



Summary

Poetic Potentials of War

Jünger, Sebald, and Combat and Body in Modern War Literature

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In modern time, war has had a special status as the dark side of civilisation, frightening as well as fascinating. In the arts, in literature, photography, and cinema war has typically been portrayed as a dramatic, tragic or destructive spectacle with the battle scene and lethal combat being the main carriers of significance. However, industrialised warfare, especially the world wars of the twentieth century, has levelled differences between frontline and native soil, soldier and civilian, military operation and genocide. In that connection, the combat-oriented convention has been challenged by alternative modes of war description. One of the most conspicuous challenges can be found in what I call a 'body-oriented war literature', in which the human body is staged as the most interesting marker of war, while the ecstasy and importance traditionally ascribed to combat has been shoved into the background.

With an emphasis on the German literary tradition after World War One this dissertation presents a study of the body-oriented war literature as well as its importance for current cultural notions about war, including the idea of combat as the essence of war. To clarify the traces of both the combat and the body in modern war literature, the structure of the dissertation follows two of the greatest and most consistent examples of the combat- and body-oriented war literature, respectively: *In Stahlgewittern* (1920) by Ernst Jünger and *Austerlitz* (2001) by W.G. Sebald. Besides the fact that each of these narratives is about a man whose life is determined by a world at war, the two works do not have much in common. The world wars, their personal experiences of the wars and the times, in which they wrote, were extremely diverse. Jünger experienced the 'storms of steel' in the trenches of World War One; Sebald was born at the end of World War Two and never saw military operations firsthand. And yet the two works belong together. Jünger and Sebald present us with complementary aspects of the same intimate relation so important during wartime: the relation between the individual body and the claims of the community. In times of war, a community calls or forces bodies into combat, as we learn reading Jünger, while at the same time the fighting leaves ruined and aching bodies, trying – dead or alive – to



come to terms with the post war world, as we learn reading Sebald. Roughly speaking, that is what *In Stahlgewittern* and *Austerlitz* is respectively about: Wartime, out of the body, into the combat zone. Post war, out of the combat zone, into the body.

Sebald and the body-oriented war literature is the main interest of this study. This is due to the fact that the literature after World War Two – rather than literature of the 1920's and the 1930's – has put combat and dramatic battle scenes in quotation marks. It has focused on the exposure of the human body to events and images of war as a factor that also belongs to cultural memories of war. Instead of referring it to mournful sanctuaries such as the so called Holocaust literature, Sebald and other writers with him seek to let the non-armoured and vulnerable, yet living and acting human body be a central part of 'war' as a conceptual complex. At the same time, the orientation towards the body makes it possible for literature to establish inextricable links between wartime and peacetime and between military and civil practices. In other words, this study of body oriented war literature is an attempt to get beyond the mythological thinking so significant of the way historiography and literary historiography describe war, while literature itself in many instances leaves the impression of war as a partly parasitical, partly integrated phenomenon in the modern world.

However, the constitutive tension between war, combat and the body is not an exclusive matter of the literature about the world wars. By sketching the role of war in western literary history from Homer to the present, the introductory chapter of the dissertation shows that the tension has much deeper historical roots, while it also has undergone important transformations during the twentieth century. The introductory chapter furthermore presents and discusses the current research on war literature as well as the relations between these studies and other cultural memory studies, which is the primary research context of the dissertation. Finally, the specific methodological and theoretical premises of the dissertation are laid out in this introductory chapter.

The first part of the dissertation marks the movement out of the body and into the combat zone by presenting two extensive analyses of Jünger's *In Stahlgewittern*. Chapter 1 concerns the importance of World War One for Jünger's writings, which have generally been founded on the conviction that war is a forge of character and a warrant of a sacred community of warriors. In post war times this community must stick together, even though the battles are now being fought on other fields than the military. Getting closer to the text, chapter 2 presents an analysis of *In Stahlgewittern* as a literary construction of the time and space of war as adventurous entities of exception, in which the decisive battle can unfold



without being disturbed by profane factors. Concurrently, the narrative has some bodily or humane 'rifts', which reveal the problems that Jünger has had translating his ecstatic war experience into an ecstatic and 'armoured' text. The first part thus examines the battle- or combat-oriented war literature from three different, but closely related perspectives: The sociality, the historicity, and the spatiality of war – or the community, time, and space of war.

The same tripartite structure governs the course of the second part of the dissertation, which is a movement out of the combat zone and into the human body. Given that the body-oriented war literature depicts the meaning of war in civilised communities, times and spaces, this tendency presents us with an aesthetic and poetic profanation of the combat-oriented descriptions of war as a temporal, spatial and social abnormality. The second part contains three readings of Sebald's *Austerlitz*, supported and nuanced by two analytic excursions into other body-oriented war novels – Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and Christoph Ransmayrs *Morbus Kitahara* (1995) – which experiment with the belligerent temporality and spatiality, respectively.

In the first analysis of *Austerlitz*, chapter 3 presents the meaning of the 'aesthetic phantoms of war' in the novel as well as the war-related (lack of) sociality permeating Sebald's work. The chapter also contains a discussion on Sebald's own poetics of war description and the focus on the Holocaust in the international reception of his work. The Sebald-reception has typically noticed his literary treatment of different constituent elements of 'the war complex', primarily the area bombings of World War Two and the destruction of the European Jews; secondly, the modern art of fortification across Europe. But *Austerlitz* has never been read this way: as an outright literary treatment of 'war' as a modern conceptual complex.

In chapter 4, I take a closer look at the role of the human body and the temporality of war in *Austerlitz*. I first examine Sebalds literary mediation of a classic battle scene from the Napoleonic Wars, the battle of Austerlitz 1805, and its impact on the present day characters. The novel is mainly concerned with what is happening behind the fighting masses, but by focusing und this exceptional literary 'battle painting' it becomes obvious why, as the scene demonstrates the impossibility of describing combat. Even though the protagonist presents the battle as an overwhelming visual event, it is impossible for Sebald to fixate it as a stable aesthetic carrier of significance in the same manner as we find it in Jünger. At the same time, Sebald's battle scene is a demonstration of the elusive gaze, the fragile process of visualisation and the provisional character of each attempt at generating historical meaning. The style of



the novel is characterised by a tension between suspension and dissolution of snapshots or emerging images resulting in a number of 'image-implosions', which place the characters of the novel in a certain flexible temporality, different from the solid belligerent temporality that marks the combat-oriented war literature.

The same conflict can be found in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, analysed in chapter 5. As *Austerlitz* this novel is a literary negotiation of the paralysing or even lethal combination of war experience, images of war, and the dissolving of ordinary time; in Vonnegut's novel, however, in a more extreme and thus more illustrative way than in Sebald's. The combat as a perspective has replaced the combat as a motive, given that the battlefield negation of the everyday sense of time and space has been spread to the entire literary universe of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. But by attaching itself to a carnivalistic warrior figure and his defiant body, Vonnegut's narrative also marks a civil action-oriented counterpoint to the resignation and mythology of destruction often reflected by combat-oriented literature.

After that, the impact of war on urban space and the landscapes inhabited by human beings is the topic of chapter 6, the third and last analysis of *Austerlitz*. To be more specific, this chapter shows how the novel's spatial threshold-character makes it possible for the protagonist to escape the logic of fortification that governs his existence for a very long time. Along the course of the narrative, he is enabled to offer civilised resistance to the geography of destruction left by the war and visible to him everywhere as the 'pain-traces of history'. Concurrently, this chapter focuses on Sebald's dissolution of the opposition between city and war promoted by the combat-oriented literature, when it depicts combat as an activity taking place *outside* or *above* urban civilisation. *Austerlitz*, on the other hand, mixes war with urban life and urban life with war as it, for instance, becomes obvious in the novel's interest in propagandistic remains from The Third Reich, in which the emblematic places of the world war – such as internment camps – are presented in the shape of lively and civilised cities.

A similar opposition between the delusions of war propaganda and the real destructions of human habitats is the topic of the analysis of Ransmayr's *Morbus Kitahara* in chapter 7. This novel is a more extreme variation of the same spatial subject as found in *Austerlitz*. In *Morbus Kitahara* the scandalous space of war in the shape of frozen battlefields stands in an even more explicit opposition to the possibilities of human life after the total war. Ransmayr thereby expands and nuances how a body-oriented war literature is able to manifest the consequences of the abnormal spatiality of modern war. If the combat-oriented war literature has a tendency to naturalise these consequences – taking the spatial



abnormalities for given and being more interested in the abnormality of human action in times of war – Ransmayr’s novel visualises the mythic violence that war conducts on space, while telling a counterfactual post war-tale of a Europe slowly emptied of modern civilisation and self-conscious human beings.

The dissertation ends by recapitulating the overall problems under examination, primarily the intimate links between body and combat and the literary depictions and negotiations of these links. Including the main points from the two analytic parts, the summative conclusion leads to the final suggestion that literary and cultural studies of war representations should to a greater extent involve ‘civil-oriented’ war depictions in an attempt to normalise, democratise and civilise ruling ideas of the meaning of war in a modern world, still marked by thinking about war in terms of exception.

In relation to the acquisition of his doctoral degree Kasper Green Krejberg MA has handed in his dissertation to Faculty of Arts, Aarhus University. Faculty of Arts has accepted the dissertation for defense on January 6th 2012 at 13.15 PM at the following address: Aarhus University, Aesthetic Studies, Langelandsgade 139, building 1584 room 124. The dissertation is available for reading on location at Aesthetic Studies, Langelandsgade 141 (139), building 1586, room 220, Aarhus C, Denmark.

The Defence will be conducted in Danish.

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