Keynote: Dr Mark Rawlinson, Leicester

AFTER WAR? WRITING ABOUT WORLD WAR IN A POST-WAR ERA

My paper explores what it now means to write and read about the world wars. It is widely suggested that, after the Cold War and in the duration of the ‘War on Terror’, war is not what it used to be. Are these claims of consequence for the study of and the writing of literature about war?

According to General Rupert Smith, today’s conflicts are not recognisable by conventional features of war: ‘war as cognitively known to most non-combatants, war as battle in a field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs: such war no longer exists.’1 Henri-Bernard Lévy’s regrets echo this in a different key: ‘wars used to have meaning….Those days are over.’2 A loss of meaning is given a contrary interpretation by Hardt and Negri, who maintain that it is an effect of ‘a new era of war….a general global state of war that erodes the distinction between war and peace’.3 This is more than a question of semantics, even if the understanding of contemporary violence and conflict is contingent on these authors’ conceptual affiliations.

If war has changed in any of these ways, what does this mean for writing about another, earlier kind of war (modern, industrial war, which, we were once taught, had changed irrevocably the way the military was represented)? Are readers of the canon of war literature imaginatively ‘fighting the last war’? Should we contemplate, in some sense, the obsolescence of war literature (its admonitory counsel by-passed by technology and political expedience)?

I want, however, to focus on writers engaging with the world wars anew, arguably after war. Is this writing historical in an unreflecting, uncritical sense (reprising what Martin Davies, in Historicis, has called ‘the same old thing’) or does it give us a

---


purchase on how power, law, morality, representation and medicine frame the military violence that is perpetrated today by state and non-state actors?

I take as my case studies two recent serial representations of world war. Pat Barker’s *Regeneration Trilogy* (1991-95) is a fictional narrative, of among other things, the formation of the Great War’s pre-eminent soldier-poet, Wilfred Owen. Tom Paulin’s *The Invasion Handbook* (2002) is the first instalment of a verse ‘loose-leaf epic’ on the Second World War.

Each is an example of the apparently incontestable significance of representing historical war, and of representing war historically: in our culture the world wars are signal events which punctuate the past as nodes of meaningfulness. Each work also confirms the belated and provisional character of a literature of war by pointing to the incompleteness of the stories of the world wars. Furthermore, in each case, the quest for forms adequate to our retrospective understanding of these wars is bound up with sustaining our culture’s appetite for symbols of trauma and disaster.

But precisely which meanings are attached to projects of recuperation and reassessment like these? In what proportions do Barker’s and Paulin’s texts disturb or hallow memory? To what degree are they inquests as well as memorials? How do they protest war at the same time that they are dependent on its occurrence as pretext? And what kinds of congruence are there between the most visceral or discomforting images of the tragedies and triumphs of European civilization’s world wars, and the global but heterogeneous conflicts of this post-War era?

Philip Bobbitt has asked, apropos of war in the post-war West, whether ‘participation [can] be supplanted by mere observation… rather than voting and serving’. This is a question about the relations of peoples to the conflicts waged in their name, but it can be focused on the field of literature. Can the kinds of attention that literature draws from us become a kind of participation, not in war itself, but in the dilemmas that military killing addresses and produces?

Dr Mark Rawlinson is Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Leicester. He is the author of *British Writing of the Second World War* (Oxford, 2000), and of chapters on Owen in *The Oxford Handbook to Modern British and Irish War Poetry* (2007) and on Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg and Thomas in the forthcoming *Cambridge History of English Poetry*. He is currently writing a monograph on the fiction of Pat Barker and researching a book on the cultural significance of camouflage.

---

Dr Jodie Medd, Carleton University, Ottawa:

**Patronage and the Production of Rupert Brooke’s National Body**

As much as Rupert Brooke’s early death in the Great War rendered him a national icon of the ‘lost generation,’ his loss was remarkably generative: of wealth, texts, and legacies. A dominant force behind these posthumous productions was Edward Marsh, Brooke’s friend, patron, quasi-literary executor, and first biographer.

In looking at the specific and intimate relation between Brooke and Marsh—starting from their launch of “Georgian Poetry” together, through Marsh’s work to sustain and honour Brooke’s memory (including Marsh’s clash with Brooke’s mother over Brooke’s financial, textual, and representational legacy), I will consider Marsh’s role in the shaping of Rupert Brooke’s national post-war legacy as a beautiful and poetic body whose early death rendered him peculiarly valuable and productive to both the nation and national literature.

Dr Gabriel Koureas, Birkbeck, London:

**Acting Out of Masculinities in the Interwar Years**

This paper will concentrate on the post-armistice years in Britain in order to examine the interrelationship between ideal masculinities and the trauma of war in representations of the male body in the visual culture of the period.

The paper will concentrate on the images of the journal The Superman in order to argue that the construction of the sexual male body during the period needs to be seen as not relying solely on desire but on the possibilities of desire and in particular those potentialities that arose during the First World War. The paper will argue that by acknowledging the co-existence of disgust and desire in the traumatic memories of the servicemen the complications of the politics of masculinity are revealed.

The strict definitions of masculinity offered at the time made it impossible for traumatised combatants, who experienced different forms of masculinity at the front to come to terms with the return to pre-war codes of masculinity that the post armistice society attempted to impose. The result was an acting out of masculinities in the inter-war years. This acting out will be examined through the writings and visual representations of a group advocating Eugenic thought in Britain in the 1930s, The Palladins, and their publication, The Superman as well as the work of the artist and writer Wyndham Lewis.
Dr Patricia Pulham, University of Portsmouth:

Violence and the Body in Vernon Lee’s *The Ballet of the Nations*

In 1915, the cosmopolitan intellectual, Vernon Lee, published an illustrated book *The Ballet of the Nations*, subtitled ‘A Present-Day Morality’, that employs the allegorical framework of the medieval morality play to explore the horrors of World War One. In 1920, she published *Satan the Waster*, a work that contains a reprinted version of *The Ballet* and adds commentary and explanation based on her understanding of the concepts of ‘empathy’ and ‘sympathy. Stranded in Britain at the outbreak of war and unable to return to her adopted home in Florence for its duration, Lee, whose itinerant childhood was spent in Germany, France, Switzerland and Italy, expressed her strong pacifist views in important journals, magazines and newspapers of the day including *The Nation* and *The New Statesman*. *The Ballet* has, as Gill Plain notes elsewhere, a liminal status. Read publicly, but never performed, Lee’s text presents images of brutal violence and dismemberment that are reflected in her journalism. This paper will examine the centrality of the fragmented and corrupted body in these writings, and the problematic division between active social commentary and passive aesthetic distance that characterizes Lee’s pacifism.

Dr Victoria Stewart, University of Leicester

**Abusing the Uniform: Deception and Subjectivity in the Second World War**

‘She saw the commando flash on his sleeve: she looked at him with interest and respect. […] “You’re the only Commando soldier I’ve seen in the flesh.”’ Only later do the protagonists of Betty Miller’s *On the Side of the Angels* (1945) discover that Captain Herriot is not in fact a Commando, only masquerading as one. His deception relies on their ability to recognise the ‘commando flash’ and their desire to have contact with such an apparently alluring figure. This is not the only novel from the 1940s in which the signifying power of the uniform is misused in this way. As in Miller’s novel, where Herriot proves to have been unfit for service, such a disguise is often a means of compensating for – and exposing – particular concerns and anxieties about masculinity. In this paper, I will draw on a range of mid-century material, including Miller’s novel, Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* (1938) and Elizabeth Taylor’s *A Wreath of Roses* (1949) in a consideration of how the meanings of the uniform and the meanings of masculinity are interconnected with and complicate each other. If being a soldier is about looking the part, how are perceptions of soldiery affected when seeing ‘in the flesh’ cannot be trusted?
Dr Petra Rau, University of Portsmouth

‘One step closer to the dreamers of the nightmare’?
The fascinating fascist corpus in some recent British fiction

This paper focuses on three novels published in Britain in the 1990s and which, I will argue, mark a turning point in the representation of Nazism or Nazi Germany in British fiction: Ian McEwan’s Black Dogs (1992), Tim Binding’s Island Madness (1998) on the occupation of the Channel Islands, and Robert Harris’s bestselling alternative history thriller Fatherland (1992) The way in which these novels portray Nazi corporeality (and conversely the state of the occupied corpus) does not just endorse Susan Sontag’s argument in ‘Fascinating Fascism’ about the ongoing cultural appeal of the ‘romantic ideals’ incorporated in fascism and the sexual allure of its dramatic aesthetics. All three novels imagine the contemporaneous attractions of the fascist corpus (body, territory and ideology) in settings British fiction had been reluctant to engage as sexualised, seductive sites: the camp, the bunker, the interrogation room. In those scenarios, the British body becomes suppliant, willing, and complicit in fascist seduction. To what extent, then, do these post-Cold War fictions retroactively (and almost with a sense of jouissance and relief) compromise the British national corpus as desiring precisely that which it purported to fight?

The fictional discourse on the Nazi corpus in 1992 should of course be seen in the wider context of historiographical publications: Angus Calder’s The Myth of the Blitz (1992), and Clive Ponting’s 1940 (1990); Alan Clark’s and John Charmley’s challenges to the finest hour myth (1993-95) in their attacks on Churchill’s motivations, and Madeleine Bunting’s uncomfortable account of the Channel Island occupation in A Model Occupation (1995). These literary and historiographical narratives represented a new phase of self-criticism and self-reflection that made room for a more differentiated approach to thinking about Anglo-German relations in the 1930s and 40s. In many ways they helped prepare the current, 21st-century literary, historical and moral debate on potential allied culpabilities and the interest in the German experience under bombardment, siege and occupation as well as the issue of German post-memory.

6 Frederick Taylor, Dresden (2005); A.C. Grayling, Among the Dead Cities (2006)
7 See Antony Beevor, Berlin; Max Hastings, Armageddon (2005), Fred Botting, In the Ruins of the Reich (2005); Anonymous, A Woman in Berlin (2006); W.G. Sebald, On the Natural History of Destruction (1997, transl. 2004); Jörg Friedrich’s The Fire,( transl. 2007). While two of the major fictionalisations of the Blitz are now out of print -- Henry Green’s Caught (1943) and Elizabeth Bowen’s The Heat of the Day (1948) -- German post-war novels about area bombardment have recently been translated into English to much critical acclaim: Gert Ledig’s Payback (trans. 2004) and Hans Erich Nossack’s The End: Hamburg 1943 (trans 2004) Among recent Anglo-American fictions set in the vanquished Germany are Adam Thorpe’s The Rules of Perspective (2005); Joseph Kanon’s The Good German (2003).
8 See, for instance, Rachel Seiffert, The Dark Room (2001).
This paper focuses on fictional representations of geopolitical space during the Cold War. The Peace of Yalta formalised a new, bipolar world-order whose Manichaean fault line did not respect national borders – cutting across, for example, Germany, Korea and Vietnam, or suppressing the autonomy of the recently self-determined states of Central, Eastern and Baltic Europe. The nation as body politic is thus often figured in postwar fiction in terms of disfigurement, dismemberment and burial, not only because of the carnage of war, but also because of cartographical partitions of sovereign space. Ian McEwan’s *The Innocent* makes clear the analogy: a German body is hacked to bits by English and German lovers in a state which has itself been cleaved in two.

The internally riven nation-space can, less gorily, be characterised as a surreal dreamscape. Peter Schneider’s *The Wall Jumper*, a novel which influenced *The Innocent*, immediately announces that the Berlin Wall can be seen from the moon: this is an unreal, otherworldly city which people nevertheless have to live in. The narrator has a doppelgänger in the East whom he almost meets – an unheimlich near-encounter between, in Freudian terms, the ‘nearly-the-same’. Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled*, set in an unnamed Central European city, relies on similar oneiric effects: the labyrinthine city, where broad streets are sealed off by purposeless walls, distends and compresses time and space. Generally, then, the ideological binarism of the Cold War disunites the unitary independence of the nation as an entity, and these fissurings provide a new type of setting in postwar narratives.

The paper will finally address the extent to which Cold War borders function metaphorically. We know that the modern thriller genre requires a kind of syntagmatic linearity: Graham Greene speaks of the tranquilizing effect of metaphor, which needs to be eliminated to achieve the characteristic pace of the ‘entertainment’. In his literary-geographical analysis of nineteenth-century historical novels, however, Franco Moretti proposes that the ‘figurality’ of language rises when the narrative encounters the national border. As I will show in brief analyses of Greene’s ‘No Man’s Land’ and John Le Carré’s *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, the geopolitical border – at Checkpoint Charlie, or at a stretch of the Iron Curtain in the Harz mountains, for example – invites metaphoricity. But at the same time the spy genre demands that the frontier should be quickly crossed. The border is thus a site of narrative as well as of ideological conflict – that is, a battleground between Jakobson’s ‘poles’ of modern writing, metaphor and metonym.
Resentments: Jean Améry, War Writing, and Anger

We’ve long understood memory as central to twentieth-century war writing, from the incommunicable memories of the shell-shocked Great War soldier in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and Wilfrid Owen’s “Mental Cases” to the millennial memorializing of the Second World War in novels such as Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* and Rachel Seiffert’s *The Dark Room*. In a literature itself shaped by the emergence and acceptance of psychoanalysis, public violence persists as unfinished private business, and acknowledgement of these legacies becomes instrumental in the achievement of integrity and resolution. On the paradoxical model offered by our culture of trauma, we remember so that we can forget. This paper discusses war memory of a different kind, sustained for a different purpose: What happens if we replace psychoanalytic pathos with political anger?

Tortured by the Nazis for his role in the Belgian resistance, Jean Améry (Hans Meier) in his 1966 memoir denounces future-oriented injunctions to be healed. Aiming “to justify a psychic condition that has been condemned by moralists and psychologists alike,” he argues that *resentment* is “the existential dominant of people like myself…a surviving Resistance fighter, Jew, victim of persecution.” His essay condemns as “anti-moral” psychoanalytic efforts to cure the condition of the “traumatized” angry survivor: if he is indeed emotionally “warped,” as the discourses of trauma suggest, then warped “is a form of the human condition that morally as well as historically is of a higher order than that of healthy straightness.” The psychoanalytic notion of emotional distortion or warping, Amery writes, “causes me to recall fleetingly the way my arms were twisted high behind my back when they tortured me.” In other words, Amery hints at complicity between notions of emotional health—anger as a traumatic symptom—and the bodily cruelties of a régime intent on destroying him, the same cruelties that psychoanalysis wants Amery to overcome. “The social body” that psychoanalysis serves “is occupied merely with safeguarding itself and could not care less about a life that has been damaged.”

This paper discusses relationships between anger and memory in war writing. Centered on Améry’s mid-century *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, the paper looks backward to the significance of “resentment” in representations of the Great War (Woolf, Sassoon) and ends with a discussion of the uses explicitly made of Améry in the accounts of a recoverable but unredeemable past offered by Giorgio Agamben’s theoretical work *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1995) and W.G. Sebald’s novel *Austerlitz* (2001).
Dr Eugene McNulty, University of Portsmouth:

**Hunger artists and/or sacred bodies:**

**self-sacrifice, Irish nationalism and the ‘British question’**.

Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.

- Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*

The protagonist of this book is bare life, that is, the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*, and whose essential function in modern politics we intend to assert.

- Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*

This paper sets out to trace the figure of ‘sacred man’ as it haunts the culture of Irish nationalism in the twentieth century. A central interest here is the idea of self-sacrifice in the national cause and the articulation of sacrificial bodies as sites of counter-sovereignty in anti-imperial discourse. This is a trope that seems particularly crucial to the idea of revival at the turn of the twentieth century and the attendant move to advanced nationalism in the years that lay ahead. In many ways the culture of national resistance in Ireland sought to reverse the normative reading of Irish bodies (and of Agamben’s conception of *homo sacer*), transforming them from ‘bare life’ to be revealed as sacred signs that stand outside the reach of imperial execution. To demonstrate such claims this paper returns to the writings of W.B. Yeats, Pádraic Pearse and Terence Mac Sweeney – as well as the more sceptical invocation of sacred life in J.M. Synge. More especially this paper concerns itself with the cultural performance of sacredness at those moments designated by Karl Jaspers as ‘grenzsituation’ (boundary situations). Such times include war or the threat of communal destruction, and necessitate, as Paul Ricoeur puts it, a ‘return to the very roots of … identity’. What is often found there is the image of sacred man and an ‘existential crisis’ born out of the relationship between nation, violence, sacrifice and empire. This crisis reaches a definitive moment with World War I and the Easter Rising, events which reveal Ireland as gripped by oppositional boundary situations and which can be read through the clashing performance of bodies as either sacred or criminally profane. There is a clear sense in which this dialectic of differently imagined ‘wars’ would have a defining influence on Ireland’s postcolonial moment. Finally, this paper also seeks to trace (and comb) these cultural and philosophical tropes through more recent political enactments of resistance in Ireland’s history. A key exemplar in this regard will be the Hunger Strikers in Belfast’s H-Blocks at the beginning of the 1980s. The figure of *homo sacred* clearly reappears here and is central to this event’s driving issues: the definition of political status and the discourses of colonialism that still marked out British relations with the idea of nationalism in Northern Ireland. In many ways this is a moment which continued to play out many of the tropes and cultural politics read as foundational to early twentieth-century nationalism and the search for Ireland’s postcoloniality. That such tactics and problematics should have re-emerged at the end of the twentieth century may also reveal the limitations of ‘such limited imaginings’.