

The Sublime and the Subliminal

Modern Identities and the Aesthetics of Combat

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... it is always just one thing alone that makes happiness happiness: the ability to forget. (Friedrich Nietzsche)

Modernity, Identity and War

MODERNITY IN its western manifestation (and the following is concerned *exclusively* with western societies; future publications will take up many of the issues discussed here in a comparative context) is a complex and many-sided development; nothing less than the transformation of reality. Classical sociological thought provides a rich source of reflection on the character of that development and models of its changing institutional structure. The history of modern philosophy, science, art and religion, equally, provide fundamental source material of the 'native view' of these developments; the self-descriptions and self-understandings of people living through these very processes of change. To simplify a continuous and intricate process, it is convenient to treat modernity as a development the leading characteristics of which in turn emerge and come to prominence in a distinctive fashion. That is to say, while modernity was not everywhere the same, and did not develop according to a rigid pattern, broadly similar features do recur and link three distinctive phases of the whole process; phases distinguished by, among other features, characteristically different relationships between warfare and identity.

Early modern society might be dated from around 1550 to about 1700. This period is marked by the age of absolutism, the rise of centralized states and their apparatus of administration and control, the dominant role of mercantilism, the rise to prominence of merchant capital and the eclipse of old aristocratic societies throughout Europe by newer trading nations and

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the formation of their world empires (Braudel, 1981, 1983, 1984; Curtin, 2000; Wallerstein, 1974, 1980). It is a period dominated by the search for order founded on the direct expression of power. The central theme in the development of western society and culture of this period is the challenge and fear of disorder. Human autonomy, which is the fundamental enabling assumption of modernity (Blumenberg, 1983; Koselleck, 1985), is grasped as an unlimited power of self-construction and self-destruction; a view articulated with uncompromising clarity by Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1962), and expressed, less precisely and forcefully, in innumerable lesser works. The old order has been radically deposed, but it is not clear that a new order can be established and successfully institutionalized at all levels of society. In order that society should be made coherent, the centralization of power and the spectacular display of its supremacy, readiness and effectiveness must be deployed as a means of quelling any dissent, recalcitrance or opposition. In the Baroque Age public display of the power of the ruler is taken to extreme and dramatic lengths, and is seen everywhere (Foucault, 1975; Maravall, 1986). The model of identity that emerges here is *equivalence*. Society becomes a collection of identical atoms; nature a collection of universal objects. The supreme power isolates and gathers together deviants and deranged individuals, those who fall outside the new rational forms of social organization and social life. At the same time new sciences make their tentative appearance in novel processes of collecting, identifying and enclosing deranged specimens of nature. The prince's power extends throughout the world. Objects are taken from far-flung places and brought together, arranged and housed within a *cabinet of curiosities*. The *Wunderkammer* is a repository of natural perversities that, in turn, are subjected to a process of ordering, naming and classifying (Daston and Park, 1998; Findlen, 1999; Jardine et al., 1996; Kaufmann, 1993, 1995; Pomian, 1987). All these phenomena, in turn, have their practical and ideological roots in the process of exchange and the development of mercantile activity (Hadden, 1994).

From around 1700 to 1870 is the central period in the development of what might be termed classical bourgeois modernity, associated with rapid industrialization and large-scale urbanization. The ordering principles of modernity are now seen as immanent in individuals themselves. Classical political economy is the ego psychology of the modern age. In fact, modern society will be self-regulating in just the same way that nature, once collected, can be grasped as an ordered and coherent whole (Unger, 1975). The view of identity here is linked directly to the new social and political realities of modern society. The order of the modern world is held to be generated automatically from the self-motivated and self-interested action of individuals. Driven by needs and motivated by desires, each person acts rationally in pursuit of goals that only they can adjudicate in terms of hidden, ultimate value. At the same time, however, and without foresight, the interaction of self-regarding individuals gives rise to predictable and reliable patterns of behaviour. This conception, from one point of view,

reinforced the *equivalent* notion of identity; in the factory, as in the prison or the school, each individual was exactly replaceable by any other. In a different perspective however, and one in which individuals were increasingly viewed in terms of contextual characteristics, it gave rise to more decisive and characteristic forms of *distinction*. Where each is equivalent to another, separate and personal identity can be maintained only through an appeal to *hidden* inner characteristics; which now become the concealed primary qualities upon which identity is founded. Identity becomes a process of self-realization; of ‘positing’ the self in its own project of becoming. Equally this becomes a new standard for collective identities. Any group might establish its distinctive identity through expressive forms of life to which its members formed a sentimental attachment; to which they ‘belonged’. This, of course, was the fertile ideological soil in which the differing cultural identities of nation, class and locality grew to prominence (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990).

From 1850 up to the present, and to an increasing extent, new forms of order and new modes of identification have become significant. The large-scale ordering mechanisms of modern society – the market, the state, the institutions of work, education, and pleasure – have become taken for granted. Progressively, organized opposition to its fundamental assumptions has been defeated and, almost, forgotten. Consequently ‘society’ now appears as a given reality that no longer needs to be maintained by the conscious ‘effort’ of individuals. Modernity has come to assert a fatal self-sufficiency; seemingly invulnerable to whatever we might think, or feel or do in our lives as *private* individuals. Thus, fleeting and superficial forms of identity have become more common and are now openly encouraged as an important psychological device promoting consumer culture. The hypermodern, the postmodern, the late modern are all characterized by a loosening in identity at a personal and collective level. To an increasing extent, many people have come to embrace the ontological playfulness that is characteristic of contemporary culture; relieving them of the more demanding search for any ‘authentic’ identity through absorption in the apparent freedom of innumerable forms of empathy.

Of course, there has been no lessening of passion and commitment to the meaningful traditions and forms of life to which people attach themselves. In many instances, it is quite the reverse; but there is a growing sense of the variety, contradictoriness, discrepant affiliations and multiplicity of roles that characterize modern experience and give rise to a clearer awareness of their impermanence (Maalouf, 2000).

In important ways each of these ordering principles (*collection, self-regulation, chance*), and forms of identity (*equivalence, distinction, empathy*), are linked to, and emerge through, the practice of different kinds of warfare. War and identity have been intimately related throughout the long history of western society, and this close relationship also characterizes the development of modernity. War is the most ‘extreme’ of modern experiences and, as experience is held to be the only ultimate authority in and for the

modern world, this relationship should not surprise us. Yet the role of warfare in the emergence and development of identities in modern society has remained obscure. Of course war is not the ‘cause’ or even the ‘foundation’ of such forms; but warfare has played a peculiarly significant role in their formation. The classical works of sociology were written at a time when it was widely believed that large-scale warfare was coming to an end, to be superseded by pacified social institutions and techniques of conflict resolution. Indeed, the establishment of the market, the state and administrative agencies as well as the new practices of work, the emergence of total institutions of care and the large-scale tendencies towards urbanization and industrialization were all significant features of modern society and, of course, contributed to the formation of new identities. Nonetheless, the distinctive and important role of warfare for this entire development should now be more clearly recognized.

The *equivalent* form of identity finds its first and clearest example in the new military techniques of the early modern state. The so-called military revolution was primarily a transformation in the social organization of warfare and the social psychology of combat (Hale, 1985; MacNeil, 1982; Parker, 1996; Roberts, 1967). New weapons technologies were of secondary importance here in relation to a novel conception of the soldier as a singular unit in a collection. The art of war consisted primarily in the instilling of discipline among soldiers, and the practice of drill and manoeuvre to make large collections of fighting men responsive to commands (Foucault, 1975). The soldier was no longer defined by the essential qualities of courage, skill and the possession of a tradition of honour; rather, the soldier was reduced to being an element in a complex mechanism, the overall structure and purpose of which he need know nothing of (Delbrück, 1990). Prior to the division of labour that came to characterize industrial production, the progressive divorce of conception and execution and a ‘managerial revolution’, had already taken place in the organization of warfare. The military revolution was, at the same time, the modern-state in embryo; requiring new forms of administration throughout society and, above all, new, centralized mechanisms for imposing and collecting taxes (Black, 1999; Contamine, 2000; Downing, 1992; Ertman, 1997; Glete, 2002).

The *distinctive* form of identity gains its significance as ideological struggle to realize a political programme and system of values within a specified territory; and to authenticate through force the inner meaning of a particular world view. Combat is here viewed as the highest form of expressive will; an outpouring, growth and uprising of a meaningful commitment to an ultimate cause. These are typically ‘people’s wars’ of nationhood and revolution; wars legitimated, if not motivated, by ideological commitment. Clausewitz (1968) clearly distinguished these two modern forms of warfare and, in analysing their historical significance, turned strategic thinking away from the fruitless search for a Cartesian geometry of combat to a serious consideration of the ‘moral factor’ in combat (Aron, 1976).

The *empathic* form of identity is the product in part (and particularly

for men) of modern technologically advanced, total wars that, emerging in the American Civil War, developed during the 20th century into a global phenomenon (Bobbitt, 2002; Förster and Nagler, 1997; Kolko, 1994). Empathic identification is transparently arbitrary and any resemblance can be a sufficient ground for empathy; seemingly categorical and radical differences of any sort can be bridged, no difference makes a difference, so that every difference has the quality of a choice of a self-motivated and non-expressive freedom. The destruction of the ego and the psyche – of everything fixed and permanent in the soul – is a prerequisite for the rise of contemporary selfhood. War is not the necessary form of this destruction but it was, in fact, a crucial route to the specific selfhood of contemporary society.

The appropriate mode of grasping the experiential reality of combat, and the identities it informs, is also distinct for each phase in the development of modern society. The first is to be understood *rationaly*; that is, primarily in terms of the power of command and the development of new strategies based upon this power. The soldier's role is to obey and be responsive to the will and strategic plan of the commander. The soldier is the equivalent unit of combat; interchangeable one with another, ideally identical element in a complex fighting machine the overall coordination and control of which depend wholly on a clearly formulated plan of action. The second form of combat is to be understood *ethically*; as the struggle for justice, national liberation and 'rights'. Here war primarily becomes a means of asserting collective interests and, ultimately, the reality of the collectivity itself. Its fighting force is founded on revolutionary fervour, national pride and belief in the historic justice of the cause. Throughout the 19th century, military science itself increasingly took note of the 'moral basis' of combat, and sought to instil, in addition to discipline and obedience, a specific 'offensive spirit' that the rational strategist could count upon as an essential element in the planning of any operation. Morale became fundamental to the strategy of combat (du Picq, 1987). The third form is best viewed *aesthetically*; that is to say, in terms of the immediacy of an overwhelming experience; as terror and the sublime. The 20th century was to an unprecedented degree warlike, and warfare during this period became industrialized destruction. Citizens not only participated as economic resource but were targets, and formed guerrilla and irregular forces as well, so that the distinction between soldier and civilian was systematically eroded. It also justified immediate state intervention in the economy (as opposed to free market ideology that characterized the conduct of war in the era of classical bourgeois modernity).

It is not possible, within the limits of a single article, to substantiate this typological sketch with sufficient illustrative material, or adequately discuss the host of issues that a brief presentation raises. The subsequent discussion, therefore, is confined to a brief examination of the ways in which modern warfare is related to the emergence of *empathic* identity.

The problem might also be put in a more direct and urgent way that raises directly the continuing practical as well as philosophical issue of

modernity. If we have created modernity as a self-disclosing realm of human freedom, why does it remain stubbornly opaque? If experience has become the ultimate arbiter of reality, how is that experience itself seems incapable of grasping itself and the world it creates? The experience of combat – the kernel of warfare – remains something remote and enigmatic. It is the pre-eminent shaping experience of late modernity, yet it remains elusive. Indeed, the extent that every recent war becomes strenuously memorialized is a sure sign, in fact, of the degree to which it is being forgotten. The First World War memorial, ‘Lest We Forget’, already indicates that it has been forgotten.

How is this possible? How can the decisive experience of a century be lost in a haze of poorly organized recollections and wholly inadequate objective memorials? This lacuna is all the more surprising when we consider the extent to which modern society was established in so many declarations of human autonomy; so much certainty that a new self-conscious beginning had been inaugurated, free from the obscuring Otherness of Nature or God. Humanity makes itself and, in making itself, discovers itself, expresses itself. Yet, the immediate lesson of the most advanced of modern societies is that humanity also loses itself, forgets itself. Having liberated reality from the claims of authority and established experience as its self-certain foundation, experience itself became cloudy and obscured by a strange impenetrability. Given this situation it is to the development of aesthetics, rather than the rational sciences that we must turn if we are to gain insight into the potent yet strangely withdrawn and enigmatic world of modern combat.

Modernity and Aesthetics

During the latter part of the 18th century aesthetics was established as a significant philosophical discipline. This was, in part at least, a recognition of the growing autonomy of artistic practices – especially music – and the problems of meaning and taste that they raised (Dahlhaus, 1991; Neubauer, 1986; Rosen, 1996). The decontextualization of art from religious ritual, political spectacle or the exercise of command and the simultaneous enlargement of its audience of private consumers, was a challenge to previous theories of art. Even more importantly, aesthetics developed as the first counter-movement within the Enlightenment. Where reason had become the principal form in and through which humanity and its world could be grasped, the passions, sensibility and pleasure had been treated as secondary and even derivative aspects of human nature. And even where the primordial force of the passions was acknowledged, this was understood in an ultimately reductive sense; the human being was driven by needs, motivated by desire and still guided by reason. The dominant rationalism encouraged what amounted at first to a reductive aesthetics; but, increasingly, the whole inner world of experience, and the immediacy of feeling and sense, were recognized as irreducible and crucial aspects of the Enlightenment’s own conception of humanity.

Thus, for example, among the Scottish philosophers Kames and Hutcheson championed an autonomous aesthetics founded on a natural history of the passions and taste, in the one case, and on the sovereignty of ‘inner sense’ as an aesthetic as well as moral reality in the other (Broadie, 1997). The discourse of aesthetics, thus, became a thoroughly modern view of the world and belonged as centrally as the concept of reason to a full understanding of human nature.

Kant’s philosophy is unquestionably the most sophisticated and complex investigation of the central issues raised by the new aesthetics, and its relation to both rational and ethical considerations. The historical context of each of the Kantian critiques was fundamentally the same. If modernity was genuinely to establish itself as the free and autonomous self-development of humanity, how could it validate its entire development without reference to discredited pre-modern authority? How could knowledge be other than self-referential representation; how could the ends of action and the relations among people be chosen and regulated in a non-arbitrary and just way? And how could feeling be elevated to universal humanness? How, in short, could the inherently free world of experience be constructed in such a way as to *impose upon itself* form-giving limitations (Beiser, 1987)?

The aesthetic might be viewed, in the general context so far outlined, as a peculiar form of representation; as the representation of immediacy, or as immediacy interpreted as a representation of reality. If knowledge was ultimately fated to express human estrangement from the non-human world, then the aesthetic might effect a *rapprochement* with that lost world; a form of immediacy specific to modernity. The aesthetic, that is to say, constituted an immediate relation to the world in terms of feeling rather than a mediated relation in terms of knowledge. The aesthetic invoked a non-discursive presence. The paradoxical character of all the arts in modern society, therefore, was their commitment to represent the non-representational aspect of reality; to convey the mute presence otherwise withdrawn to some remote corner of the world. Through appearance alone the arts sought to make present that which had no appearance (while the sciences, it might be added, revealed the mechanisms of Nature which lay hidden within and beneath that appearance) (Marin, 1999; Stoichita, 1995, 1997).

The peculiar, though not exclusive, task of art was to break the otherwise withdrawnness of modern experience into itself. The most widely discussed aspect of this paradoxical situation had focused on the notion of the sublime and the conventions of sublimity in the pictorial arts. Poussin’s rendering of tempests, for example, has been strikingly interpreted by Marin (and by the artist himself) as depictions of the sublime (Marin, 1999). The artist’s attempt to paint the sublime is a double contradiction; a modalization of the impossible; a kind of transposed hieroglyph of the ungraspable. The sublime in, or, rather, beyond Nature is suggested or hinted at by the tempest; wild, unpredictable, violent, a rending of nature as a uniform and continuous being; a disruption of, and irruption into, the realm of universality and necessity, at the very moment that Nature had finally been

conceptualized by science as absolutely uniform. This miraculous breakdown of the natural order is at once violent and awe-inspiring. The painter attempts to represent this, to paint something that cannot be represented because it is not a thing at all, nor even a gesture of Nature. It is something altogether beyond empirical reality, and the artist invokes in this (mis)representation a certain terrifying freedom of reality to form and express itself in a wholly unpredictable fashion. For Poussin, the problem of painting is essentially the problem of the sublime; of how art can divest itself of its appearance and convey not what it designates but what it signifies. Later Romantic painters, such as Friedrich and Turner, transposed the issue of the sublime to one of pure subjectivity and used wilderness landscapes to suggest the fathomless abyss of the human soul (Honor, 1981; Koerner, 1990). This perspective, it is worth noting, was by no means anti-scientific in its vision of nature (Gusdorf, 1993; Larson, 1994; Mitchell, 1993).

Modern aesthetics became preoccupied with what amounted to an essentially new conception of the sublime. The term itself had a long history rooted in Ancient oratory. Longinus, thus, described the sublime as the irresistible and mysterious power of speech:

For the excellence of elevated language is, not to persuade the hearers, but to entrance them; and at all times, and in every way, what transports us with wonder is more telling than what merely persuades or gratifies us. The extent to which we can be persuaded is usually under our own control, but these sublime passages exert an irresistible force and mastery, and get the upper hand with every hearer. (Longinus, 1965: 100)

In modern aesthetics, however, the sense of defencelessness became enigmatic; it was powerlessness in the face of our own nature. This involved an important development within the new aesthetics itself; a development that can be summarized in terms of the difference between the approaches of Burke and Kant. There is a transition here from an objective associationist account of feeling to an exploration of interior subjectivity. In Burke the sublime is an aspect of the 'objective' character of the stimulus; of exterior reality, which is in itself terrifying, magnificent and so on. But, for Kant, the emphasis lay entirely on the subjective side – on the *inconceivability* of the sublime and the abyss into which this throws the subject; a self-undermining of the self. This latter view is philosophically more penetrating but more difficult to illustrate.

Artists persisted in depicting the sublime as a wild landscape even though, in principle, such visions cannot be other than picturesque. The sublime is the intuition of infinity within the subject; the abyss of interiority projected into a picture of the world. Kant himself had begun with a Burkean view and progressively modified his understanding (Kant, 1960). In the sublime, interior 'space' is infinitized and becomes symmetrical with exterior space. The subject, suspended between the two, is the meeting point of two infinities; a view already espoused by Pascal. Consciousness, as a

result, no more adequately grasps and reflects interiority than it penetrates the pure Otherness of the ‘thing-in-itself’. Indeed, the ‘thing-in-itself’ is nothing other than a projection of the illusion of completeness and finiteness of the interior world of subjectivity; and once this has been broken down, or broken through, it dissolves into nothingness.

The immediacy that Kierkegaard was to take as the distinguishing criteria of the aesthetic is, therefore, already a strange and involuntary imposition of the soul upon itself. And it is not pleasure alone, but self-generated feelings of all sorts, which is its content. Pleasure orients the aesthetic sphere in much the same way that goodness orients the ethical or reason orients cognition and reflection; it is the normal tendency, the expected and unsurprising direction of discourse and action, the movement towards a conclusion and a satisfaction of some sort. But immediacy is, equally, unpleasure and the perversity of the senses. There is a kind of negative sublime; an infinite negativity found in irony and the defiance of the spirit against itself. It is the negative sublime that we encounter in some of Dostoevsky’s extraordinary characters and, more generally, in the abyss which is the experience of combat.

The Aesthetics of Combat

If the character of modern experience generally may be grasped aesthetically, then combat (the essential experience of warfare) may be viewed as the *sublime* potentiation of one of modernity’s most characteristic features. The study of warfare, and especially of combat, becomes a kind of applied aesthetics.

There is, first of all, a straightforward sense in which an aesthetics of combat has become significant. The most direct way in which people now become informed of the experience of warfare is by reading novels and watching films. Moreover, the western war literature of the 20th century has been quite fundamental to the transformation of the novel as well as to the development of our understanding of combat. There is an ‘elective affinity’ between the development of the modern novel and combat experience; something that makes war one of the given themes of modern literature, and literary art the primary modality for our grasping the modern, western experience of war. The literary treatment of national and revolutionary wars was vital for the development of classic realism in the novels of, for example Stendhal, Balzac and Tolstoy as the development of total war was for Emile Zola and Theodor Fontane. The specific literary reconstruction of the First World War, of course, is fundamental to the development of a culture of modernism throughout the 20th century (Eksteins, 1989). The literary innovation and originality of, for example, Claude Simon, Ernest Hemingway, Céline, Jules Romains, Ford Madox Ford, James Jones, Joseph Heller and many others is unimaginable outside the context of the encounter with war which conditioned their mature literary recreation of reality (Fussell, 1975; Hynes, 1998; Rieuneau, 1974).

There is in addition, however, a more penetrating sense in which an

aesthetics of combat becomes meaningful. Combat is an extreme form of experience and, as commonly with aesthetic judgement, it is easy to be misled by its overwhelming objectivity into making the error of positivism; of 'explaining' the experience by a presumed external reality. But here, as elsewhere, experience is by definition a humanly and socially constituted phenomenon; a constructed reality.

The *aesthetic* construction of the experience of modern combat may be outlined in terms of several crucial 'categories'.

Terror

Burke begins his *Philosophical Enquiry* with a helpful general statement:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the idea of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime. (Burke, 1990: 36)

It would hardly seem contentious to regard terror as the central experience of modern combat! Interestingly, however, it is relatively recently that this has been recognized, and has been so only as a result of the outstanding work of scholars, including Ashworth (1980), Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker (2000), Ellis (1990, 1999), Holmes (1985), Keegan (1991) and Linderman (1997), who have sought to write partial histories of modern warfare, and modern combat, from the perspective of the ordinary combatant. Yet, matters are not quite so straightforward. The terror of the sublime bears a phenomenological kinship to the (oppositely evaluated) dread of the sacred; a momentary conceptual and sensory dizziness which opens the soul to its own abysmal interiority (Otto, 1959; van den Leeuw, 1963). And for the soldier, also, the sublime begins in something exterior and irresistible. But where the sacred has the potential to flood the soul and create a new and deeper selfhood, the soldier's terror remains something external, imposed and physical; fear crushes the body rather than liberates the soul.

A deeper insight into the connection between the aesthetics of the sublime and the experience of terror can be gained through a consideration of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Here, the sublime is 'a presentation of an indeterminate concept of reason' and arises:

... by a feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful, and so it is an emotion that seems to be no sport, but dead earnest in the affairs of the imagination's reason. (Kant, 1960: 91)

Indeed, he counts it 'a negative pleasure' an alternate attraction/repulsion.

In terms of objects of nature, whereas the beautiful is a self-contained form, the sublime 'contravenes our power of judgement' and seems to be 'ill-adapted to our faculty of presentation, and to be, as it were, an outrage

on the imagination' (Kant, 1960: 91). The sublime 'cannot be contained in any sensuous form', nonetheless, some such form may suggest the sublime as a pure idealization. In a formula borrowed from St Anselm he characterizes the sublime as the 'absolutely great', something 'beyond all comparison'. The sublime is to the realm of immediate feeling what the infinite is to the concept of reason, or the Absolute is to the realm of Being; neither presentable nor representable; a paradox. It is a paradox, nonetheless, into which we can enter by way of its literary transformation.

Here, for example, is a fine, extended description of battleground fear, from the most comprehensive and subtle of all modern war fictions, Jules Romains' sublime novel, *Verdun* (first published in 1938 as part of his huge novel cycle *Men of Good Will*):

Jerphanion was conscious of a sudden change of mood, a special kind of shock which he had no difficulty in recognising since it had happened to him before. It was as though he had been completely transported from one state of being to another. All his senses were equally affected, eyes, lungs, mind, and limbs. Nothing, within him or without, but was different from what it had been a moment before. Each nerve-end seemed suddenly conscious of a feeling of oppression, of something between excruciating pain and strangulation. Every organ of his body felt as though it had been caught up and constricted. He had a sensation of being tightly squeezed, while at the same moment something seemed to click in his brain. No doubt about what had happened. His head, his hands, the stretched skin of his chest, the way his blood circulated through veins and arteries, his sense of the passage of time, his anticipation of what the next moments would bring – it was as though his whole conscious being had become aware that it was set in a vice which some hand had turned quite definitely, though quite gently. His body seemed to contract within a narrowing sheath with an effect of tingling. He could find relief only, as it were, by shrivelling up inside himself, by making himself smaller. His eyes, on the contrary, felt distended, as though they had been just noticeably pushed outwards from their orbits. Some stranger to this place, meeting him suddenly, could not but have been struck by his expression. His brain, too, as though in an effort to escape, or as though subjected to some uprush from within, felt like a living thing pressing heavily against the confining skull made more rigid by the steel of his helmet. There was nothing in the experience that could be called acute pain; quite the contrary, nothing like a sudden shock to be followed by an easing of the strain. What was happening seemed deliberately to avoid getting worse; rather, it appeared to be establishing itself as a chronic state. His mind might register what had occurred like a singing in the ears, but only to resign itself forthwith to the thing's continuance. 'It's come. Incredible though it may seem, it's come, as it came before.' (Romains, 2000: 53–4)

This is:

... a fear unaccompanied by any sense of shock or even by a noticeable trembling of the limbs, free of any merely episodic character or of those automatic

reactions which might absorb and dissipate it, of anything, especially, that bore the remotest resemblance to a movement of flight; a sensation that was the concentrated essence of fear in its harshest form. (Romains, 2000: 55)

His first acquaintance with this fear had been overlaid 'by a curiosity so novel and so strong, by so violent an effort to show himself equal to the occasion . . . with the surge within himself of great waves of nervous excitement and exaltation'. But now no longer curious, he becomes aware of the impossibility of avoidance: 'One loses even the mystical respect for danger . . . this particular manifestation of fear had just got to be accepted as something quite simple, without frills, without variation, without even the power to develop, that went on and on' (Romains, 2000: 57). In the combat zone fear is not a transitory feeling, or a psychological disposition; it is a permanent state of being; it is something corporeal, indeed, it is the mode of embodiment specific to combat.

For Burke (1990: 53), as for Romains and Kant, 'no passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear'. This is no discovery. Military authorities already knew all this, and sought through training and discipline to provide the fear-stricken soldier with a series of automatic activities; responses that would become habitual even in the face of terror, and might serve to fill the sublime void with a comforting action. 'Combat effective' troops keep the sublime at bay; for a time at least, and desublimates their terror, by learned mechanical activity.

Burke additionally lists obscurity, power, privation, vastness and infinity as accessory symptoms of the sublime. 'Infinity', he says, has a tendency to fill the mind with the sort of 'delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime' (Burke, 1990: 67). These characteristics, equally, could be amplified and illustrated from memoir and fictional sources. But each, in turn, would become a point of transition between two worlds, and open on to a reality so transformed that these words themselves fail to convey the altered state of being to which they refer. In a more general way the negative sublime of combat can be grasped as suspension of everything that makes our world meaningful, predictable and manageable.

Chance

Combat, that is to say, is a world unlike any other; a world of confusion and chaos, a kind of anti-world. Its sublime Otherness is made real for us, above all, as the negation of order. On the battlefield Chance rules supreme.

In a radical sense the soldier cannot *act*. By virtue of his presence in the midst of chaos the soldier, in fact, surrenders to Chance. The conditions of modern warfare are impersonal, the enemy is distant and invisible, death is doled out on an industrial scale. Jules Romains, once again, is a reliable guide to the subtle interplay of rationalized forms and experiential chaos which typifies the combat zone:

There was the actual front line, a place characterized by surprise strokes, by primitive violence, by catastrophes confined within fairly localized limits, by, in short, a confused activity in which chance, the unexpected, and the incalculable necessarily played a considerable part. But behind that lay a zone marked by totally different features, the zone of ‘command’, where the matter of prime importance was to know what was happening, to foresee and, as far as possible, to determine what should happen. (Romains, 2000: 115)

Combat literature abounds in examples of the rule of Chance. Remarque, for example, tells us:

The front is a cage in which we must await fearfully whatever may happen. We lie under the network of arching shells and live in a suspense of uncertainty. Over us Chance hovers. If a shot comes, we can duck, that is all; we neither know nor can determine where it will fall. . . . A few months ago I was sitting in a dug-out playing skat; after a while I stood up and went to visit some friends in another dug-out. On my return nothing more was to be seen of the first one, it had been blown to pieces by a direct hit. I went back to the second and arrived just in time to lend a hand digging it out. In the interval it had been buried. . . . No soldier outlives a thousand chances. But every soldier believes in Chance and trusts his luck. (Remarque, 1963: 70)

Ernst Jünger describes similar experiences. He recounts an incident in which a soldier pauses for a moment to converse with someone and sees just ahead a shell explode at the point he would otherwise have reached. In another case a soldier shelters from fire and heavy rain and, moments later, sees a shell explode where he had been standing. Later:

. . . the same performance was repeated; only this time, as it was fine, I stood outside the farmhouse. The next shell fell right in the middle of it. Such are the chances of war. Here more than anywhere it is a case of little causes and great effects. Seconds and millimetres make the difference. (Jünger, 1996: 211)

Romains, with characteristic amplitude of vision, comes to include the high command within the domain of sublime chaos. The war in its entirety could be viewed only from a vast distance ‘where conscious Will is no longer lord of all, but only Chance’ (2000: 35). At both the senior command, and in the field, ‘At both ends of the scale, therefore, the indeterminate, the unknown, the hand of chance, held sway . . .’ (2000: 36–7). The zone of rationality shrinks to insignificance.

The soldier is forced to wager his life and can do little to improve the odds in favour of surviving. Most, unsurprisingly, accept their new and incomprehensible world as the imposition of an ineluctable Fate. The experience of Chance, it should be noted, has little to do with the rationalized activity of assessing risk, or the calculation of probability; it is a direct exposure to the radical contingency of a reality in the face of which human

powers of reason, foresight, prudence and virtue are ineffective; even magic loses its potency to reassure, or religion to console.

The combination of Fear and Chance effects a total transformation *in* experience; indeed, transforms the character *of* experience itself.

Totality

The sublime is ungraspable Otherness; combat is ungraspable Otherness. But there is nothing elusive or spiritually edifying in the latter (though Ernst Jünger loudly proclaimed it as a value). Where the sublime in art indicates radical transcendence that bounds and deforms reality by its presence, the sublime of combat is forcefully, overwhelmingly and inescapably actual. Combat is sublime immanence. It is, nonetheless, the antithesis of the mundane or ordinary world; it is the contradiction of an actual sublime; a paradoxical non-transcendental Otherness. This illogical formulation allows us, from the security of the library or study, to enter, imaginatively but more completely, into the world of combat.

The aesthetics of combat is not a perverse attempt to glimpse beauty in the phenomena of war but, more importantly, a practical realization of the programme of philosophical aesthetics. That is, rather than subject reality to reason and objectify it falsely as an abstract system of relations and equilibria; reality is recovered and dignified in terms of immediate experience. This effort to rediscover reality finds its greatest success in modern warfare; elsewhere (for example in leisure, consumption, art), the aesthetic is compromised by being assimilated to a theory of representation. But here, rather than imitate a greater but hidden reality, or reduce reality to nothing but a series of arbitrary signs, the aesthetic gains its own inner coherence in a practical demonstration of destructive power. Warfare is a real presence, not a system of signs. It is not something to be understood, but, imposing itself as an absolutely objective reality, constitutes an inescapable event.

The sublime aesthetic object is self-enclosed; a world rather than a differentiated segment of normal experience. It opens for us a new reality that is quite distinct from our everyday existence. Combat, similarly, is a world apart. Gerald Linderman's excellent book *The World within War* (1997) makes this explicit and describes what appear to be its central features with care and precision. And Richard Holmes (1985: 149) remarks that 'the battlefield is a unique and alien land, with logic, rules and values of its own'. But, rather than enrich experience with another full and meaningful reality, it is the exact antithesis of all meaning and all experience. It is a world of negation and nothingness. Combat is not just another reality, a variation, as it were, of ordinary life, it is an inversion of everything that makes ordinary life possible; it is radical Otherness, negative existence; 'Here there was no semblance of meaning'; here the soldier is 'initiated into a strange, insane, twilight fraternity where explanation would be forever impossible' (Mailer, 1993: 245). The radical character of this negation leaves nothing untouched.

The Senses

In the other world of combat sensory experience is transformed; it is differently constituted and ordered. The senses turn inwards. To take just one aspect of what is, in fact, a thoroughgoing metamorphosis, in combat, hearing rather than vision becomes the dominant sense. The soldier is rooted to the spot, movement is unnatural; space is oriented vertically in terms of the Earth and the Sky rather than horizontally and directionally in terms of a near and far horizon. The so-called 'front' is usually invisible; the enemy cannot be seen, neither can the vast majority of his fellow soldiers or commanders. Battle itself obscures the visual field with smoke, vapour and poisonous gas. And there is danger on every side, the risk of being shelled by your own side is ever-present. Jünger, cooler under fire than most it seems, admits to being confused; 'what puzzled me most of all was why it went on from all sides' (1996: 25).

The soldier is attuned to sound, hearing is his most acute sense and works without conscious reflection:

At the sound of the first droning of the shells we rush back, in one part of our being, a thousand years. . . . A man is walking along without a thought or heed:— suddenly he throws himself down on the ground and a storm of fragments flies harmlessly over him;— yet he cannot remember either to have heard the shell coming or to have thought of flinging himself down. (Remarque, 1963: 42)

Sound is continuous and becomes one of the few meaningfully differentiated aspects of the sensory world:

The thunder of the guns swells to a single heavy roar and then breaks up again into separate explosions. The dry bursts of the machine-guns rattle. Above us the air teems with invisible swift movement, with howls, pipings, and hisses. They are smaller shells; — and amidst them, booming through the night like an organ, go the great coalboxes and the heavies. They have a hoarse, distant bellow like a rutting stag and make their way high above the howl and whistle of the smaller shells. (Remarque, 1963: 44)

Romains, similarly, notes the priority of sound:

Now and then the ear was utterly dazed by a single, absolutely hellish crash accompanied by a sheet of flame. Then an unceasing and sharp swishing gave the impression again that hundreds of pound weights were flying after each other through the air with incredible velocity. Then came another dud, plunging with a short, heavy thump that shook the solid earth all round. Shrapnel exploded by the dozen, as prettily as crackers, scattering their little bullets in a heavy shower, with the empty cases whizzing after them. When a shell went up near-by, the soil rattled down in a torrent, and with it the jagged splinters as sharp as razors rent the air on all sides. (Romains, 2000: 93)

Everyone listens ‘with the peculiar intentness that concentrates all thought and sensation in the ear’ (2000: 93). And sound is the only sense that might be of any use: ‘In the face of the enemy the senses are always on the look-out; and it is remarkable that, at such moments, quite ordinary sounds can give one the instant conviction, “Something is up!”’ (2000: 148).

In fact hearing does not so much become the dominant sense, as the common denominator of sensation; a kind of general kinaesthesia that begins with sound and ends in a general, undifferentiated pressure on the surface of the body; the weight of fear, which Romaine so well describes, is first of all heard. Sensations, rather than discriminating and distinguishing objects in the world, all focus and return to the body. All sensation ends in the dark, shadowy mass of the body. Reality is muffled, colourless, close, aversive but inescapable. It is unrelentingly painful. It is felt rather than seen or heard or distinctly touched; it is felt, rather, as a continuous, engulfing pressure.

Corporeality

The weight of fear presses the soldier to the ground. Remarque, in an extraordinary passage, emphasizes the appropriateness of the Rabelaisian grotesque body-image with which his novel begins (the pleasures of eating, defecation and sleep are all prominent in the opening pages) with an erotic hymn to the Earth; the natural abode of the soldier:

From the earth, from the air, sustaining forces pour into us – mostly from the earth. To no man does the earth mean so much as to the soldier. When he presses himself down upon her long and powerfully, when he buries his face and his limbs deep in her from fear of death by shell-fire, then she is his only friend, his brother, his mother; he stifles his terror and his cries in her silence and her security. (Remarque, 1963: 41)

The carnival of death invokes a precise inversion of the Renaissance body image in which modernity was inaugurated. In place of the upright figure, gazing into the distance, ordering the world through differentiating power of sight, the weight of the body gathered internally as a mobile and vital force, the combatant is crushed, face buried, guts dissolved, his entire weight draped over him like a lead rug. The body is reduced to pure materiality; to a heavy mass that somehow has to be dragged around. There is something uncanny in this corporealization; a living out and living through of the body shadow rather than the body image; it is the presence of death (Ferguson, 2000).

De-differentiation

A general process of de-differentiation characterizes experience at the front. Here everything is the same, not because all identities are equivalent but, rather, because every individual is absorbed into a mass. The living and the dead are mixed: ‘Among the living lay the dead. As we dug ourselves in we

found them in layers stacked one upon another. . . . Arms, legs, amid heads stuck out stark above the lips of the craters' (Jünger, 1996: 99).

Habitation reduced to rubble becomes part of a uniformly blighted landscape; there is no vegetation, the land is colourless; 'The village of Guilemont was distinguished from the landscape around it only because the shell-holes there were of a whiter colour by reason of the houses which had been ground to powder' (Jünger, 1996: 99). In retrospect soldiers recall the battlefield in tones of grey, a striking distinction from their visualization in contemporary, and ravishingly beautiful films, such as *Apocalypse Now* and *The Thin Red Line*.

The desolate landscape conceals instruments of death; battle becomes a normalized condition and not a singular and dramatic event:

The modern battlefield is like a huge, sleeping machine with innumerable eyes and ears and arms, lying hidden and inactive, ambushed for the one moment on which all depends. Then from some hole in the ground a single red light ascends in fiery prelude. A thousand guns roar out, and at a touch, driven by innumerable levers, the work of annihilation goes on. . . . Everyone feels that he is caught in a vortex which draws him on and on and thrusts him with unrelenting precision over the brink of death. (Jünger, 1996: 118)

Total war reaches out from the battlefield; the distinction between soldier and civilian becomes meaningless; entire populations are the enemy; everyone is a combatant. The idea of the 'home front' and the civilian 'war effort' and the reorganization of everyday life becomes imperative. Military command becomes ubiquitous, along with destruction, resignation and fear.

Derealization

It is as if all reality being, so to speak, concentrated in the body, the world ceases to exist; or, at least, becomes strangely dematerialized. This, it seems, is the specific character of the sublime in combat, and the source of its peculiar ecstasy. Jünger reports this transition from sensory bombardment to the derealization of the world:

The roar of the battle had become so terrific that we were scarcely in our right senses. The nerves could register fear no longer. . . . Everyone was mad and beyond reckoning; we had gone over the edge of the world into superhuman perspectives. . . the godlike and the bestial inextricably mingled. (1996: 254)

More commonly, combatants have described their experiences at moments of extreme danger and the overpowering of the senses as akin to dreaming, or walking into a filmscreen, or photograph. Jünger himself remarks that he was overtaken by:

A feeling of unreality. . . . It was so mysterious so impersonal. . . . The impression of something arising entirely from beyond the pale of experience was so strange that it was difficult to see the connection of things. It was like a ghost at noon. (1996: 3)

And Remarque concurs:

The front is so absorbing that previous life ceases to exist; a landscape encountered in a previous life takes on the appearance of a photograph a row of poplars which had been the landscape of his youth became 'a soundless apparition'. (1963: 82)

Or, to take an example from a later experience, James Jones (1998: 163) tells us that in the war zone 'there was no semblance of meaning . . . it felt like being in a film'. A feeling, oddly, 'that something more important, more enthralling should happen'. The 'virtual reality' of the combat zone is an aspect of fear and chance, not of modern technology; it was already described this way by Jünger:

. . . we looked at all those dead with dislocated limbs, distorted faces, and the hideous colour of decay as though we walked in a *dream* through a garden of strange plants and we could not realize at first what we had all around us. (quoted in Holmes, 1985: 177)

The common experience of the soldier in battle is 'the certainty that none of it was real' (Mailer, 1993: 195).

Romains has an interesting description of a night battle:

. . . an extraordinary battle of ghosts. . . . No one knew exactly what was happening to his right and left. Men recognized their nearest neighbours as friends by the sounds of their voices, the outline of their figures, the heavy breathing, the grumblings and exclamations bristling with familiar vocables, which surged and eddied with the moving mass of the bodies. They identified the enemy by reason of some difference in outline, by some strangeness in the noises they emitted, and chiefly in response to an obscure feeling, which the mere material situation of the two sides was insufficient to explain, that he was on the opposite side, that he was *against* them. They were conscious of his pressure, and aware that it was they who formed the obstacle, the principle of resistance, which must neutralize, counterbalance, and overcome his effort. (2000: 317–18)

To this dematerialization and desubstantialization can also be traced the comfort which the wholly inadequate protection of a somewhat inclined stance, a flimsy barricade, even a scrap of cardboard seems to afford the soldier; and the extraordinary way in which attacking troops seek to ward off bullets by brushing them aside with their hands.

From the Sublime to the Subliminal

The radical, negative sublimity of the combat zone means that events cannot, so to speak, emerge from it into the light of normal current experience. Extreme, violent and destructively actual as it is, combat is somehow not quite real. As combat is a world apart, the recollection, within it, of a

previously peaceable existence becomes ‘a soundless apparition’. Indeed, ‘here in the trenches’ such memories become ‘completely lost to us. They arise no more; we are dead and they stand remote on the horizon, they are a mysterious reflection, an apparition that haunts us.’ And even if they were revived and given back ‘it would be like gazing at the photograph of a dead comrade’ (Remarque, 1963: 83). The ‘real-time’ experience of combatants is lost to us, and to them; as sublimely inaccessible as the immediate experience of a dream.

Memory and possibility are squeezed from the combat zone; the subjunctive has no role in its overwhelming immediacy and, therefore, human autonomy – which *is* humanity – cannot survive within it. Combat is a thin, brutal facticity; an impossible combination of the absolute and the arbitrary.

We can approach combat through notions of fear and chance but cannot by such congenial means adequately grasp its fearful quality; the closure of its world within itself resists all conceptual blandishments. The sublime defeats all power of conceptualization, and combat – the most dramatically real of any form of sublimity – becomes shrouded in the strange simultaneous mysteries of corporealization and dematerialization.

Romains anticipates our difficulties; one of his characters despairs of conveying to his friend the character of his current experience:

... the long privation of all things that make life real. . . . It is natural that you should be infinitely curious. Incidentally, let me say that you’ve missed something in not having the experience for yourself. No letter, no amount of talk, and, still more, no literary descriptions in second-rate books – and books on the war cannot but be second-rate – could ever give you the faintest idea of the reality. . . . The most one can do is to throw one’s line at a venture in the hope of hooking some fragment of experience that may serve as evidence, or, rather, as one scrap of evidence among others. I try to think forward to the day when some man will try to put together the thousand and one statements of those who were witnesses of these events which at present are beyond the power of thought to compass. What will he make of them? God knows! . . . I no sooner write down a phrase than I want to scratch it out again as false, conventional, intolerably one-sided, as a wholly distorted view of the facts. (Romains, 2000: 147–8)

The radical novelty of combat means that it cannot be grasped by the imagination. Jünger carefully notes the misleading character of all anticipation of battle:

The horrible was undoubtedly a part of that irresistible attraction that drew us into the war. . . . And now at our first glance of horror we had a feeling that is difficult to describe. Seeing and recognising are matters, really, of habit. In the case of something quite unknown the eye alone can make nothing of it. So it was that we had to stare again and again at these things that we had never seen before, without being able to give them any meaning. It was too entirely unfamiliar. (Jünger, 1996: 23)

A subsequent process of ‘familiarization’ with destruction and disorder serves only to render unexceptional, but not less mysterious, the phantom images of war.

It is for the very same reason that combat is difficult to recall. The combat literature of the 20th century emerged only a significant interval after each major war. The struggle to remember is linked directly to the transformation in experience that is essential to combat. To pile paradox upon contradiction we might say that combat is not an experience at all – the most immediate, direct, aesthetically overwhelming of events is, from another perspective, so alien, strange and Other, as to be devoid of the very conditions of experience itself. The sublime cannot be conceptualized; it cannot be anticipated or remembered; it is the incursion of an Absolute and, as such, cannot be assimilated to the multiple and relativized perspectives of any possible ‘normal’ experience.

The detachment and difference of combat – what seems at first to render it opaque to every analytic and descriptive effort of clarification – is a difficulty which, however, and in an unexpected way, allows combat to be reconnected with the entire development of contemporary society and culture.

At the beginning of the 20th century the problem of memory arose in a particular and pressing way. Memory, along with every other human capacity and activity, was transformed in the emergence and development of modernity; it became primarily an inward and personal secret; the hidden history of the ego. Memory enabled individuals effortlessly to connect their own past to a possible future in which their inherent uniqueness and potentiality could be realized. The task of self-development, indeed, was accepted by many as a quasi-religious duty and became fundamental to the entire modern orientation to reality. But towards the end of the 19th century the practical and theoretical difficulties of this task – the conception of personal existence as a quest for authentic self-expression and self-realization – overpowered every serious effort to satisfy its demands. Hysteria formed the context for the emergence of Freud’s psychology as well as for a variety of now largely forgotten psychological theories of ego-fragmentation, double-consciousness and the multiplication of disconnected memories, and its characteristics were all so many symptoms of the internal breakdown of the major modern tradition of ego psychology; of experience viewed as the domain of the individuated and interiorized ego (Ferguson, 1996; Hacking, 1995).

What emerged from this crisis were new conceptions of the role of memory in the constitution of experience. Rather than regard memory as a record of past events, it was recognized as a creative process that entered intimately into the constitution of every experience. Every experience is an experience only to the extent that it is already memorable; that is to say, it is already integrated with recollections of the past and imagined futures. This process, in which memory becomes a continually shifting focus and transformation of attention, is one of the fundamental modalities of

experience; and it is the continuous voluntary shifting of such modalities and their perspectives that is productive of the characteristic ‘substantiality’ of actual events and actual experiences (Casey, 2000).

At the end of the 20th century a similarly diverse literature on collective memory has emerged. Samuel (1994), Nora (1992–6), Winter (1995), Mosse (1990) and many others have discussed the century in terms of the process of constructing and reconstructing a shared ‘memory’ of its past. This, we must suppose, indicates a crisis in the life of the modern state, nation or community, in much the same way that, a century before, the problem of memory indicated a crisis of personal identity. If the collectivity is to be real, it must be continually present in memory and imagination; it must establish the rich texture of residues that make up the everyday world of appearance. And to this end the recollection of war is fixed upon as a central locus of such memory; the moment in which the collective life of the nation became real and the link between personal identity and collective life could be forged anew and in ways which avoided the solipsism of the classical ego or the fragmentation of its postclassical alternatives.

The myth of modern war was manufactured afresh with each major conflict; as was the myth of nationhood, community and the common destiny of the people (Mosse, 1990). But in viewing war as the constructive principle of identity; such myths betray themselves, and cannot sustain themselves in the face of the personal records of modern combat too briefly alluded to above. Combat cannot be an experience from which personal and social identities are forged for the simple reason that it is not an experience at all!

In combat, identity is lost; surrendered to impenetrable processes which can be ascribed a meaning only at the cost of denying their real/unreal character. The incommensurability of combat with ‘normal’ experiences renders the whole process of collective memorializing an invention; it is war re-invented, not remembered; and invented as something quite different to that which, in its essential aspects, cannot be remembered at all. In retrospect the sublime ecstasy of war becomes subliminal.

Trauma, Remembering and Forgetting

The problem of memory arises here just because the self or, rather, the ego is lost in combat. The solidity and self-composure of the ego as an individuated experiencing subject are washed away in combat, so that ‘experience’ itself becomes clouded; something other than the ego striding through the world or contemplating a beautiful landscape. The striking affinity between literary fiction and combat in modern society now becomes clearer in terms of the formal transformation of normality that they both imply. Where the novel is a dreamworld, combat might be thought of as the inversion of the dream. The dream became a literary theme with the birth of the novel at the very outset of modernity, and a preoccupation with dreams and dreaming links Golden Age Spanish literature with both literary modernism and the new ‘art of memory’ practised in different ways by Freud and Proust

(Ferguson, 1996). The dream we know we have created for ourselves but cannot help experiencing it as an objective reality; combat appeared to its participants as pure externality, yet they are bound to encounter its awfulness as a sublime subjectivity. These symmetrical but opposed transformations make the fiction of combat more 'real' than either the memory of the actual events or their objective, historical-sociological reporting. Anyone, including war veterans, who genuinely wants to discover what combat is 'like', gains the greatest insight from reading James Jones or Jules Romains. These novels, it should be admitted, even where they are 'based' on actual experiences of their authors, are not recollections but – in a masterly fashion – constitute that fictional transformation which alone makes available to us the rich content of the events themselves. Thus, Caruth notes the role of literature in reclaiming memory. The past must be recreated, even fictionalized, to be remembered. To be faithful to the reality of the past, therefore, Alan Resnais, rather than produce the documentary for which he had been commissioned, with Marguerite Duras invented the authentic memorial, *Hiroshima mon amour* (Caruth, 1995).

Combat is forgotten just because, in destroying the ego, it destroys the possibility of it being experienced in the first place; combat is not configured as an experience, it is, rather, an episode of unreality. It is an inexperience. And in order to be recalled, an inexperience has first of all to be transformed. Hence the importance of the war memoir, especially the imaginative reconstruction. Hence also the delay in the process of recall; this is due less to the suppression of painful recollections, than to the difficulty of effecting a constructive transformation.

Where battle is remembered (or, rather, misremembered) it is because it is imagined in advance and spliced into existing experience so that, afterwards, it can gain in immediacy by being recollected. Verdun, as Antoine Prost points out, was recollected and celebrated as a symbol of the nation after the war because so many soldiers were prepared (however inadequately) in advance for the encounter. Almost the entire French army was involved, the method of replacing divisions meant everyone took a turn. 'Before experiencing the battle, they had imagined it, and that experience later fed the collective imagination.' Thus, after the war, Verdun quickly became a sacred place; a place of sacrifice and consecration; 'Going to Verdun was a kind of initiation: anticipated, vaguely foreseen, feared, and inevitable' (Nora, 1992–6: 383). Romains, characteristically, describes the more common case, the unanticipated and, therefore, unremembered, battle: 'Men in the antipodes spoke of the war's horrors, but since no one had experienced them, they found them difficult to imagine' (2000: 34).

Combat, therefore, is first of all recalled through inadequate stereotypes current in an earlier existence; stereotypes which condition even accomplished literary memoirs such as those of Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden and Siegfried Sassoon, whose war recollections have their psychological roots as firmly in the English public school as they do in the trenches (Blunden, 2000; Fussell, 1975; Graves, 1998; Sassoon, 2000). Normal

memory, it should be emphasized, is also a social relation and is not less so in its bourgeois and individuated interior form (Connerton, 1989; Halbwachs, 1992). From Rousseau onwards the fiction of the self is the illusion of personal memory as an isolated and objective recollection of the past.

The modern history of the notion of shock and trauma is an important link between the inexperience of combat and the formation of new transient identities. Combat is one of the most significant processes at work in the establishment of *empathic* identities. During the latter part of the 19th century the concept of physical trauma was introduced as an explanation for the psychological disturbances, particularly disturbances of memory function, which were, apparently, becoming more common. The idea was introduced in part as a means of dealing with legal claims for compensation, arising particularly from railway accidents (Piñero, 1988; Young, 1995). The great French neurologist, Jean-Martin Charcot, took up the notion and extended it as a general nosological category; but one linked to hysteria. Only the hysterical were likely to sustain long-term physical or psychological damage through physical trauma; congenital weakness predisposed some people, particularly young women, it was held, to develop memory loss and a variety of hysterical symptoms in the wake of physical shock. The experience of the shock was itself undergone in a ‘dissociated’ state; a detached and dreamy condition characterized by a somnambulistic lack of attention (Antze and Lambek, 1996; Ferguson, 1996).

The ideas of suggestion and suggestibility, as of nervous excitement and neurasthenia, were also widely discussed as possibly predisposing some people to long-term symptom formation after trauma. Forgetting the details of the initial circumstances was commonplace and, in fact, often made establishing legal claims more difficult.

Freud presented a new view; the trauma was a psychologically meaningful event rather than the result of a physical shock; and its forgetting was motivated by an unconscious act of suppression or denial. The theory became increasingly elaborate and sophisticated, leading to a comprehensive theory of the neuroses. Again the forgetting is involuntary, though here it is motivated unconsciously. His initial supposition was that the traumatic memory, inscribed on the body as symptom, would disappear once the meaningful form and mnemonic content were uncovered and translated. A good deal of Freud’s subsequent development of a psychoanalytic theory was an effort on his part to explain why this had not proved to be the case.

However, as a direct result of studies of ‘shell-shock’ during and immediately after the First World War, shock theory was revived. Shell-shock victims might be understood as suffering just the kind of circumstances Charcot had described; only here, as the shock was so great, even normal and robust young men suffered physical and mental breakdown, displaying symptoms characteristic of hysteria, including amnesia of the precipitating event itself (Leys, 2000).

Continuing studies of ‘battle fatigue’ have encouraged a further

development of the notion of trauma as an incomplete experience rather than a forgotten event. In current discussion there is an assumption that the overwhelming character of the experience – not only emotionally and physically, but cognitively – makes it a detached and fragmented event; in fact, not an experience at all (Caruth, 1995). An influential study makes the point that ‘In important ways, an experience does not really exist until it can be named and placed into larger categories’ (van der Kolk et al., 1996: 4).

The result is that the trauma is not recalled and formed into a narrative past and assimilated to an identity: ‘The memory of trauma is not integrated and accepted as part of one’s personal past; instead, it comes to exist independently of previous schemata (i.e. it is dissociated)’ (van der Kolk et al., 1996: 7). And it should be noted this is largely due to the social isolation of the war veteran, and the guilt associated with the events of combat. Symptoms then become indicators of real experiences and not ‘illusions’ of some sort:

The past is relived with an immediate sensory and emotional intensity that makes victims feel as if the event were occurring all over again. . . . Paradoxically, even though vivid elements of the trauma intrude insistently in the form of flashbacks and nightmares, many traumatized people have a great deal of difficulty relating precisely what has happened. (van der Kolk et al., 1996: 8–10)

Caruth (1995: 8) talks of the ‘inherent latency’ in the event itself. The ‘belatedness’ of historical experience ‘since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time’ (Caruth, 1995: 8). She draws attention to the paradox that ‘the person has experienced an event that is outside the range of human experience’. In trauma the person is ‘possessed by the past’ even though the past has not yet been established as an *experience*. The term ‘witnessing’ has been introduced to describe the recovery of traumatic memories:

As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference. (Felman and Laub, 1992: 5)

Massive trauma precludes its registration. . . . The victim’s narrative . . . testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence. (Felman and Laub, 1992: 57)

The point here is that the trauma is once again defined as meaningless. Indeed, it is the meaninglessness of the shock that makes it an inexperience and a detached trauma which revisits the victim in unexpected

memory flashes, heightened emotional states and panic attacks. The First World War, it might be argued, represents, on a larger scale, a transition from wars of meaningful sacrifice to wars of meaningless chaos. The disorientation of the shell, the explosion, is the primal reality of modern war. This was already clear to Barbusse, who remarks of his first exposure to mortar fire; 'It seemed to strike from all sides at once at his sense of equilibrium. Had it come from left or right, from in front or from behind? Difficult to be sure' (1917: 97). Shell-shock was a widespread experience among soldiers during the First World War and its 'reception history' continues to develop (Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 2000; Leys, 2000; Shepherd, 2000). The heightened intensity of battle became prolonged and signalled the end of any credible notion of glory in battle.

The trauma of war, and its forgetfulness, continues to infect not only the combatant but the civilian, the scholar as well as the politician and the citizen. Conventional reticence still censors many literary reconstructions of the trenches. There is little mention of the loss of bodily control in combat, or of sex in the combat zone, or of the peculiar and disturbing ecstasy of violence (Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 2000; Bourke, 1999). The real extent and intensity of violence are paradoxically absent from most histories of war; as is violence against the civilian population and violence against one's own comrades. The widespread anomie that characterized the putative civilian population during and immediately after wars is yet to receive the attention it deserves.

War is not the only trauma; indeed, the history of contemporary society might be written as a process of adaptation to, and normalization of, its varied, overwhelming shocks. Modernity oscillates between the banal and the shocking; the boring and the traumatic.

Modern War and the Normalization of the Sublime

Experience and memory are continually interrelated and mutually interdependent. We do not simply 'have' experiences that are later recalled. Memory, rather, is continually reconstituted in and through experience; and it is only through the continuous assimilation of the past that experience itself becomes possible. New psychological and philosophical views of memory emerged in modern society just at the time when the self-certainty of the ego as a detached experiencing mechanism broke down. Radical reassessments of the functioning of memory are found not only in the famous writings of Bergson and Freud, and the literary explorations of Proust, which, in different ways, sought to establish new insights into the constitutive role of memory in every form of experience, they are also central to the development of orthodox, academic psychology. In the wake of Charcot, French psychologists in particular investigated disturbances of memory as a privileged route towards the understanding of normal psychic life. The work particularly of Théodule Ribot and Pierre Janet was influential, and their meticulous case studies of amnesias, fugues and memory disturbances of all kinds, which seemed to indicate a breakdown of classical forms of

modern identity (Ellenberger, 1970; Hacking, 1995; Janet, 1965, 1977; Ribot, 1882). The memory crisis, as it has more recently been called, marks the onset of *identification* – transitory states of wishfulness – alongside, and even supplanting, the fixity of *equivalence* and *distinction* as a characteristic form of modern identity.

The ‘memory crisis’ at the end of the 19th century was itself symptomatic of long-term changes in the social structure of memory. Pre-modern memory is collective – a form of ritual in which the traditions of the community are rooted and through which they are reinforced. At the same time, a specific, artificial memory, or ‘art of memory’, was developed as an aspect of the study of rhetoric. Artificial memory was a field of practical mnemonics, specifically designed to assist the orator in his public role (Carruthers, 1990; Yates, 1969). Progressively, the visualizing techniques of the art of memory became abstract and logical; the ‘place categories’, which organized the memory system and facilitated the recall of material extraneous to the everyday practices of the community, operated most effectively when they formed a ‘natural’ system. Thus, in the modern period, the rise of science (though itself an ‘artificial’ system of representations) replaced other memory systems with the logical structure of nature and shifted the focus of attention away from its technical application towards the conceptual and empirical properties of the system itself. And while artificial memory systems became naturalized, collective memory was reduced to fit the internal dimensions of the ego. Modern memory, thus, became internal, personal and individuated; the modality of selfhood.

In relation to this large-scale shift, it is tempting to argue that modern war constitutes a residual collective memory; a genuinely communal experience in which the life of society can be replenished and take root (Winter, 1995; Winter and Sivan, 2000). But this can be misleading. Quite the reverse is the case. It is modern warfare, and the inexperience of combat, which is the specific trauma through which contemporary society, with its fluid and dynamic identities, emerged from its own past, freed both from traditions and modern, abstract conceptions of nature and reason. Contemporary memory is becoming ever more fluid and interactive, though not genuinely collective. There is no past; it is a memory of the present; the continuous reinvention and reliving of a dream. The ‘actual’ past is denied, not lost. For contemporary life, new possibilities of collective memory, particularly film, provide a reproduction of visible forms of the past and encourage a sense of the contemporaneity of all events. Identification with our own past, and the past of others becomes deceptively free and immediate.

Freud’s essays in the art of recollection stood on the boundary, indeed marked the boundary, between a culture which sought authenticity and in which reality seemed naturally to represent itself in the depth and solidity of the ego, and a culture that celebrates the inauthentic and regards all depth with metaphysical scepticism. A century after Freud, infatuation with collective memory is a token of a similar transition from a society which is

viewed in terms of a continuous history, tradition and forms of differentiation specific to its own past, and a society in which collective identities are no more necessarily joined to the history of the nation than personal experience is joined to the history of the ego. In the floating world every form of identity has about it an air of arbitrariness, a wilful construction as happy to remake the past as to reinvent the future. Personal identity thus becomes at best ironic, and the search for ‘meaningful’ experience recoils from a century in which meaningful experience was precisely meaningless, where extremity and ultimate reality were met with in the battlefield and in the unconstituted rawness of a reality that refused to turn itself into experience.

Modern warfare, inconceivable and forgotten, is a large-scale model of contemporary life and the forms of *inexperience* common to it. War is an extreme version of all those tendencies that, in apparently more benign ways, have come to colour contemporary existence. War was a cruel initiation rite; a mechanism for the destruction of memory and the ecstatic birth of novelty (Eksteins, 1989). The flimsiness of the past, its thinness and lack of substantiality, are linked also to the emergence of new body images that, for men, also have their origin in the trauma of combat. War forced open the hermetic seal of the bourgeois body – the carapace of the ego – and opened it to a multitude of new influences. The mass neurosis of war, anticipated by the young female hysterics of the late 19th century, delivered the individual from the historically significant but now unnecessary constraint of reason and nature. War created the human raw material for advanced society; people sensitive to their own whims. People for whom fashion was more significant than memory and for whom momentary identifications could provide an adequate basis for action.

The turbulence of war is the prototype modern fluidity (Bauman, 2000). Romaines describes for us the viscosity of mass movements so characteristic of modern warfare:

They discovered that the physical properties of men reckoned by millions made up an element that conditioned and neutralised all considerations of mere strategy. Armies of so vast a size were found to possess unexpected fluidity, a tendency to flow into, and fill up, any holes that might be made in their compact body, to envelop, impede, and turn the point of any opposing thrust; to give beneath a blow, to bend without breaking, to seep outwards from the flanks, covering more and more ground with an ever-shifting, ever-active front, growing to such a size that the forces involved could be regarded as nothing less than nations in arms, obstinately clinging to the ground they covered, adapting themselves to the accidents of its surface, tracing, almost instantaneously, with millions of pairs of arms, a continuous scratch over which they formed like a scab and at every point of which they faced the opposing lines with a ceaseless crackling of fire, a lethal trembling, as though something tormented, burning and unapproachable had become installed as a natural feature of the landscape. (Romaines, 2000: 158)

And, he remarks, ‘We just let ourselves be swept along; the tide of danger

picks us up and carries us with it' (2000: 158) Remarque similarly describes the fluid dynamics of war; 'To me the front is a mysterious whirlpool. Though I am still water far away from its centre, I feel the whirl of the vortex sucking me slowly, irresistibly, inescapably into itself' (1963: 41). These are observations that might equally apply to the peaceful activities of contemporary life.

Romains, indeed, already makes the association between modern warfare and leisure pursuits; not through the public school idiom of fair play and muscular endeavour that characterized many of the English officers at the outbreak of the First World War, but in terms of the mass character of its movements. Describing an enemy attack, for example, he observes:

The moving mass was less like a crowd intent on reaching some definite goal than a sauntering concourse with plenty of time before it; like, for instance, an outing of East End Parisian holiday-makers who had been to watch a firework display on the Buttes-Chaumont and were now wending happily homeward through the grassy undulations of the park. (Romains, 2000: 306)

Similarly, Norman Mailer, whose subsequent infatuation with sport is well known, talks of combat as an incomprehensible mixture of fear, excitement and anger 'not unlike the feeling in a stadium' (1993: 11). And we might well suppose that sport and leisure in the 20th century have sustained some of the peculiar transformations in experience that, more completely and radically, were the peculiar genius of combat.

Combat is a practical self-discovery of the modern age; an encounter with meaninglessness, randomness, death and the body; the persistence of a curious capacity for care. On the battlefield as elsewhere there is a horizon, but it is ungraspable, unfamiliar, the very presence of death as an externalized reality.

Combat is an aid to forgetting, which is a precondition for the sensuous and psychic fluidity that characterizes contemporary life in advanced societies. It is an initiation into a new mnemonics that alone preserves our sanity in a world dominated by Chance and the inconsequential; it is an *aide-oubli*. Shattering the link between body and self, it allows us to forget the past. The past is something created not something recalled, a means, as Nietzsche pointed out, of creating a sense of forward motion out of random events. 'In order to live', he says, a person 'must possess, and from time to time employ, the strength to shatter and dissolve the past' (1995: 106). This was a difficult task for Nietzsche and his contemporaries, experiencing the modern world at the height of its bourgeois self-certainty and historical sensibility. But that world and that self-certainty, destroyed by modern warfare, no longer presents itself as an obstacle to the multitude of arbitrary *identifications* that daily present themselves as so many enjoyable alternatives to the hard work of becoming someone in particular.

If we could live without the illusion of memory, then, 'such a human being would no longer believe in himself, would see everything flow apart

in turbulent particles, and would lose himself in this stream of becoming' (Nietzsche, 1995: 89). But this is just the contemporary world of fluidity and change; an alluring rash of possibilities in which the equivalent and distinctive forms of self-identity are dissolved, in which history is lost in the ceaseless flow of becoming; a world relieved of meaning or cause, created by war and sustained by the effort both to recall and forget its awfulness.

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