La mascolinità nella letteratura e nelle arti

Decostruzione/evoluzione di modelli identitari

A cura di
Mariaconcetta Costantini e Federica D'Ascenzo

LED Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto

M. Costantini - F. D'Ascenzo (cur.), *La mascolinità nella letteratura e nelle arti* - Milano - LED, 2025
ISBN 978-88-5513-206-0 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/206-0-mascolinita-letteratura-arti.html

IL SEGNO E LE LETTERE

Collana del Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture Moderne dell'Università degli Studi 'G. d'Annunzio'

I volumi pubblicati nella Collana sono stati sottoposti a doppio referaggio anonimo.

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ISSN 2283-7140
ISBN 978-88-5513-206-0

LED Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto
Via Cervignano 4 - 20137 Milano
www.lededizioni.com - www.ledonline.it - E-mail: led@lededizioni.com

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In copertina
Inchiostro blu - Foto di Chiara Scarlato. Per gentile concessione.

Videoimpaginazione: Paola Mignanego
Stampa: Litogì

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SOMMARIO

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HARDLY AT WAR

Figuring Unheroical Masculinity in WW2 British Culture

Marilena Parlati

DOI: https://doi.org/10.7359/2060-2025-parm

ABSTRACT

The chapter focusses on the counternarratives of WW2 represented by fiction published in the 1940s, namely Henry Green, Agatha Christie and Graham Greene. I start by looking at some of the mythical discourses which surround the 'just war' and the alleged ferment at participatory democracy it is often associated to. The Blitz and Dunkirk, to name just two powerful legendary versions of that war, lie at the most intimate core of an intense rhetorical construction of English resilience and communal solidarity. In my view, the creases in this narrative did not simply emerge out of British postwar social turmoil but were already quite visible in many cultural sites, as in the case of some famous fictional texts of the 1940s. My main interest in this chapter lies in the analysis of the intersection between masculinity, gothicised citizenship, and the uncanny in domestic and urban spaces, more specifically in relation with Henry Green's *Caught*, Agatha Christie's *N or M?* and *The Ministry of Fear* by Graham Greene.

KEYWORDS: masculinity and war; reserve masculinity; uncanny spaces; vulnerability; World War 2.

1. MYTHS: MASCULINITY AND WAR

In the summer of 1940, Simone Weil started to write a very short pamphlet, *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*, on the sad spur of the Nazi occupation of France. To her,

> The man who is the possessor of force seems to walk through a non-resistant element; in the human substance that surrounds him nothing has the power to interpose, between the impulse and the act, the tiny interval that is reflection. [1]

[1] Weil 1945, 324.

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In a very different historical context, Graeme Dawson investigates the images and iconic representations surrounding the very real men that he labels as *Soldier Heroes*[2]. Among other themes and discourses, he connects adventure fiction and imperial propaganda to mythical figures, including the eccentric Lawrence of Arabia. From this perspective, war *is* indeed a man's world, an occasion for adventure and game, the spatial site of a quest for virtuous male fulfilment, but also at times for the pleasurable narcissistic unleashing of brutal violence. Weil is subtle, yet nonetheless clear: "the man with force *seems* to walk". I argue that hers is a powerful and complex mythopoietic gesture: violence generates and en*genders* anxiety while obviously causing pain, trouble, destruction. If war is the occasion for the construction of a *certain* version of masculinity, or rather of one version of a contestable hypermasculinity, imagined as monolithical, singular, both exceptional and ordinarily prescriptive, in Weil's view this version cracks doom and is also doomed to crack: "thus it happens that those who have force on loan from fate count on it too much and are destroyed"[3].

The association between masculinity, violence and war has often been portrayed as simply obvious[4]. In my view, Weil's argument might help navigate the innumerable shapes of wars and representations of war one could take into consideration. It must not remain unnoticed that her main focus of attention is the *Iliad*, possibly the most famous archetypal example of an intense connection between masculinity, war and literature. In my attempt at sparking some light on these fraught issues, I side with what Harry Brod contended, already in 1987, when he suggested that "while women's studies corrects the exclusion of women from the traditional canon caused by androcentric scholarship's elevation of *man* as male to *man* as generic human, the implications of this fallacy for our understanding of men have gone largely unrecognized"[5]. In this chapter, therefore, I consider myths and cultural icons of masculinity as they are presented in British novels of the Second World War. My focus will lie more specifically on Henry Green's *Caught* and Graham Greene's *Ministry of Fear*, with some forays into Agatha Christie's wartime crime fiction, namely *N or M?*. In my view, these texts exemplify the entangled

[2] Dawson 1994.

[3] Weil 1940, 324.

[4] See Christensen - Rasmussen 2017.

[5] Brod 1987, 40. For more updated debates, see Meyer 2009 and Robb - Pattinson 2018.

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complexity of the representation of masculinity in and out of war in the Anglophone panorama of the early 1940s. To begin, I briefly survey the imagined British communities the two world wars both triggered and predicated.

2. The Great War and troubled memory

The First World War looms large when one attempts to look at twentieth-century ideas and myths about masculinity at/and war. In various European countries, to mention just a few of the areas involved, the shock of dramatically different warfare and the numbers of soldiers and civilians disparaged by the global conflict have provoked highly contradictory reactions, both collective and individual, ranging from exhilaration to resilience, from mourning to resentment. In 1975 Paul Fussell initiated a thorough rethinking of the mnemonics of representation of the Great War – literary representation included[6]. That book has become a site of memory in its own right, a veritable *lieu de mémoire* generously offering vast archival resources. After Fussell, many feminist scholars have also contributed to reimagining the Great War in its previously often inscrutable obscurities. To mention one instance, the 1978 chapter that Elaine Showalter dedicates to hysterical men in her pivotal *Female Malady* certainly did spread some essential light on shell-shock and on the gender issues that the present tense of war and its later memorialization have been bound and are still bound to entail: "Shell shock is *the body language* of masculine complaint, a disguised male protest not only against the war but *against the concept of 'manliness' itself*"[7].

More recently, historians such as George Mosse[8] and Joanna Bourke[9] have contributed to shifting the terrain of masculinity studies and war studies alike. And yet, one had better not forget that the versions of the Great War which have been canonized in the second half of the twentieth century and that many readers worldwide tend to take for granted have never been undisputed, both before and after the process of canonization of its *heroes* began. To offer one example, while contemporary readers of poetry in English immediately pinpoint Wilfred Owen as the most acute

6 Fussell 1975.
7 Showalter 1987, 175; my italics.
8 Mosse 1996.
9 Bourke 1996.

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and intense voice from the trench war, this was certainly not the case yet in the 1930s, as testified to by William B. Yeats, who decided not to include Owen (nor any other trench poet) in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* he edited in 1936. His explanation for this choice is a controversial passage which is predicated on, but also powerfully reinforces, stereotypical images and ideals of masculinity:

> I have a distaste for certain poems *written in the midst* of the Great War. [...] I have rejected these poems for the same reason that made Arnold withdraw his *Empedocles on Etna* from circulation; passive suffering is not a theme for poetry. In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies. [...] If war is necessary, or necessary in our time and place, it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of fever, remembering our comfort at midnight when our temperature fell, or as we forget the worst moments of more painful disease. [10]

The fact of feeling bereft in the midst of battlefields ought to be, for Yeats, suffused with Wordsworthian tranquility: in his view, the clash of arms and the fear and pain of war were to be seen from a distance, and war traumas were to be kept at bay, or rather, truly forgotten once the social body is metaphorically and literally restored to standardised sanity.

More recent works on masculinity in and out of the Great War investigate the many texts which confront this topic by using the theoretical framework of vulnerability and disability studies, thus disarticulating masculinity as an abstract idea, and refiguring both the male body as a fraught category and actual male bodies implicated in material and representational relations of intimacy and touching care[11]. It is from this perspective that I read my chosen textual examples, which are not related to the Great War, but to the multiple genocides which were committed during World War II, and to the devastating anxieties and fears it triggered worldwide.

[10] In private letters, Yeats reserved a very specific appreciation to Owen: "He is all blood, dirt & sucked sugar stick (look at the selection in Faber's Anthology – he calls poets 'bards', a girl a 'maid', & talks about 'Titanic wars'). There is every excuse for him but none for those who like him" (December 21, 1936, in Yeats 1964, 113).

[11] To read more about vulnerable masculinity at war, see Dudink - Hagermann - Tosh 2004, Roper 2005, and Das 2006.

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3. The other war and reassuring paradigms

To many scholars and commentators, the Second World War did not have the same disconcerting effect of the First, and was not perceived – by those who experienced it, first, and by works recording its impact, after – as a revolution of any special sort. To many, it was *only* a massively devastating historical event, and a foreseeable logical consequence of the First, more a continuation of it than its surprising aftermath. And yet, as Marina Mackay justly underlines:

> Despite the fact that Britain and America have fought numerous wars since 1945, World War II remains a kind of *gold standard for "just war"* – an obvious contrast with World War I, which found its place in cultural memory as a tragic and obscene mess for everyone concerned. [12]

Mackay refers here to the well-known investigation into the Second World War conducted by historian A.J.P. Taylor, who used the fruitful old expression "just war" to suggest that no innocence was lost in that global war and that, on the contrary, the line separating perpetrators and saviours was self-evident and reassuring [13]. On a different note, historian Tony Judt suggests instead that no grand narratives were truly available or usable, and that World War II was "experienced not as a war of movement and battle but as a daily degradation, in the course of which men and women were betrayed and humiliated, forced into daily acts of petty crime and self-abasement, in which everyone lost something and many lost everything" [14].

In the case of Great Britain, it is essential to mention *The People's War*, a pivotal study by Angus Calder, who suggested that World War Two successfully mobilised every social class in the United Kingdom, and that every British citizen was attuned in an unprecedented "ferment of participatory democracy" [15]. Calder later expanded more specifically on the Blitz as collective myth, intended in the Barthesian sense of metadiscourse which also accommodates many contradictions and counternarrations [16]. It is important to remember that the original argument on participatory democracy has often been contended against, and that numerous

12 McKay 2009a, 3; my italics.
13 Taylor 1962.
14 Judt 2005, 41.
15 Calder 1969, 18.
16 Calder 1991.

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creases to this only superficially unseamed narrative were already quite visible in fictional works of the 1940s. Indeed, most fiction, especially so-called popular fiction, offered less compact and assuaging views on the re-presentation of that *event*. And it did so also by zooming in on controversial masculinity, before those myths-in-the-making were polished up behind the metaphorical facade of undisputed univocity.

In some well-known icons of those years, the words survival and resilience are pasted to one of the most intriguing myths of the war, that of the Blitz. Other essential events of WW2 have equally been mythologised, often masculinised, and transcribed within innumerable media, such as the evacuation of Dunkirk and D-Day. I am interested here in the Blitz, and in the extenuating phoney war which preceded it: both are fundamental fields which pullulated with massive propaganda campaigns and an incisive proliferation and replication of cultural images. I contend that these images haunted the war years, but that they can also be used to counter any oversimplified and unseamed grand narrative.

A pivotal core of the myth of the Battle of Britain is made up of *The Few*, heroes by birth, education and training, 'perfectly' masculine figures tested by the attempted occupation and the protracted challenge of the Luftwaffe from June 1940 to May 1941. Propaganda made it clear that the body of the Pilot was to be collectively protected, and metaphorically venerated: in this lies a possible paradox, with the image of the *protector* par excellence surveyed upon and shielded by an immane national effort. Ordinary people were instead portrayed as the *many*, who had to and did indeed resist to prolonged attacks and whose unflinching resistance became another legendary myth. In between the heroically active few and the many construed as a sturdy and well-grounded patriotic bulwark, I find cultural and literary traces of the *rest*, i.e. the men who remained in the blindspot, stuck in imprecise spaces beyond and behind active military action. Furthermore, these men were also entrapped within the contradictory demands of political and ideological attempts at forging a *certain* idea of a nation and the very real policies which interned *alien enemies* (including German and Czech Jewish refugees) within British camps[17].

In this context, I follow the beautiful suggestions Sara Wasson advances in her book on the urban uncanny in World War II fiction, and I thus wish to highlight the radical class, gender and ethnic confrontations

17 Wasson 2010.

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which took place during and after the two world wars [18]. Among these modes of confrontation, incarceration became a fact for some, but also a sensation, a wider mode of being in the world, for many. And yet, *they* – the British, but also the phantasmatic enemies lurking within home lines – could *take it* as a famous documentary film produced by the British Government suggested [19]. Or maybe not?

4. Honourable service and fears of the future

Among the categories involved in these dissonant forms of masculinity at war, one must include men in reserved occupations, home defense wardens, volunteer firemen, and, although in a different sense, interned prisoners of war. These masculine outsiders were perceived by government authorities as always potentially dangerous, and their morale was often addressed and surveyed in tones of unconcealed anxiety:

> It is the function of the 615 members of our democratic parliament to voice the wishes, feelings, wants, needs, hopes, opinions, grouses, aspirations and criticisms of 45,000,000 people. But this democratic system has broken down in other countries, and may break down in our own, because the 45,000,000 do not feel sufficiently strongly that they are able to speak through parliament. So they give it up as a bad job and resign themselves to being voiceless or get annoyed with the whole system. [20]

The M-O research project of national anthropology and sociology initiated in 1937 by Tom Harrison and Charles Madge in 1939 could already count on at least 2,000 *observers*. It is an amazing source for the registration and representation of concepts such as 'honour' and 'fear', together with the obvious other key terms 'control' and 'observation'. This material reservoir may suggest which cultural issues mattered to British citizens at that time. Robb, McIvor and Pattinson expand on the topic of honourable action, in particular, by quoting a 1939 *Times* article which reported on a heated House of Commons debate.

> It is to be understood that both those who join the defense services and those who are covered by the Schedule of Reserved Occupations and therefore stick to those occupations are engaged in what is truly national service [...]

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18 Wasson 2010.
19 Jennings - Watt 1940.
20 Harrisson - Madge 1939, 9.

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> the government are anxious to prevent any feelings that one is more honorable than the other; both classes will be serving the country's interest in the way best filled to their abilities. [21]

For the sake of civilian morale, of male citizens in particular, it was mandatory not only to serve the country by working long shifts in factory lines and night patrols. It was equally as relevant that those men and women could *see* and represent themselves as essential fighters, otherwise resentment and demotivation were bound to ensue. Yet, these *other* heroes were much more recalcitrant than any polished national mythical image would have. If the "war [could undo] the self" [22] even of the resilient and steadfast *hands* (manual workers), this would apply even more to the educated men who were literally outside any rank, as well as to the marginal and vulnerable people on every side of the war.

Very often can this unsettling of self and space be detected in the poetry and fiction of the war years. To start with a famous example, in texts written after May 1941, Elizabeth Bowen portrays the city of London as the ghostly site of "suspicious listening, surreptitious movement, and leaden hearts" [23]. This shifting and unsafe urban ground is the setting for *Caught*, an experimentalist, late modernist novel by an upper-class very prolific writer, Henry Green [24]. In this novel, everybody is caught in the spiral of fear, especially of an anticipatory type; Green narrates the Blitz in relation to the preceding "phoney war", which ran from 3 September 1939 to 8 June 1940, the months between the declaration of war and the first air raids: it was indeed an "interminably anxious space" [25]. Apart from the descriptions of the fires that firemen and the Auxiliary Fire Service were called upon to vanquish, the novel describes a series of traumas which are not just experienced and recalled in the aftermath of the event, but may also be anxiogenetic anticipations of a "mourning-to-come", to adopt Paul Saint-Amour's phrasing [26]. In the first months of the war, both the British Government and the British people kept expecting and phantasising over the number of casualties and the volume of rubble that the country would have to deal with in the case of a Nazi attack and possible invasion. No leap of imagination could truly

21 Robb - McIvor - Pattinson 2017, 76.
22 Rau 2005, 31-55.
23 Bowen 1999a and 1948. Qtd. in 1948, 149.
24 Green 2001.
25 Stonebridge 2001, 49.
26 Saint-Amour 2015.

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suffice to draw the lines of that nightmarish vision. Eventually, in fact, as Mackay notes,

> [...] the anticipated death toll of the upcoming German air raids on Britain came nowhere to be equalled, as in the whole duration of the war a total of 60,000 British civilians was killed. [27]

In an attempt at preparing for undefined traumas to come, expectations were indeed magnified and reached their peak in the Phoney war limbo. This was a time of mass evacuation of thousands of children and women, and of the rationing of food and gasoline, whose unnerving effect was heightened by strict curfew and blackouts. Green started to write *Caught* in 1940 before the raids began, at a time of uncanny and unsettling inaction, during which courage could not be tested on any traditional battlefield, unless in the act of resisting to collective fear and individual loneliness. In elliptical time lapses, the novel moves to and fro from the unfamiliar, strange surroundings and mass mobilization of the torn cities and the peaceful and apparently untouched English countryside. The auxiliary fireman Richard Roe and his once-abducted, traumatized son, the low-class group of professional firemen and Pye, their chief, who is a rapist, all unsettle prescribed ideas of *proper* masculinity. In fact, they are either too old or too young, in all cases unfit to live up to the masculine ideal of the white gentleman soldier hero that propaganda was indeed *soldiering* on. In Kristin Miller's words, these others – the rest, or metaphorical *waste* – are indeed left behind,

> [...] on the home front, they must therefore rethink masculinity and find other ways of being real men in wartime. The People's War compounded this crisis of masculinity by disrupting conventional gender roles on the home front: service in the People's Army instead of the military meant joining a corps of men and women functioning on increasingly equal terms. [28]

Eventually, anxiety and/or actual wounds force the male characters of the novel to re-adapt and devise new ways for inhabiting their bodies and lives or be left broken by the blasts of war.

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[27] Mackay 2009b, 1604.
[28] Miller 2009, 83.

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5. Stranger nets

It is often in popular fiction that one finds intriguing angular views on the myth of muscular and heroical masculinity I am concerned with in this chapter. To mention one case, Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot also dismantles any preconceived model in his being, as Sally Munt maintains:

> [...] a parody of the male myth; his name implies his satirical status: he is a shortened Hercules and a poirot – a clown. He is narcissistic, emotive, feline, apparently irrational, eccentric, quixotic, obsessed with the domestic, and socially "other" in that he is a Belgian. [...] He is a feminine hero. [29]

With the character of Poirot, Christie contributes to the revision of some of the gender paradigms of her time. As Merja Makinen also suggests, Poirot is used to renegotiate "an 'othered' and distanced masculinity [...] [and his] fussy concern with his own importance and with domestic symmetry and tidiness" delineates a non-model image which exceeds and dismantles any typical construction of "masculine success" [30]. Christie put to the fore another famous instance of broken stereotypical expectations in her Miss Marple stories. The unmarried elderly lady is expected to be vulnerable and thrives on those expectations to insinuate behind the defense barriers of her culprits. Yet, it is mostly in the novels featuring the sturdily middle-class spies Tommy and Tuppence Beresford that Christie works to interrupt many shortcircuited narratives on gender expectations and models, as much as stereotypes on refugees and vulnerable people of various sorts. In *M or N?* set in 1940 and published in 1943, the setting is Sans Souci, a boarding house in a seaside location in the South of England. While the Beresfords both have a past career as spies, on this occasion, Tommy alone is called upon to unveil a mysterious net of both German and British spies plotting to facilitate the Nazi invasion of the British Isles [31]. Whilst officially excluded from the mission (as a woman, or worse, as a middle-aged married woman), his wife Tuppence also goes undercover and eventually comes to the solution. By doing so, as Judy Suh suggests, Tuppence embodies a version of femininity which combines self-sacrifice to professional mastery and "deviates from state-sanctioned ideals of womanhood in wartime" [32]. As a consequence, Tommy

[29] Munt 1994, 8.
[30] Makinen 2006, 62.
[31] Christie 2015.
[32] Suh 2023, 152.

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Beresford is portrayed as a caring and humorous masculine figure who is not scared of collaborating and sharing information. Suh underlines that:

> *N or M?* incorporates many of the suspicious circumstances surrounding the Irish that were repeatedly reported in the British wartime press, including the coastal setting, the shifty Irish hotel proprietor, hidden connections to Roger Casement, and potential anti-colonial sentiments. At first, the novel animates and sustains these stereotypes of Irish collaboration and deception. Yet Christie ultimately deflects paranoid scrutiny from Irish migrants. [33]

Truly, Christie manages to construe a novel which subtly underwrites over-simplistic ideas about foreign refugees, the Irish and women more in general, while at the same time assuaging the fears of her readers by positing an eventual, logical and positive (to the British) conclusion of the war. By reminding the need of personal sacrifice and collective contribution to the war effort, and by reinforcing the belief that internal and *alien* enemies were much more than a paranoid invention, Christie's novel seems perfectly in tune with the propaganda discourses and images of the war years. It is to Graham Greene's *Ministry of Fear*, published in 1943, that I turn to highlight a complex intersection between masculinity, gothicised citizenship, and the uncanny in both the domestic and the urban spheres of the Blitz and more in general of the war years. As Norman Sherry clarifies, Greene was "thought by many to be the greatest novelist of his generation, and also the most successful (his books have sold more than 20 million copies and have been translated into over 40 languages)" [34]. As is well known, during the war, Greene served at the Ministry of Information, an inspiration for *The Ministry of Fear*, 1943. He was also a spy for the SIS (MI6) at least from 1941-3: these personal experiences are often reflected in his later novels, all very successful and often transformed into film. In his own words, from *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) onwards, he became a "vulgar" success [35].

The Ministry of Fear seems to be the realization of one of the future visionary texts of H.G. Wells. In his old age, he was still writing about his prospects of the very near future with the usual keen eye. In *The Fate of Homo Sapiens* (1939), he describes the world to come in dejected terms:

> The population stratum of military age will be largely killed, mutilated, poisoned or mentally unbalanced, and after it will come a generation or so,

[33] Suh 2023, 148.
[34] Sherry 1994, 7.
[35] Greene 1980, 5.

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> which has been more and more under-nourished, under-educated, demoralised and mentally distorted. [...] There will have been a great burning and smashing up of human habitations which no one will have had energy to replace, and such a destruction of beautiful buildings, works of art, and irreplaceable loveliness of all sorts, as will make the feats of the Huns and Vandals seem mere boyish mischief. [36]

But the most relevant outcome of the impending war was, to Wells, the fact that "More and more will the world be for the tough, for the secretive, the treacherous and ruthless. Cities will be dangerous labyrinths" [37]. Greene's novel is set in such a labyrinth, London, during the Blitz, and is divided into three revealing parts, entitled "the unhappy man", "the happy man" and "the whole man", in chapter headings taken from Charlotte M. Yonge's *The Little Duke* (1854). This very famous Victorian version of traditional chivalric narrative centers on a boy hero, Duke Richard, who grows into power by learning tough lessons and yet remaining pure and secure in his firm beliefs. The book-within-the-book is not only a paratextual element, but also a vibrant material object playing a pivotal role in the plot. At the very beginning, in fact, while meandering through scarified areas of the bombed city, the protagonist Arthur Rowe enters a fete, and buys a second-hand edition of Yonge's text. Arthur is a dreamer and the *pitiful* murderer of his terminally-diseased wife, due to which he has served time in a penal mental asylum; soon after his release, he is casually caught in the intricate net of pro-Nazi espionage. In fact, to clarify how the pervasiveness and porousness of the enemy line makes it impossible to distinguish clear boundaries among right and wrong, Arthur happens to buy a home-baked cake, made with extremely rare real eggs and sugar, and in which fifth-columnists have hidden the essential microfilms they have managed to steal from the British government. The cake functions as a dismaying sign that even nostalgic domesticity is not, or is no longer, a secure shelter from the horrors of war and that the melancholic confrontation between the real and the mythical: any dreamt-for innocent and collective childhood made of games and country fetes is forever impeded by the uncanniness that London – devised in the novel as a "phantasmogenetic centre" [38] –, Britain, and the whole world had come to be invested by.

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36 Wells 1939, 290, in Wasson 2010, 7.
37 Wells 1939, 308, in Wasson 2010, 7.
38 Luckhurst 2002, 542.

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The prewar peaceful world Arthur nostalgically remembers is another cracked myth, since the novel reveals how that pastoral version of Britain has always been fraught with inconsistencies and injustice. This is made more evident in the Blitz months during the day, when homes are infected and invaded by creepy enemies. Obviously, though, this comes even more to the foreground during blacked-out nights, in which London is blasted by speaking bombs which directly address the novel's paranoid, middle-aged unwilling hero: "[...] another raider came up from the south-east muttering to them both like a witch in a child's dream, 'Where are you? Where are you? Where are you?'" [39]. The *Ministry of Fear* is indeed crowded by other "pathetic, lump-like, and yet breathing figures waiting hollow-eyed or in their public sleep" [40]. At one of the pivotal moments of the novel, Arthur is caught in a blast, that the knowing narrator describes as follows:

> Blast is an odd thing, it is just as likely to have the air of an embarrassing dream as of man's serious vengeance on man, landing you naked in the street exposing you in your bed or on your lavatory seat to the neighbours' gaze. Rowe's head was singing, he felt as though he had been walking in his sleep, he was lying in a strange position, in a strange place. [...] He felt as though he were in a strange country without any maps to help him, trying to get his position by the stars. [41]

Mapless and clueless, Arthur Rowe cannot but feel unfit, beyond the pales of action and of social recognition: "The army wouldn't have him, and his short experience of civil defence had left him more alone than ever – they wouldn't have him either" [42]. This other excerpt also paints a similar portrait of recalcitrant heroicism:

> I'm not fit enough for the army, and as for the damned heroes of civil defence – the little clerks and prudes and what-have-yous – they didn't want me: not when they found I had done time – even time in an asylum wasn't respectable enough for Post Four or Post Two or Post any number. And now they've thrown me out of their war altogether [...]. It's not my war; I seem to have stumbled into the firing-line, that's all. [43]

Eventually, Rowe does break through the fifth column, more by chance than by skill. To round things up, Hilfe, the German refugee who leads

[39] Greene 1943, 29.
[40] FitzGibbon 1957, 136.
[41] Greene 1943, 28.
[42] Greene 1943, 21.
[43] Greene 1943, 76-77.

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the fifth column, eventually commits suicide in the grotesque space of a public lavatory, thus providing a consistently Greenian and very bitter imitation of a traditional happy ending. Yet, no happily-ever-after solution is truly offered either to the protagonists or to readers, who must come to terms with reality, fear, and guilt and are to keep up appearances by the means of very unheroical lies.

> People were buried alive in their own homes, night streets turned into a bizarre dreamscape [...] shelterers took refuge in open coffins and even familiar structures hid new and unexpected horrors [...]. Corpses, shop mannequins and butcher's meat lay scattered in streets, all queasy doublings of the living. [...] The nineteenth century saw many attempts to tame London as a space: sewers removed filth, electric light brightened the whole metropolis, and the vast distances of the city were mastered by the London underground and a mass transit network. All these masteries of the city cracked during the Second World War. [44]

In the texts I have analyzed, stories countering the dominant national mythology of British survival and emotional resilience are easily readable, even between the lines of the promoted discourses on national unity and resoluteness which tried to hide and discredit lurking feelings of fear and collective distrust. I conclude that they testify to a masculinity which is already radically redefined, portrayed as vulnerable and often paranoid, and that many creative literary acts of the time function to revise normative masculine able-bodiedness as well. As Kristine Miller suggests, in fact: "the blitz made it impossible [...] to sustain [...] boundaries; placing soldiers and civilians alike in the line of fire, the bombing effectively collapsed distinctions between masculine and feminine spaces and roles" [45].

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[44] Wasson 2010, 4.
[45] Miller 2009, 140.

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