

A Body, a Nation: The Enigma of the Body and Nation in T.S Eliot and Wyndham Lewis

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Julia Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language* suggests that the body is ‘always already involved in a semiotic process’¹; the body is a complex site for cultural discussion and this can be exhibited in many ways. That is to say that the body is, from birth, semiotic because of the social structure into which it is born. Therefore, by reading the body, one can also read the corresponding social and discursive pressures. This is one of the ways in which modernist writers articulate nation in their texts. In *What is Carnal Hermeneutics*, Richard Kearney addresses the idea of interpreting the body according to the sensory. He writes that ‘flesh (sarx) is the medium (metaxu) that gives us space to discern between different kinds of experience [...]’² He refers to the importance of flesh as a medium in the relationship between sensation and interpretation, asserting that the body, through its senses, is full of carnal signs bridging the gap between the internal and the external. This produces a reversibility of sensation in order to interpret it and make sense of it. In other words, in a text, the body becomes the flesh through which sensations are conveyed to the reader so that they can be interpreted.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty presents ideas of gestalt in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1998) and the dualism of the sensory in giving and receiving, which brings an experience into being by connecting the external touch with the internal sensation. In this way, the body is advanced beyond a semiotic in literature as it is an embodiment of discourse. This study will use these ideas in its analysis of gender and nation in the texts *The Waste Land* (1917) and *Sweeney Among the Nightingales* (1920) by T.S. Eliot and *A Soldier of Humour* (1927) and the essay *Our Wild Body* (1910) by Wyndham Lewis. Nation is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘a large body of people united by common descent, history, culture or language, inhabiting a particular space or territory.’³ This study will explore how the concept of nation is embodied in the male and female in these texts. These texts were chosen for this study as they address the bodily and the sensory in the modernist movement and their place in terms of gender and nation. They view the body from various, and often contradicting, perspectives. Eliot talks about a post-war nation whilst Lewis talks about particular nations (such as the English nation and the American nation) to make assertions of power structures. In some places the gendered body functions as an embodiment of

1 Julia Kristeva, ‘Revolution in Poetic Language’, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by William Cain, Laurie Finke, Barbara Johnson, Vincent Leitch, John McGowan, Jeffrey Williams, (New York: Norton & Company, 2001), pp. 2169-2178, here p. 2170).

2 Richard Kearney, ‘What is Carnal Hermeneutics?’, in *New Literary History*, vol. 46, (2015), pp. 99-124, here p. 102.

3 *Oxford English Dictionary*, nation - definition of nation in English | Oxford Dictionaries, 2016

the nation, whilst in other instances it is a symbol of the pressures of nationhood. Yet, both texts demonstrate the enigmatic and fluid roles assigned to the gendered body and to the bodily nation.

The melancholy of returning to the nation torn by war despite its victory is expressed in the male bodies of *The Waste Land*. Bodies are scattered throughout the five parts of the text, whilst dejection and death override the joy of victory. The body is used as a locus to contemplate nation and gender. The parts of the male body that Eliot focuses on in *The Waste Land* are failing. Michel Foucault's ideas of the corporeal body will aid to interpret this aspect of the body's malfunctioning. In his essay *Docile Bodies*, Foucault refers to the performativity of the body. He asserts that corporeal style, or acting out of the body, makes it possible to examine how individuals live in their bodies in order to analyse their social relations and that 'the human body was [...] a machinery of power.'⁴ The body's description as a machine is symbolic of the progression of the nation through the Industrial Revolution and colonisation and is therefore representative of political power. Advances in technology and machinery contributed to Britain becoming the most powerful country in the world in the nineteenth century. Similarly, the representation of the body as a machine infers that the body has the ability to symbolise power. This is in itself a modernist idea in that the body can represent external power or lack of it.

In *The Waste Land*, the lack of coherency within a modern identity following the Great War can be seen in the disjointedness of the body and senses in the text. In *The Burial of the Dead*, the male body is a physical symbol for the post-war nation, and so is the figure of a returning soldier. In juxtaposition with the soldier, the character of hyacinth girl in the text is used as a symbol of a sensory experience of the body as she comes from the garden, 'arms full, and your hair wet [...]'.⁵ Her wet hair and full arms can be seen as a sign of fertility as the lady in the garden creates imagery of Eve in the garden.⁶ After returning from the encounter in the hyacinth garden, the failing of the bodily connection to the senses is expressed through the lines 'I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing.'⁷ Shell shock and post war trauma in soldiers has caused the body to fail in the most basic of its instincts: connecting the corporeal and the sensory. Despite victory, the male body here signifies the collapse of the nation after the Great War. Andrew Bennett writes 'the senses are the most immediate experience we have of the body – in this they are, so to speak, the body of experience itself.'⁸ As the power of nation is embodied in the soldier, the corporeal failure of the soldier's body contradicts the assumed power of a victorious nation.

There is no fixed gender of the voice in the poem and it deviates in perspective throughout without continuity. This displacement of national identity due to the war and the loss of the corporeal statement of power mean the nation no longer has a fixed voice but is rather an assortment of fragmented thoughts and voices that lack coherency. The violence of The Great War has distorted the

4 Michel Foucault, ed. Paul Rabinov, 'Docile Bodies', in *The Foucault Reader*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 179-187, here p. 182.

5 T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', in *T.S. Eliot Collected Poems 1909-1962*, (Faber & Faber Ltd: London, 1963), p. 64.

6 Nidhi Tiwari, *Imagery and Symbolism in T.S. Eliot's Poetry*, (Atlantic Publishers: New Delhi 2001), p. 133.

7 Eliot, *TWL*, p. 64.

8 Connor, Steven Literature, Technology and the Senses, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, ed. by David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 177-196, here p. 179.

nation's bodily experience. Even looking at the 'heart of light' is met with silence as it cannot draw the male out of the darkness.⁹ The light in the female body signifies hope due to its ability to bring new life into the world. The male body's lack of response to that hope after a sexual experience, synonymous with procreation, would suggest despair about the future of the nation, affected by the everyday violence in wartime Britain and the inability to look forward to the future optimistically.

Images of men returning from war in *The Waste Land* are found in the line 'A crowd flowed over London Bridge' and 'each man fixed his eyes before his feet.'¹⁰ This imagery suggests that the soldiers were unable to meet the eyes of the people in London due to the atrocities committed on the battlefields; it detracts from the representation of the victorious nation to the harsh reality of the Great War, which was soldiers returning from war with both damaged bodies and minds. The failure to adjust and to connect with the gestalt aspect of connection with the internal mind and external physicality of life is emphasised by this. Merleau-Ponty writes that 'the body is our general medium for having a world.'¹¹ For Merleau-Ponty our body is the prerequisite of experience. Thoughts and experiences are dependent upon the sensory rather than the body being reliant on internal thought. However, the text here suggests that this cannot be achieved in the male body of the soldier as it is no longer able to receive sensation to interpret the reality of the new nation. Therefore, he is unable to engage with its changing social circumstances.

The theme of a damaged nation is taken further in *A Game of Chess* and complicates the reflection of modernist society and the role of the woman's body within it. The section begins with the words 'The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne.'¹² The line places the female body in the position of leading the embodied male nation as if led by a Monarch. However, although the female body continues to represent hope for a rebuilt nation following the war in this way, its ability to carry out this role is impaired in the text as the chair being 'like' a throne implies that the ascent to this position is fraudulent as it is not actually a throne, merely a chair purporting to be one. The female body is used to stimulate a reaction from the male body by connecting the external touch with the internal emotion, as suggested by Merleau-Ponty, in order to lead the nation into the future.¹³ The decadence of the modernist era is shown in the way that 'strange synthetic perfumes' are used by the female that 'drowned the sense in odours [...]'¹⁴ The use of the word 'synthetic' to describe the perfume suggests the forced attempt to engage the male body and its senses. Yet the effort is marked as futile because instead of engaging the male body the scent overwhelms it.

The female body's ability to stabilise the damage done by war to the nation is unsuccessful as the male body is not able to respond, despite the seductive efforts of the female body. This is reflected in the passage of speech where the female asks the male to 'Stay with me. / Speak to me. Why do you never

9 Eliot, *TWL*, p. 64.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

11 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, (Routledge: London 2002), p. 146.

12 Eliot, *TWL*, p. 66.

13 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 148.

14 Eliot, *TWL*, p. 66.

speak? Speak.¹⁵ The only response the female body gets to this is ‘I think we are in rats alley / Where dead men lost their bones.’¹⁶ In *Shell Shock: War and the Modernist Imagination*, Bonikowski writes that, as well as bodily injuries, war affects the psychosis of soldiers in such a way that they are unable to make a connection with sensory experiences because of the disruption of the ability to assemble them into a coherent structure.¹⁷ Soldiers were harmed so badly they were unable to connect to their experiences and to engage with the world they returned to. The extent of damage to the nation is shown in the male body in these lines. It portrays the female body as pleading to the male for a connection to the internal through the bodily experience. However, this is unsuccessful because the male body is trapped in memories of the war. Therefore, despite the potential of the female body in bringing hope for the recovery of the nation, the trauma of war is too great to overcome. The role of hope assigned to the female body by a patriarchal society in relation to nation is questionable as the text suggests that this function is, in fact, not realistically achievable. By assigning an impossibly idealised role to the female body, the text infers that the female body is powerless to change the nation and, in turn, questions the legitimacy of the role assigned to it.

Eliot complicates the female body further in this text as he detracts from the image of the female body as a saviour and then renders it as a commodity. The modern post-war woman emerging from the text – a wife who waits for her husband to come back from the war – is an example of one of the emerging roles played by the female body in modernity. The woman is told by her friend to get herself some teeth to make herself presentable for her husband as he ‘wants a good time’ having been to war.¹⁸ The friend goes on to advise her that if she doesn’t give her man a good time ‘there’s others will’¹⁹. This suggests the commodification of the female body for male pleasure and its potential disposability; once not functioning properly, it can be easily replaced by another female body. Although the woman lacks sexual desire since her abortion, she is still pressured to perform the role of dutiful wife for her husband. Her body is damaged through childbirth and miscarriages for the animalistic desire of men. The woman is expected to satisfy her husband’s sexual desire and, if that results in pregnancy, then it is something that she will need to deal with. The female body is shown to be the property of her husband in this way and the text questions how far women are expected to push their bodies for the male body. With the female body being easily disposable, it loses its value and is reduced to carrying out a duty to the male body. This diminishes the modern female and her contribution to the nation as she is objectified, merely a servant to the desires of the male body.

Animalistic desires of the male are also portrayed in Eliot’s poem *Sweeney Among the Nightingales* (1920). In this poem, Sweeney is described like an animal. His ‘arms hang down’ which is ape-like and he has ‘zebra stripes’ on his face.²⁰ The description blurs the line between human and animal thus obscuring

15 Eliot, *TWL*, p. 67.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

17 Wyatt Bonikowski, *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination: The Death Drive in Post-World War I British Fiction*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 1.

18 Eliot, *TWL*, p. 68.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

20 T.S Eliot, ‘Sweeney Among the Nightingales’, in *T.S Eliot Collected poems 1909-1962*, (Faber & Faber Ltd: London, 1963) p. 59.

his human attributes. The animal-like features indicate the lack of ability to think rationally and display the inherent connection to nature. Therefore, his mind is weak and powerless in confrontation with his primitive, bodily desires. Following the war, the rationality of the mind and the power of the physical body has been severed indicating a nation that has been reduced to its primal, uncivilised state. It is an allusion to the unthinkable violence in the Great War which has damaged the nation and stripped back civilisation in male bodies to its primitive ancestors.

Sexual intimacy and therefore sensory experience between bodies is degraded by the portrayal of Sweeney's male body as animalistic. However, although Sweeney is tempted by the exotic female bodies on offer, shadows of *The Waste Land* hover over him; the inability to engage with the temptation marks him as the 'silent vertebrate [...]' who 'Contracts and concentrates, withdraws.'²¹ The classification of him as a category of animal dehumanizes him as the inability of the male body to engage with its senses is what differentiates it from animals. As a result, Sweeney loses his voice, becoming silent, as well as his recognition as a man and therefore loses agency. The decline is developed further when Sweeney encounters Rachel who, in a similarly animalistic vein, 'tears at grapes with murderous paws.'²² By creating animal imagery of the female body in this way, Eliot equalises male and female bodies and suggests that in terms of nation, both males and females are equal and neither can save the other. This complicates the role of the body as it proposes that the female body and its bodily instincts of sex are no different from the male. Therefore, the dynamic contradicts Eliot's ideas of the female body as both the saviour and a commodity in the modern nation.

Like Eliot, Wyndham Lewis connects nationalism with the concept of a neglected body. In contrast to Eliot's suggestion that the embodied nation was unable to connect to its sensory experiences, Lewis writes that the English idea of the body is repressed by modernity and civilisation. Lewis asserts that the English equate one's awareness of the body with physical cleanliness and exercise. He writes that the English are proud of their baths, but that this is merely 'to drown' their bodies in and that exercise is to 'indebt it to science and tame it.'²³ The use of these vivid images of drowning and taming the body suggest repression. This has led the body to 'become anaemic' metaphorically in terms of spirit, when it is in fact wilderness that needs to be explored, not repressed.²⁴ The body is referred to as wilderness here because of the lack of inhabitation of this physical space. By encouraging the nation to get in touch with their bodily and sensory experiences, Lewis contradicts Eliot's ideas of the intellectual deterioration inherent to the animalistic body by suggesting that, instead of being unable to think rationally, it will enable the nation to connect with the modern world.

Lewis compares the Englishman to the Frenchman and to the Continental man. By continental, Lewis differentiates between the man from France and the man from elsewhere on the European continent. Again, this contributes to the embodiment of nation as the man is known by his nation. He

21 Eliot, *Sweeney*, p. 59.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

23 Wyndham Lewis, 'Our Wild Body', *The New Age* (1910), pp. 8-10, here p. 8.

24 Lewis, *OWB*, p. 8.

calls the Frenchman's body the child of the mind, writing that, as the fathers 'become friendly [...] natural that the children should also'²⁵. By making the intrinsic link between body and mind as a father and son, Lewis propagates the idea that a son should follow his father and be more open to physical contact. Furthermore, the depiction of the body and mind as a family unit alludes to the dependence of one upon another. This follows Merleau-Ponty's ideas of the sensory as a two way relationship in the sense of touch by giving a sensation and at the same time receiving a sensation which then becomes comprehension. He writes that 'all meaning was *ipso facto* conceived as an act of thought, as the work of pure I [...]'²⁶. Merleau-Ponty in this passage emphasises the importance of the bodily self and perception of the world in order to bring meaning to it. The 'I' is what brings something into being. In this text the embodiment of the nation in the man makes it an entity by connecting the internal man with the external nation.

In effect, Lewis brings the bodily into being as opposed to making it a sign or a vessel to carry meaning by making the body and mind dependent upon each other, thus creating the point of connection between the two. By doing so, he suggests that the sensory experience is an inextricable part of the national identity. He uses the example of the two English stockbrokers who were in touch with their sensory experiences when they were young as they played together but, as grown-ups, they 'never touch at any point of their physique [...]'²⁷. The distance between them is symbolic of the way in which the nation is disconnected by the neglect of awareness of the bodily and sensory. In adulthood, the stockbrokers have forgotten the importance of the physical touch that created the connection they had as children and distances them. Lewis compares this to the Frenchman's 'hospitality of the body' in which the Frenchman allows another to be 'at home in his body' by giving him full access to the tactile as well as visual senses. However, though walking side by side with other nations, the Englishmen remain detached. They are unable to bridge the gap between the sensory and the visual and, by extension, to bring the nation into being as an entity.

Lewis proposes using the phenomenological experience of being by blurring the boundaries between anger and laughter. By doing this, the text elevates the primitive nature of the body and suggests that the seemingly animalistic urge to fight is repressed by the so-called civilised society. He writes that by fighting, a man 'feels, at the contact of his victim's chin or nose, his anger ebbing' but then 'realises the futility of the pretext that had led to the struggle.'²⁸ The fight brings the internal feelings of discontentment into being by giving them an external physical sensory experience. Eventually, this process leads to the understanding of the situation and the irrationality of the negative feelings. This text illustrates the way in which the primitive nature of the body functions to bring emotions into being, complicating the idea that the body is a mere sign for interpretation. In contrast, the Frenchman's animalism is described as 'neither attractive nor dignified' but is said to be a catalyst in 'the healthy state

25 Lewis, *OWB*, p. 9.

26 Merleau-Ponty, p. 147.

27 Lewis, *OWB*, p. 9.

28 Ibid.

of mind shadowed forth.²⁹ Though Eliot's assertions of primitiveness suggest a nation in decline, Lewis's ideas of embracing the primitiveness of the body are viewed as a way of recovery for the nation.

Lewis carries on the theme of conflating the lines between laughter and anger in his short story *A Soldier of Humour* (1927). The body and the mind in this text are dichotomised in order to show the versatility of the body in the embodiment of the nation. Lewis uses the embodiment of the American nation in order to demonstrate this. Kerr Orr describes himself as a 'large blond clown' and his body as 'large, white and savage.'³⁰ Though a clown would suggest entertainment, the size and savageness of his body suggests violence. Yet this contradiction is bridged by 'large strong teeth which I gnash and flash when I laugh.'³¹ Ordinarily, gnashing teeth are a sign of anger but Lewis takes imagery of the wildness in the gnashing teeth and attributes it to the contradictory emotion of laughter. The juxtaposition of these images blurs the lines between the grotesque and the humorous by emphasising laughter as a physical experience, aligned with the experience of fighting. Both states connect the physical with the emotional in creation of a bodily experience.

Kerr-Orr attributes his ability to experience the physical bodily sensation to his mother. Similarly to Eliot's assertions of the female body as a facilitator for the recovery of the nation, the wildness of Kerr Orr's body is facilitated by his mother, enabling him to 'feed the beast of humour that is within me [...]' by giving him money.³² Both Eliot and Lewis acknowledge the utility of the female to further the nation and its patriarchal structure by encouraging it to be able to engage with the sensory and bridge the gap between the physical and psychological. Kerr-Orr's laughter is referred to as 'uncivilised' in nature, and then juxtaposed to the 'French esprit'³³. By comparing the wild nature of his laughter to the civility of the French mind, the text creates meanings contradictory to those contained within Lewis' essay *Our Wild Body*. It suggests the French body is restricted by social etiquettes of civilisation. Furthermore, the animalistic reference to humour being a 'beast' which needs feeding questions the effects of humour and the body. Calling it a 'beast' suggests an uncontrollable being which may easily overpower the body. Therefore, the text suggests that the body may become captive to humour to the detriment of other sensory and psychological experiences highlighted in the Frenchman of Lewis' essay.

The effect of nation on the body is demonstrated in the character of Valmore, a naturalised American citizen. His pride at being an American citizen shows in the change of his demeanour when he talks with a New York accent. He is said to have been 'injected' with 'a personal emotion' as he looks at Kerr Orr with 'eyes of the forty-eight States of the Union'³⁴. The eyes of the American subject project power over Kerr-Orr; by using the word 'injected', the text indicates that, like drugs, the emotion of nationalism can be inserted into a body and have an empowering effect upon it. It emphasises the strength of America after the Great War and that nationalism contributed to their strength in this regard.

29 Lewis, *OWB*, p. 10.

30 Wyndham Lewis, 'A Soldier of Humour', in *The Wild Body and Other Stories* (Penguin Books: London, 2004) p. 5.

31 Lewis, *ASOH*, p. 5.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

However, it is also representative of the infiltrations of migrants who were given citizenship in the aftermath of the Great War and the way the power of the nation insinuated down to them as well through the process of naturalisation. It echoes *Our Wild Body* in that it embodies nationalism in the male body and makes it a physical presence rather than a mental concept. This is further emphasised when Kerr-Orr wants to make Valmore look like a fool for taking pride in being an American citizen, even though he earned his citizenship through naturalisation, not birth. His manner of achieving this however, relies on his American friends whom he praises that ‘Optimism, consciousness of power [...] surged out of them [...]’³⁵. This, again, shows the confidence of the American nation which emanates from the bodies of Kerr-Orr’s friends. By the end of the war, Britain was heavily indebted to America financially. America’s industrial strength and assistance was one of the reasons for the victory in the Great War. The power relation between Britain and America after the Great War is reflective in the power relations between Kerr-Orr and his friends demonstrated in this text. The perception of optimism, progressiveness and power is projected by Kerr-Orr on to his friends. Unable to defeat Valmore in his own body as the American body overpowers it, Kerr-Orr requires his friends’ American bodies to use as armour in order to defeat him. Therefore, the American body here is a site of national pride which generates the capacity to overshadow all other bodies within its vicinity.

Kerr-Orr applauds his own intelligence and his ability to manipulate words and language to gain advantage over Valmore in his argument. However, the description of the argument is reminiscent of a physical fight. For example, Valmore ‘changed his position in the argument [...] begun by attacking.’³⁶ Throughout the argument they ‘changed about alternately’ and at one point had ‘a breathless moment.’³⁷ The language here demonstrates the inextricable connection between mind and body. Though Kerr-Orr’s mind is working during the argument, his body is reacting to the words which are said and this gives the effect of a contest between the mind and the body. Kerr-Orr’s reference to Valmore as a ‘poor bum’ has a stark physical effect on Valmore of ‘paralysing’ him and robbing him ‘of speech’ thus enabling Kerr-Orr to emerge victorious.³⁸ These words have the effect of severing the gestalt in Valmore as the internal perception of self as an American becomes disconnected from the external physicality of his migrancy alluded to by these words; he loses the moment of connection between them that completes him. However, the victory of Kerr-Orr’s words and the exchange has a more profound effect on his own body in the physically intense, orgasmic effect of laughter in his body. Kerr-Orr ‘howled like an exultant wolf’ and his ‘penetrating howl [...] shook the walls of the room.’³⁹ The imagery of the howling wolf connotes the primitive and wild self of *Our Wild Body* and the liberty which is experienced by unleashing the wildness within it.

35 Lewis, *ASOH*, p. 37.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

39 *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Eliot's poems provide an illustration of the cultural roles attributed to the male and female body in a post war nation. At first glance, it may be assumed that female body in Eliot's poems is assigned these roles as an aid to the progress of the male embodied nation. However, in both of Eliot's poems, this position is questioned as the female body's ability to heal a nation is challenged due to the inability of the male body to respond to the female body upon stimulation both physically and mentally. The commodification of the female body and the animalistic desires of the male body suggest a regressive rather than progressive nation. Therefore, if the female body cannot heal, and there is little possibility for the male embodied nation to be healed, then the texts suggest that, the nation is irreparable and regressive, despite its victory at war.

Lewis, on the other hand, argues that the body in its primitive form (that is, when released from societal confinements) is in touch with reality and this is the way to 'cure' the illness of the neglect of the body. The body and sensory experience is deemed to be superior in society. Therefore, by crossing the boundaries of civilisation and entering the realm of the absurd, the body is capable of creating a better nation. It contradicts Eliot's assertions that the primitiveness of the body is a symbol of inability to perceive the world adequately. Rather, the connection with the primal instincts of the body in relation to the sensory and bodily is essential in understanding the perception of being in the world.

Eliot's and Lewis' texts, consecutively, assigned the body with a variety of roles. They are presented both as a whole and in fragmented parts in the texts, yet each has significance in terms of gender and nation. The body is used as a vehicle of discourse and its association with the preservation or disconnection from the gestalt gives it significant political agency.

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