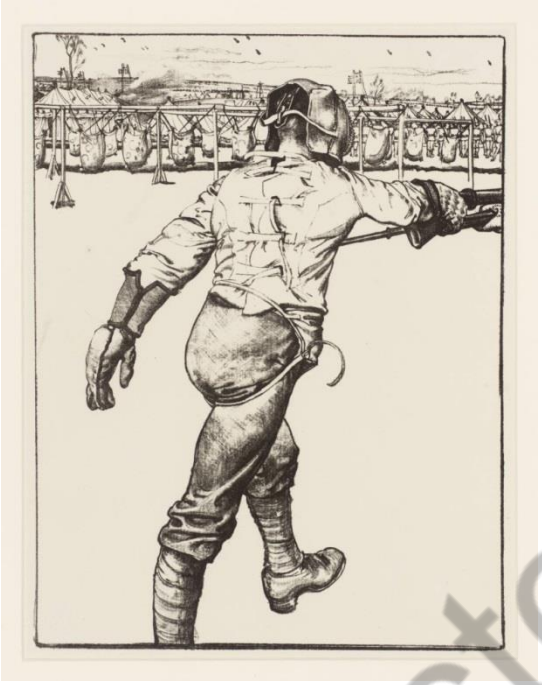

Figure 7. Eric Kennington, *Making Soldiers: Bayonet Practice*, c. 1917 (Tate Britain, London).

Figure 8. Eric Kennington, *Making Soldiers: The Gas Mask*, c. 1917 (Tate Britain, London).

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Figure 9. Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, *The Bomber*, 1918 (Leicester Galleries, London).

Figure 10. Jacob Epstein, *Rock Drill*, c. 1913-15/1974
(Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham / Tate Britain).

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Figure 11. *Christopher Richard Wynne* Nevinson, *Column on the March*, 1915 (Museums and Art Gallery, Birmingham).

Figure 12. Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, *Returning to the Trenches*, 1914-15 (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa).

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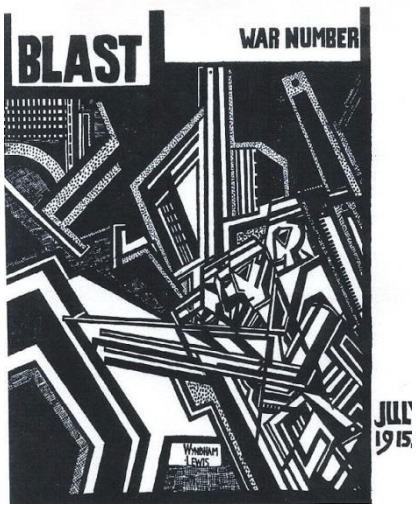

Figure 13. Wyndham Lewis, *Blast War Number 1.2* (1915). London: John Lane, 1915. Print.

Figure 14. Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, *The Doctor*, 1916 (Imperial War Museum, London).

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Figure 15. Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, *La Patrie*, 1916
(City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham).

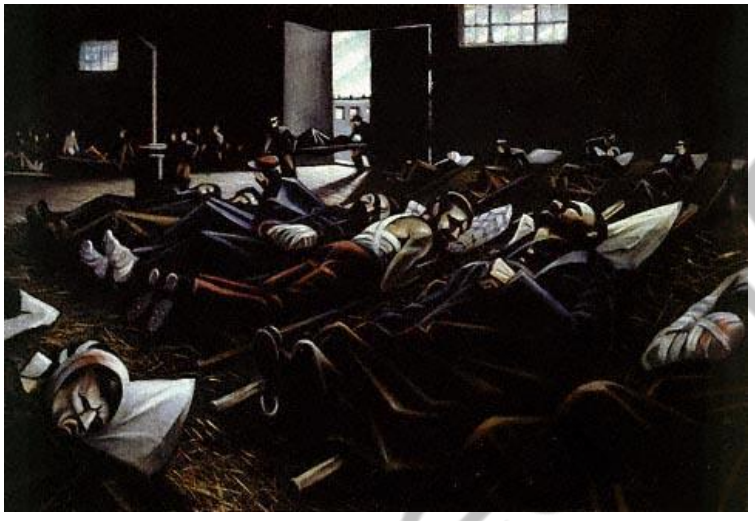

Figure 16. Eric H. Kennington, *Gassed and Wounded*, 1918
(Imperial War Museum, London).

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