



The first casualty

Tom Palaima muses on truth's troubled relationship to the tales we tell about the heart of war



For the past 20 years I have been teaching seminars about the many kinds of stories, ancient and modern, fictional and factual, that human beings share with others after experiencing acts of violence. How and why stories of war and violence get told, what forms they take, what truths they reveal or conceal, and who listens to them, or not, and for how long, tell us a lot about ourselves and what we value as a society.

Whenever I get discouraged about how ready we are to refuse to look at things as they are, I call to mind the deep commitment to truth of the men and women who have shared with me and my students and colleagues their thoughts and feelings about things we classify as unspeakable or unthinkable. They think and speak about such things, often with a hard-won, almost preternatural assurance and an unspoken invitation. They restore my faith, again and again, in the honest goodness of some human beings. They make me want to believe in the boy at the end of Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* rather than to contemplate the fate of the kid at the conclusion of the same author's *Blood Meridian*.

There seem to be good reasons for looking away from and not talking about acts that cause us to feel horror. Why should we expose those we love or those who are innocent to the terrible ways human beings can do harm to one another? Doesn't the God of the Old Testament command Adam and Eve not to partake of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Is it better to believe that human beings are essentially good than to be forced to admit, by example after example from human history, how banal,

random and senseless but also logical, alluring and pervasive acts of violence are?

Should we declare categorically that we hate war or listen to William Broyles explain "Why Men Love War" (*Esquire*, November 1984)? Is it morally right to take pleasure in the beauty of Wilfred Owen's gorgeously horrific poem *Dulce Et Decorum Est* and to study how its beauty was achieved in its surviving drafts? Should we watch Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) or Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* (1997) or Hogan's Heroes (1965-1971) television reruns? After all, the Athenians laughed at the miseries of war in *The Acharnians* (425BC) and absorbed its extreme brutality in *The Trojan Women* (415BC).

What do we make of the fact that in May 1938 a distinguished classical scholar could write the following words in the introduction to his edition of Euripides' *Medea*? "The murder of children, caused by jealousy and anger against their father, is mere brutality; if it moves us at all, it does so towards incredulity and horror. Such an act is outside our experience, we – and the fifth century Athenian – know nothing of it."

Was Denys L. Page an intellectual ostrich? Or do his words conceal something worse? How could anyone who had read closely in the Greek original Euripides' play, and especially *Medea*'s anguished words about her children in lines 1071-1080, think and write such thoughts?

Part of the answer may be that Page never had the chance to watch Jules Dassin's film *A Dream of Passion* (1978) or read Peter Levi's translation (1983) of Alexandros Papadimitantis' *The Murderess* (1903). And

sensational cases, such as Andrea Yates' drowning of her own five children in Houston in June 2001, had not yet proved novelist Tim O'Brien's axiom that fiction is the only truth.

Violence, in its many forms, raises for us questions about evil in our world that we would rather avoid asking. If we believe in a God, why does our God allow such evil to exist? If we believe in peace, when is it proper to resort to the violence of war? If we believe in a state of social equilibrium called justice, how do we restore it after violence has created chaos?

On 4 April 1967, Martin Luther King saw the connections between different forms of violence and the danger of tolerating or ignoring violence within society: "I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government."

Exactly one year later, on 4 April 1968, Senator Robert F. Kennedy spoke to a predominantly black crowd in Indianapolis, Indiana about what he declared might be their natural reaction to the murder of King that day in Memphis, Tennessee: to repay it with violence of their own. Kennedy explained, in painfully open human sympathy, that he "had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man". He then hoped out loud that "we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love".

Kennedy, who would be shot dead in a hotel kitchen two months and two days later,



The evil that men do a wounded Allied soldier in 1942, above; a 16th-century painting of Medea, right; US soldiers in Vietnam rescue a comrade, previous page





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told his audience in an eerily foreshadowing past tense that “Aeschylus was [italics mine] my favorite poet.” He then quoted a popular translation of a choral passage from the Greek tragedian’s *Agamemnon*: “In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.”

He had come to know that extreme violence alters the way we think and feel and speak about our lives and the world around us. Drops of grief had dripped on his heart for four and a half years since the assassination of his brother, US president John F. Kennedy, and it had made him wise enough to see where the pain of public, racially motivated murder could lead many Americans.

Kennedy’s and King’s voices were silenced by violent acts. I do not think that any major public figures in the US since their deaths have spoken out so forcefully about institutionalised violence, whether the socio-economic violence of racism and of wealth and power disparity or the governmentally sanctioned violence of armed military force. But other voices do get raised and do raise doubts and questions about our uses and abuses of violence, some in classrooms like mine.

Many years in my seminars we have read selections from the late Wallace Terry’s *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War* (1984). Terry – an African-American, an ordained minister and a professional journalist – in 1967 began a two-year assignment covering the Vietnam War as a reporter. In his introduction he writes, “In any black soldier of Vietnam can be found the darkness that is at the heart of all wars.”

The 15-year time lag between Terry’s

(by all accounts) courageous and principled involvement in the war and the publication of his book is typical for processing the meaning of violence in a form that publishers and readers will accept, something that Aeschylus, a war veteran himself, would have understood. Erich Maria Remarque, Ernest Hemingway, Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, Rolando Hinojosa-Smith and Michael Herr took between eight and 25 years to convert their experiences into masterpieces about the First and Second World Wars, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

In the spring of 1968, Charles Patterson, who served in Vietnam in 1967-68 with the United States Marine Corps, started a poem for a fellow Marine named Marion Henry Norman who was killed at Khe Sanh on 30 March of that year. He completed it, in its published form, 15 years later. He read it to one of my classes in 2007.

Patterson’s book of Vietnam War poems, *The Petrified Heart*, should be read aloud during any congressional debate to commit troops to combat or any trial involving a troubled veteran of the armed services. And every citizen before every election day should hear Korean War veteran Hinojosa-Smith recite the 19 lines of his poem *Friendly Fire* and then describe the use of artillery against waves upon waves of Chinese soldiers: “Gun barrels don’t talk, and they won’t listen./They don’t do much except fire/And sometimes/at the wrong people. But I should care....”

Terry’s 20 stories contain vivid and riveting passages, too. The oral history of Captain Norman Alexander McDaniel, a prisoner of war in Vietnam from July 1966 to February 1973, begins, “I could smell the hate.”

Terry visited my seminar in October 1999. He explained that he had felt a moral

imperative to go to Vietnam because of the disproportionate casualty rates among black soldiers. He was painfully aware of how young the soldiers were and how tragic it was that, as he put it, “many of the soldiers were taking lives before they had ever experienced making lives”. While in Vietnam, he conducted (expressly forbidden) surveys of black soldiers in order to get a broad sample of their reactions. He then tracked the soldiers down, back in the US, for fuller accounts.

Terry admitted to “heating up” the stories of “bloods” in Vietnam in order to make them engrossing. He wanted to make sure their stories would get a readership. For example, he asked McDaniel, after re-reading his interview, “Could we express your feelings after you crashed and were surrounded by farmers and communist militia this way: ‘I could smell the hate?’”

By using his own words to convey McDaniel’s thoughts and memories, Terry was breaking a taboo for purist oral historians. But as a man of God who knew his way with words and had seen the heart of darkness even stateside, he knew how important it was to get across the realities of the experience of violence.

Terry talked openly about racism, about covering the early days of the civil rights movement in the deep South, about how he had to urinate into glass jars in his car because restrooms were off limits to blacks and he was tailed by police who would have arrested him for public lewdness if he stopped and availed himself of roadside shrubbery.

I will never forget his description of how he organised the stories of his soldiers. He used a marker pen to highlight key sections of the typed-out interviews, cut them out and stacked them. He shuffled these like cards in



Stories of war from left, troops under fire in the battle of the Somme; parents find their son's corpse in the Crimea during the Second World War; a soldier comforts a comrade during the Korean War; Therrel Shane Childers, reported as the first US casualty in Operation Iraqi Freedom

a poker deck and then arranged them in dramatic sequences. We can still feel what his soldiers felt going to, serving in and coming back to “the World” from Vietnam.

Terry is famous. So was Therrel Shane Childers for most of 2003. I now often begin lectures here in the US about what I call the myths of war by asking whether anyone knows who Childers is. I have never had anyone say they did.

Childers was a Marine Second Lieutenant who was “heroised” by US media as the nation’s first combat casualty in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Embedded reporter Gordon Dillow filed the first accounts in the *Orange County Register*. Rinker Buck, a reporter for the *Hartford Courant*, later covered his funeral “in the badlands of Wyoming” and wrote a book about it and Childers’ life, *Shane Comes Home* (2005).

I eventually read three different accounts Dillow gave of Childers’ death and the actions of his unit surrounding it. They were contradictory. I suspected that the news media and the military that largely controlled reporting during the Iraq War thought that Americans needed a hero and gave them one, much as they did with Pat Tillman, who died in remote mountains in Afghanistan about a year later.

On 31 January 2008, I wrote a heartfelt commentary piece, “What We’ve Lost in the Iraq War”, about the ways in which war coverage had affected our values. A few days later I received an email from Jesse Odom, a soldier who served under Childers. He asked if I wanted to know more about the discrepancies in Dillow’s accounts of Childers’ death. “Gordon Dillow wasn’t anywhere near us. He didn’t even interview me and I was the one with Lt. Childers when he got

shot and when he died,” Odom claimed.

I flew Odom into Austin to talk in my seminar about how and why Childers really died. Odom proved in his way another of O’Brien’s axioms: you can tell a true war story “by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil”.

Odom was so upset by the distortions in the media’s accounts of Childers’ death that, with the encouragement of other soldiers in his unit, he kept notes of their experiences and later wrote a book about what they went through. Its title gets across what Odom wanted his book to stand for: *Through Our Eyes*. Odom appeared on NBC’s *Dateline* on 25 May 2008. As I write, his book is ranked 1,459,241 on Amazon’s Best Sellers list.

I have in Austin a friend named Kenneth Ashworth, a former head of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and an author and thinker of considerable merit. Ken’s father, severely wounded when serving in the First World War, abandoned his pregnant wife – Ken thinks in retrospect fortunately – when Ken, the oldest of their three sons, was not yet four years old. I asked him recently whether this early childhood background had shaped his disposition, outlook and choices in life.

In reply Ken told me his own kind of war story. He also openly and generously wrote, “Feel free to use anything I send to you in any way you find them useful.” With Ken’s blessing, here it is.

There was one thing about my father that we had great difficulty understanding. Mom said he did not believe in God. She told me once that she had asked him several times why he did not believe there could be a God.

“Finally he became angry and said to her, ‘All right, I’ll tell you the kind of thing your God lets happen. Listen to this and tell me there’s a God. There was a long artillery attack out front of our position a day before we were told to advance. We started across a bombed-out farm to a line of trees.

“When we got closer to the woods, we started to see heads and arms and legs scattered all around. Men’s intestines were hanging from trees and a fence. I almost stepped on an eyeball. And there was a man’s whole face lying in a furrow.’

“He paused and then said, ‘We had to chase dogs and birds away. They were feeding out there.

“Now you tell me there’s a God.’

“She said she shouldn’t have said anything but she asked, ‘Were they their men or ours?’

“He just looked at her for a long time. She knew she shouldn’t have asked that. She couldn’t tell whether he was angry at her question or lost in the memories she had forced him to bring back. He got up and went outside.

“She said she knew what ‘shell-shocked’ meant. How could he have come back normal?”

There it is. Ken’s father had learned a secret about man’s inhumanity to man. It is expressed in the lyrics of Bob Dylan’s song of war *John Brown*: “But the thing that scared me most was when my enemy came close/And I saw that his face looked just like mine.”

We recognise our shared humanity most clearly when we face our inhumanity. But it takes will or force for us to look. ●

Tom Palaima is Robert M. Armstrong centennial professor of Classics at the University of Texas at Austin.