Introduction: Writing Bodily Resistance in World War II Literature

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> [War is] the most radically embodying event in which human beings ever collectively participate.
>
> —Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*

Theories of conflict and theories of embodiment share a common critical vocabulary. The discourses of trauma, testimony, and witness are integral to both; both are subject to the difficulties posed by nonrepresentability; both are concerned, directly or indirectly, with the integrity of borders and discrete categorizations—and with their dissolution. Consequently, much recent scholarship has sought to supplement broader study of war's ideological abstractions and geopolitical machinations with close attention to the dynamics of human embodiment and disembodiment, as not only a crucial site of war's inscription but a constitutive component of war itself. This renewed emphasis on the particularities of embodied lives under wartime conditions has afforded a clearer view of the multiple ways in which war has shaped, and continues to condition, our twentieth- and twenty-first-century conceptions of individual and collective bodies, both on and beyond the battlefield. This special issue focuses on one particular dimension of this field of study: the recurrent rendering of the broken, abject, or "unhealed" body as a potent site of resistance within literary and filmic renderings of World War II and its long aftermath.

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This collection of essays draws attention to bodies that refuse to conform to the circumscribed standards of bodily health and heroism that circulated during World War II, and thus broadens the category of "resistance" to include the conflicted strategies of defiance, opposition, and noncooperation via abjection, suffering, fragmentation, and indeterminate embodiment. Our contributors examine how modes of physical abjection and nonconforming corporeality were frequently rewritten as a potential mode of "bodily resistance." The body's capacity for "resistance"—to language, to theoretical clarity, to sociopolitical categorization—is well documented across a wide body of scholarship.[1] The human body is vulnerable to interpretative inscription, yet also exhibits a marked propensity toward destabilization, resistant to culturally prescribed or fixed meaning. As Sarah Cole (2009: 26) observes, it is often the human body "that most palpably and irrevocably disrupts the sense of distinctiveness or boundary" between preconceived categories of identity and behavior. Nevertheless, scholarship of World War II, too long conceptualized as "simply about the experience of fighting men" (Lyon 2005: 1), has been slow to decouple its formulations of "resistance" from martial paradigms rooted in the activities of politically and militarily organized partisan movements. As a result, the predominant model of dissent remains bound to modes of physical strength and action, an association that implicitly associates embodied experiences that do not fall within this bracket with passivity, submission, and suffering. This is a particularly marked oversight given the degree to which the power relations that characterized World War II were constructed in large part on the basis of extreme bodily politics of "value" and "degeneracy," often to the point of determining an individual's survival or eradication.[2] One of the key aims of this special issue, then, is to call into question the presumed passivity of abject and unorthodoxly embodied figures in twentieth-century war literature. "The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency," Judith Butler (2004: 26) observes; here, we challenge any framework that would posit an innate separation between bodily suffering and bodily agency, while aiming to avoid any too neat subsuming of suffering and abjection into redemptive narratives of healing and triumph. Following World War II's corporeal and ideological atrocities, that is, "there may be a political value in not being healed" (Wasson 2010: 159).

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While this issue examines several texts from the 1940s and 1950s that might be readily categorized as "wartime" and "postwar" cultural productions, such as T. S. Eliot's and Keith Douglas's 1940s poetry, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's 1943 film *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, and Samuel Beckett's 1950s prose work, it also extends its focus back to Djuna Barnes's 1936 novel *Nightwood* and forward to Ingeborg Bachmann's 1971 novel *Malina*, and even to Thomas Harris's *Hannibal* (1999) and *Hannibal Rising* (2006). This issue widens the scope of "World War II literature" to include texts that respond explicitly to the war's politics of the body, regardless of their publication date. We take our lead from the burgeoning number of scholars in recent decades who have insisted that the cultural impact of World War II "cannot be contained within the temporal limits of 1939–45" (Plain 2013: 185). The long-ranging impact of World War II's body politics and bodily trauma on twentieth-century cultural production testifies to what Mary Favret (2010: 40) has identified as the "temporal waywardness" of modern warfare, "its collapsing of event into condition or situation" that thwarts any attempt to demarcate its scope and influence within neat boundary markers. Paul Saint-Amour (2015: 14) uses the discourse of trauma theory to structure his own radical temporal restructuring of the boundaries of World War II: "Having arrived early—in advance of its capacity to be received and understood—the traumatic event makes its impact felt belatedly" via "the return of repressed memories and the compulsive repetition of behavior, gestures, dreams, and fantasies associated with the traumatic event." The repeated depiction of World War II and of war-related bodily damage across twentieth-century cultural production testifies to this "compulsive repetition" of a suffering that defies easy comprehension.

Beyond this more medicalized model of traumatic recurrence, however, we might also observe the recurrent *refusal* of the war's survivors to submit to any neat chronology of recovery. Operating outside narratives of redemption or recuperation, the texts under discussion throughout this issue recurrently pose what Vivian Patraka (1999: 87) has identified as a "critical act of resistance—the attempt to express, against the odds, both a historical and a somatic awareness" of wartime suffering. We find a particularly explicit refusal of postwar healing in the writings of Jean Améry, a member of the Belgium Resistance movement during the war who was tortured by the Nazis

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before being deported to Auschwitz.[3] Améry (1980: 68) criticizes the pathologizing of camp survivors who have "failed" to move on from the horror of their experiences, who have failed to "forgive and forget":

> I read in a recently published book about "Delayed Psychic Effects After Political Persecution" that all of us are not only physically but also mentally damaged. The character traits that make up our personality are distorted. Nervous restlessness, hostile withdrawal into one's own self are the typical signs of our sickness. It is said that we are "warped." That causes me to recall fleetingly the way my arms were twisted high behind my back when they tortured me. But it also sets me the task of defining anew our warped state, namely as a form of the human condition that morally as well as historically is of a higher order than that of healthy straightness.

Améry draws on the physical "warping" of his body under torture—a deliberately disquieting reminder of the details of a physical agony described in horrific detail earlier in his text—to justify the perceived "warping" of his state of mind. In a postwar world grappling with the revelation of the modern human being's hitherto unthinkable capacity for cruelty, Améry positions "healthy straightness" as more morally circumspect than his own "warped state" of damage and distortion. Améry legitimizes and reclaims his pathologized state as one necessarily resistant to the "healthy straightness" of recovery's chronology or ideology: "I rebel: against my past, against history, and against a present that places the incomprehensible in the cold storage of history and thus falsifies it in a revolting way. Nothing has healed." Améry offers a particularly explicit version of a mode of thinking that the essays in this special issue trace more extensively: the refusal to elide the suffering body from view, and the reclamation of abject forms of embodiment as epistemologically valuable in their own right. The essays in this issue rise to the challenge of responding as readers and spectators to the cultural construction of damaged, suffering, and abject bodies—bodies that are not held up as simplified sites for mourning, catharsis, or redemption but that assert themselves as agential forces of resistance within the context of wartime and postwar bodily politics.

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In this issue's first essay, "Samuel Beckett's Trilogy and the Revolution of the Body in Vichy France," William Davies argues that "there is something oddly defiant, even resistant, about Samuel Beckett's postwar depictions of physically debilitated and suffering bodies" when read against the collaborationist French Vichy regime's vaunting of a healthy, fertile, and perfectible muscular male body as key to national renewal. Davies contends that the recurrent focus on physical limitation and degradation in *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951), and *The Unnamable* (1953)—and indeed the fantasy of further impairment—rejects "normative expectations of health and physical fitness . . . underpinned by the essentialisms that allowed Vichy to participate in, and sanction its own part in, the deportation of excluded bodies" to Nazi concentration and extermination camps. Images of physical degradation emerge as a defiant politics of the body that resists the conflation of corporeal perfection with moral and social value or totalitarian structures of identity. Beckett's postwar trilogy thus finds a resistant value in the unruly bodies that refuse to function according to an authoritarian state's demands.

In the second essay in the issue, "Cynic and the Lyric Balanced: The War Dead and the Lyric Beloved in Keith Douglas," James Brophy continues the focus on the damaged male body as an unexpected site of resistance, but extends the grounds of examination from the postwar prose novel to battlefield poetry, and from politically inflected satire to lyric intensity of feeling. Brophy explores the recurrent "shock of knowledge" that gathers around the human body in its two primary (and coalescing) forms in Keith Douglas's battlefield poems: the soldier corpse, and the recumbent lover. The essay reworks James Campbell's (1999) description of World War I Trench Poetry's "combat gnosticism," the unique transformative experience of the battlefield. Here, Brophy offers "lyric gnosticism" as a new term to describe the intimate, transformative knowing that a lover professes to have for the body of his beloved. Brophy traces this resistant mode of vision throughout Douglas's World War II battlefield poetry, identifying in it a means of upholding "the legitimacy of poetic aesthesis, a certain embodied and loving relation to the world that has been ushered in by the trauma of combat," the attainment of the "balanced style" that allowed Douglas to write as love poet *and* war poet simultaneously, according careful attention to the defeated yet still prized soldier body.

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The next essay, Lisa Mullen's "'Sound, Substantial Flesh and Blood': T. S. Eliot's 'East Coker' and Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*," continues this issue's focus on the value of the ostensibly "failing" human body, tracing the echo of the medical imaginary through Eliot's 1940 high-modernist poem and Powell and Pressburger's 1943 propaganda film. Both wartime works "return our gaze insistently to the intransigent materiality of the flesh" highlighted by the experience of World War II's destruction. Metaphors of broken flesh and medical intervention, replicated in the "tearing and healing" of poetic and cinematic form, express an aesthetic and epistemic disquiet regarding the realm of threatened corporeality. Yet where the image of the failing body remains in "East Coker" an avatar of human weakness and of profound epistemological unease, it is rehabilitated in *Colonel Blimp* as the only form of access to the phenomenological moment that can redeem the mortal human experience. The phenomenological connection with the mortal and material human body, rather than the vain attachment to an inaccessible metaphysical ideal, can offer a means of resisting wartime despair, a newly resistant and redemptive late modernist aesthetics, Mullen suggests.

Zhao Ng's "Of Beasts Blond and Damned: Fascist and Hysterical Bodies and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*" extends this focus on mortality and desire into Nazi and Freudian specifics, while also troubling the idea of "redemption" itself as formulated in mid-twentieth-century cultural and political ideology. Taking Barnes's resistance to James Scott's "genital solution for everything" in her work as a starting point, Ng traces the psychic logic co-implicating Freudian narcissism and fascist eschatology in Barnes's striking phrase, in order to uncover the alignment of Freudian *Endlust*, and the "Final Solution" of the Nazi *Endlösung* in Barnes's thinking, and *Nightwood*'s resisting such hollow promises of redemption or *Erlösung*. Positioning the queer body of Doctor O'Connor alongside the Jewish body as "figures of embodied otherness in opposition to the mythic Aryan body," Barnes refuses the "immortality fetish" promised by Freudian procreative desire or Nazi racial continuity and millennial reign. Thus dissociating *Endlust* and *Endlösung* from O'Connor's queer, bodily transfiguring hysteria, the essay offers "a revisionary account of the novel's political unconscious," an important intervention in now outdated critical

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readings of "Hitlerite" or "failed fascist" leanings in *Nightwood*. By resisting the very promise of the redemption of bodily wholeness and mortality, *Nightwood* rejects a particularly pervasive strain of fascist bodily stricture.

The penultimate essay in the issue, Douglas Atkinson's "Death Styles: The Language of Trauma and the Trauma of Language in Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina*," considers the postwar evolution of Bachmann's writing from poetry to the prose novel as part of a "violent and visceral dissection of the decomposing, fetid body of the German language" that had played such an instrumental role in Nazi atrocity. Following Maurice Blanchot, violence done to the body—and particularly the female body—is aligned with violence done to language, and Atkinson poses a challenge to Elaine Scarry's famous destabilizing of the link between language and pain by arguing that Bachmann's novel suggests, first, that wartime bodily trauma has in part been occasioned by language having been used as a weapon against it, and, second, it is consequently only in reclaiming language in the post-Holocaust moment that bodily trauma can be assuaged. This essay shifts to a more skeptical reading of "resistance" than that of the earlier essays in this issue: Atkinson here emphasizes that Bachmann's *Malina* does not itself fully enact this implied possible recovery but, rather, bears careful and unblinking witness to the collapse of both language and body, testifying unforgivingly to the "challenge, perhaps even threat, to our ability to compose—or recompose—ourselves after a traumatic event."

In the final essay of the issue, "Hannibal Lecter as Avenging War Orphan in Thomas Harris's *Hannibal Rising*," Korine Powers offers a final skeptical querying of postwar modes of bodily resistance, tracking the prequel afterlife of Thomas Harris's famous cannibal Hannibal Lecter. Powers explores how the villain of *Red Dragon* (1981) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988)—the embodiment of incomprehensible evil who resists all diagnostic labels—is transformed in *Hannibal* (1999) and *Hannibal Rising* (2006) into a World War II orphan-avenger, whose first experience of cannibalism is the forced consumption of his younger sister at the hands of Slavic Nazi collaborators, and how his subsequent cannibalistic murders are positioned as an "ethical response" to his wartime trauma. This essay traces how the war criminals of World War II, welcomed back into a postwar society, are established as the

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actual villains in this half of Harris's tetralogy and how, consequently, Lecter is reimagined as "victim and consequence of not only wartime atrocities but also postwar Western consumerism," an avenging justice meted out against the totalitarian nonidentity of the postwar Soviet Union and the apathetic capitalist consumerism of postwar France and America. Powers retains significant reservations about the mode of postwar resistance sketched in Harris's prequel novels, however, following Dina Khapaeva's (2017: 121) caution as to vaunting the moments in which "the human species turns against itself," this essay closes our issue with a salutary warning against accepting all forms of bodily "resistance" as equally valid.

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Notes

1. Particularly notable examples within the last few decades include disability theory's interrogation of social versus medical models of disability, as for example in Lennard J. Davis's *The End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era* (2014), Judith Butler's (2010) exploration of the cognitive and affective slippages between compassionate recognition and fearful rejection of "other" war victims, Elizabeth Grosz's (1994: xi) extended philosophical reading of the body's ability "to always extend the frameworks that attempt to contain them," and Elaine Scarry's (1985: 4) seminal reading of how "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it."

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2. This hierarchizing of the body was not limited to Nazi Germany, although Nazi practice offers one of its most infamous examples; see, for example, Claudia Koonz's (2003: 2) research into the Nazi rhetoric of "health, hygiene, and progress" as allied to the practice of "healthcare rationing, genetic counselling, involuntary sterilization, and euthanasia" (104) throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Elsewhere, however, Joan Tumblety (2012: 9) draws attention to the similar alignment of the individual citizen's bodily health and the "vitality of the nation as a whole" in Vichy France. Similar ideology was rampant throughout Europe and America during the period, as was a racially charged hierarchy that provided the basis for much derogatory propaganda on both Allied and Axis terms.

3. Améry's essays are themselves an example of "belated" postwar writing: Améry did not begin publishing about his wartime experiences until the 1960s.

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