

CRITICAL INSIGHTS

Violence in Literature

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Editor

Stacey Peebles

Centre College in Danville, Kentucky

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About This Volume

Stacey Peebles

Violence is a big topic. Not only because its incidence and experience in the world demands our attention and judgment, but also because it is such a constant in human history and in artistic representation. Violence shapes our oldest stories and our newest ones, and deciding precisely how an anthology like this one should address the topic—even when limited to the only-slightly-narrower focus of violence in literature—poses something of a challenge. (Salem Press' Critical Insights series includes other thematic volumes, and I wondered which editors might have had a similarly interesting problem. Maybe Margaret Sönsler Breen did when she was tasked with rounding up "good and evil," or John V. Knapp when he covered "family." I should also mention Alex Vernon's excellent volume on war, which can be considered a kind of companion to this one.)

And so I probably don't need to mention that this collection is necessarily selective and that there are certainly interesting subjects left out—the way violence works in comedy, for instance, or in regional and national traditions not covered here, or how graphic novels depict it in a combination of text and image. But I will note what this volume succeeds in doing, which is to draw together smart, sometimes provocative essays about works that vary widely in their historical and cultural contexts, in their style and structure, and the ways that violence makes (or resists) meaning within them. While each essay is intelligent and thought-provoking on its own terms, what has fascinated me most in compiling them is the connections that can be made across radically different works.

Thomas Palaima, for instance, begins his essay about the violent stories of the ancient Greeks and the cultural contexts that made those stories appealing—for them, and for us, almost 2,500 years later—with Euripides' *Medea*, a play about a woman who kills her own children. As he notes, it is an act that the scholar Denys L. Page once called "outside our experience," beyond the possible.

But we know, sadly and excruciatingly, that it's not. The real-life stories of Andrea Yates and Susan Smith reveal as much, as does that of Margaret Garner, whose life provided inspiration for Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. That novel is the focus of Aretha Phiri's essay, which explores the protagonist's act of infanticide in the context of African-American history and the lived experience of slavery. *Medea* was first performed on the brink of the Peloponnesian War; *Beloved* takes place both before and after the Civil War. Different worlds in many ways, with different motivations and historical circumstances at stake, and yet each work of art gives us a similarly unspeakable act to contemplate. Unspeakable—except Euripides and Morrison both speak it, insisting that we consider what we as humans are capable of, what is indeed within our experience, and the reasons that this might be so.

In Genesis, Abraham also believes he must kill his own child, an episode that David Mikics discusses in his essay on violence in the Hebrew Bible. Abraham doesn't question God's demand and moves to fulfill it, only to be stopped at the last moment. (Isaac is thus saved from his father's act of pious violence, though what he might have thought and felt about the experience afterwards is left to our imagination.) The threat of a single act of violence here becomes violence repeatedly and seemingly arbitrarily enacted in the Book of Job, a theological conundrum if ever there was one. Again, children die: Job's are killed, taken from him along with his wealth and his good health. The losses keep coming, and unlike Abraham, Job questions God—though the answer he receives is not the one he expected. Job is not a lengthy tale, and its author doesn't describe the deaths or Job's boils in anything like gory detail. But the piling of violence on violence is what we remember and what provokes both Job and the reader to ask, as we inevitably do in such circumstances, why this is happening. It's not so different, surprisingly, from the writings of the Marquis de Sade, which are also characterized by violent act after violent act visited upon seemingly undeserving victims. But as Lindsay Hallam argues in her essay, Sade's writing thus avoids the cloaking or veiling common to institutionalized violence and reveals that violence is "an integral part of the 'civilized' human, no matter

how much we try to silence these aspects." It's not a comforting thought, but then neither is God's response from the whirlwind.

Shakespeare seems to think that violence is similarly unavoidable for some, according to Philip White, who explains how the Bard's view of the physical self, and thus a person's disposition and resulting values, influences his portrait of violence in *Romeo and Juliet*—murderous acts that are not, upon careful reading, purely a product of the feud between families. James R. Giles addresses two contemporary American novels that also suggest something about what it means to have a "disposition" for violence, though the characters in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* are inclined to take things a bit further than the Montagues and the Capulets—and are motivated to do so at least in part by the corrupt capitalist systems in which they function. Issues of scale, of degree, of motivation do lead to considerations of economic and political context, as Núria Sabaté Llobera and Aaron Bady show in their discussions of colonial and post-colonial portraits of violence in Latin America and Africa, respectively, and the legacy of violent cross-cultural contact in representations from both sides of the conflict. Sabaté Llobera's essay engages the blurred boundaries between history and fiction that can happen as a result in narratives that attempt to make meaning out of violence perpetrated or violence suffered. Bady focuses on Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, which is often read in dialogue with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. As Bady argues, however, the novel is more properly understood through the lens of Simone Weil and her reading of the *Iliad*. Colonization is indeed a destructive force, but force itself—the true hero and subject of the *Iliad*, according to Weil, and of *Things Fall Apart*, according to Bady—can erupt in human relationships for other, deeper reasons, even within a colonial context.

Like Sabaté Llobera, Ty Hawkins also focuses on literature as a sense-making exercise, particularly in response to modern war, and finds different paradigms of doing so in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. The essays in this volume cover

violence in a variety of social contexts, and even though the subject of war is, as I mentioned, well covered in another volume in this series, America's modern and contemporary wars—namely, the twenty-first-century wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—have elicited so much creative production that attention to that work is warranted. Mark Bresnan writes about Ben Fountain's 2012 novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, which follows a squad of soldiers enduring the bromides, glad-handing, and overstimulation that comes with being honored for their service during a Dallas Cowboys football game. It's not combat, but it's not easy either, as they are bombarded with all the noise of American sports, fandom, patriotism, and spectacle. Fountain builds a story out of fictional characters, but Lydia Neuman shows in her essay how contemporary journalists like David Finkel, Sebastian Junger, and Dexter Filkins write about real people undergoing violent experience, balancing the need to document reality with the need to shape the story most effectively. These writers embed themselves within the lives of soldiers in combat or on the home front, a heightened presence that fades in their finished work, which seeks, as much as possible, to reflect those soldiers' experiences—a challenging and potentially problematic practice, to say the least.

All of these essays reveal the often unexpected ways that violence can turn up in human lives, but in this volume's final essay, Allen Josephs reminds us that violence and its traumatic aftermath may not, in fact, appear in the places we assume them to be. Sometimes a story about fishing is just a story about fishing (well, and writing), as Josephs argues about Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," with a careful and thoughtful intervention into the details of that story and its publication, the critical conversation surrounding it, and Hemingway's own comments about its creation and content. An appropriate final word on the subject of violence, I think, emphasizing that as much blood, force, and injury there is to be experienced and written about in the world, there are also moments of stillness and peace. If it's true that one shouldn't turn a blind eye to violence, past or present—as many of the essays in this volume insist—then neither should one ignore the sight of a trout

breaking through the surface of the water and, just for an instant, catching the sun.

When Jane Eyre is ten, she is regularly bullied and beaten by her cousin, John Reed. “[E]very nerve I had feared him,” she says, “and every morsel of flesh on my bones shrank when he came near” (Brontë 42). After she is set to Lowood School, she endures privation and strict discipline, as well as the death from consumption of a dear friend. Later in life, she takes a job and gets engaged, only to find that her would-be husband, Rochester, is already married to Bertha Mason, a figure of abjection and torment: “beast or human being,” Bertha growls, cries out, shakes her wild hair, and attacks Rochester when he visits, “grappl[ing] his throat viciously, and [laying] her teeth to his cheek” (Brontë 321).

When Jane confronts Rochester about his marriage, he is furious at her for insisting that she must leave. He grabs and shakes her, noting how easily he could crush her small, slight frame. But the struggle is, for her, internal—between her love for Rochester and her “intolerable duty” to leave him. “I was experiencing an ordeal,” she says, “a hand of fiery iron grasped my vitals. Terrible moment: full of struggle, blackness, burning!” (Brontë 342). She wrests herself away, and leaves Thornfield Hall alone, weak, and weeping “stormy, scalding, heart-wrung tears” (Brontë 348). Jane endures homelessness and a near-fatal illness as a result. In her absence, Bertha sets fire to the Hall and commits suicide by leaping from the roof; the Hall burns to the ground and Rochester is blinded and disabled by the blaze.

Is *Jane Eyre* a violent novel? There are no armies massing on the grounds of Thornfield Hall and no descriptions that we might call gory or gratuitous, but if you’re paying attention, the story is devastating—both when taken as a straightforward tale or when considered through a critical lens. Bertha, after all, is figured as a monster, but can also be read as “Jane’s truest and darkest double . . . the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane

has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead,” argue Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (360), and Jean Rhys exposes the racism and sexism inherent in Rochester’s treatment of Bertha in her re-imagining of the story *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966).

What about the *Bhagavad Gita*? That story does take place on a battlefield, and portrays the prince Arjuna poised on the brink of war with an enemy that includes his family members and friends. Krishna, his charioteer, counsels him on how to best understand the situation, as well as the nature of the world and his place in it. The setting is the field of war; the potential for violence that is both political and intensely personal has incapacitated even this great warrior. Few, however, would call this a war story, as the narrative quickly ascends into philosophical and theological abstractions. “O Krishna, I will not fight,” Arjuna says and falls silent, paralyzed by what he sees as his conflicting duties. “You speak sincerely, but your sorrow has no cause,” Krishna responds. “The wise grieve neither for the living nor for the dead. There has never been a time when you and I and the kings gathered here have not existed, nor will there be a time when we will cease to exist” (89). He continues at length, telling Arjuna about the nature of the world and the self, and the “perfect evenness of mind” that is yoga (94). Not, perhaps, a typical war story, but a story that is nonetheless initiated by the moral confusion that war and its violence engenders.

What counts as violence, or as a violent story? Arguably every story is a violent one, if you take “violence” to simply mean “a conflict of any kind.” (A story completely lacking conflict, after all, would be rather defiantly so, thus conferring a kind of violence on the expectations of the audience, if nothing else.) Even “the drama of a broken teacup,” to use Frank Norris’ famously scathing description of most literary realism, is drama nonetheless.

But most of the time, when we talk about violence and art, we’re referring to art that takes something more extreme than broken china as its subject—and typically, this is violence that causes physical injury or threatens to, though, in many cases, emotional or psychological violence is inseparable from its more tangible counterpart. Art can follow instances of violence that are

large-scale—wars that engulf the globe, genocide, institutionalized torture—but the representations themselves almost always give us individuals to consider. This person, that wound, this act of aggression, that resistance. We encounter other people in situations that must be considered on a case-by-case basis, and yet (because this is art) those situations are never just about the individual. They don't stand alone. They stand as re-presentations of something important—something that society values or condemns, perhaps, or something that we must decide ourselves if we condone or censure. How to understand or even identify that “something,” however, isn't always clear, and can provoke extended, passionate, and sometimes centuries-long conversations. Because, again, this is art.

Acts of violence can be understood as atrocities, things to be lamented, sworn against, perhaps punished. They can be read as necessities, unfortunate but required, a means to an end. And they can be seen as pleasures, acts to be enjoyed, even savored. In America, the pleasures of violence are many—the well executed sack of a vulnerable quarterback, the child's righteous punch of a bully, the movie hero's final domination of the bad guy. Americans do love their vengeance, as demonstrated in the longstanding popularity of that most American of genres, the Western. The hero there will kill, but only reluctantly, judiciously, and justly. He may even be an outlaw, but we are still to understand him as a man with honor. The gun he wears “tells us that he lives in a world of violence, and even that he ‘believes in violence,’” writes Robert Warshow. “But the drama is one of self-restraint: the moment of violence must come in its own time and according to its special laws, or else it is valueless” (Warshow 716). And so the Virginian shoots Trampas; Shane kills Wilson and his cronies; the Ringo Kid shoots Luke Plummer and his two brothers. The pleasures are obvious: wrongdoers are found, punished; victims find saviors; families and townsfolk can settle down and live peaceful lives as their hero rides off into the sunset, taking his guns with him.

But violence loses its pleasure for those who would see stories like these as, at best, escapist myth and, at worst, the mythology of oppression—of women, whose roles are minimized; of African and

Mexican Americans, who also assume lesser supporting positions; and, of course, Native Americans, who so often are the de facto enemy in classic Westerns, simply because they live on the land that white civilization wants to claim for its own. The power and satisfaction of the wielding of violence can be dampened if one is familiar with the pains of being its object. For those plagued in their real lives by domestic abuse, political terror, or gang violence, or for those who feel that, righteous or not, revenge is not a proper response to wrongdoing, even represented violence can lose its pleasure. For many, art that takes violence as its subject should be realistic about society's challenges, and forsake simple pleasures for hard truths.

But the pleasures of well-represented violence are never simple, even in a seemingly open-and-shut case like *Shane*. The Western hero, argues Warshow, is always a figure of moral ambiguity, since his justice is always violently delivered; it taints him, sets him apart from others, as Richard Slotkin has also noted. And defining morality by the actions of a single person is always a troubling, if seductive, inclination. In Jack Schaefer's original novel from 1949, which predated the Hollywood film by four years, the young narrator spies Shane on his way to that final showdown:

He was the man I saw that first day, a stranger, dark and forbidding, forging his lone way out of an unknown past in the utter loneliness of his own immovable and instinctive defiance. He was the symbol of all the dim, formless imaginings of danger and terror in the untested realm of human potentialities beyond my understanding. The impact of the menace that marked him was like a physical blow. (Schaefer 134)

For a boy given completely to hero worship of this stranger, the description is striking—and more striking still when considered in the light of the novel's publication, just a few years after the United States had wielded its own kind of terror in World War II. Schaefer may not have been consciously thinking about Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the firebombing of Tokyo when he wrote about “the untested realm of human potentialities,” but the implications are there to explore.

This volume is, in many ways, dedicated to the pleasures of works of art that depict violence and the taxonomy of those pleasures—whether they are the pleasures of aesthetic satisfaction, of intellectual rigor, of escapism or of confrontation, of personal or political recognition, of giving voice to those in pain, or simply the realization that someone, somewhere, has captured something essential about the suffering that is an integral part of being human. These are pleasures that—even, or perhaps especially, in the most escapist of tales—should never be easy or unchallenging.

My own interests tend toward the exquisite articulation of extreme violence, the complex reactions engendered when poetic language rubs up against horror. My first encounter with this was in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, a historical novel that follows a group of men who are paid by the Mexican government to scalp Native Americans in 1849. The protagonist is an unnamed "kid" of sixteen who falls in first with a filibustering expedition led by Captain White, a man determined to militarily dispute the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War and set the Rio Grande as the border between those two nations. "We fought for it. Lost friends and brothers down there. And then by God if we didnt give it back," White says to the kid, lamenting the territory he feels the United States gave up (McCarthy 33). "Back to a bunch of barbarians that even the most biased in their favor will admit have no least notion in God's earth of honor or justice or the meaning of republican government" (McCarthy 33). He goes on:

What we are dealing with . . . is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers. And maybe no better. There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there's no God in Mexico. Neyer will be. We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves. And do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them . . . We are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land. (McCarthy 34)

It's perfect imperialist rhetoric, complete with dehumanizing language that is a denial of Mexican government, religion, and

morality. The only thing to do, as the appropriately named White sees it, is to go there and take what rightfully belongs to the United States (as a number of filibustering expeditions really did attempt to do during this time period.)

As easy as White expects the mission to be for such clearly superior troops, they are undone in unexpected ways. An old Mennonite warns them before they depart: "The wrath of God lies sleeping," he says. "It was hid a million years before men were and only men have power to wake it. Hell aint half full. Hear me. Ye carry war of a madman's making onto a foreign land. Ye'll wake more than the dogs" (McCarthy 40). That warning is echoed in McCarthy's descriptions of the landscape, which grow cosmic as the men ride through an unforgiving desert:

All night sheetlightning quaked sourceless to the west beyond the midnight thunderheads, making a bluish day out of the distant desert, the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear. The thunder moved up from the southwest and lightning lit the desert all about them, blue and barren, great clanging reaches ordered out of the absolute night like some demon kingdom summoned up or changeling land that come the day would leave them neither trace nor smoke nor ruin more than any troubling dream. (McCarthy 47)

When they encounter other men to fight, the battle doesn't go as planned. It's not their stated opponent, and it's not even really a battle. When they see dust on the horizon, White at first takes it to be "a parcel of heathen stocktheives" with whom they may see "a little sport" (McCarthy 51). But it's an attacking party of Comanche warriors, painted and "clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners," howling and charging, "death hilarious" (McCarthy 52–53). The men can do no more than gasp out "oh my God" before they are shot by arrows, pierced by lances, and scalped. The scene is chaotic, excessive—the satisfaction at seeing White's racism turned on its ear is quickly tempered by the extreme violence of the attack,

and that violence is both heightened and made aesthetic by the way McCarthy describes it:

Now driving in a wild frieze of headlong horses with clusters of arrows clenched in their jaws and their shields winking in the dust and up the far side of the ruined ranks in a piping of boneflutes and dropping down off the sides of their mounts with one heel hung in the withers strap and their short bows flexing beneath the outstretched necks of the ponies until they had circled the company and cut their ranks in two and then rising up again like funhouse figures, some with nightmare faces painted on their breasts, riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them and leaping from their mounts with knives and running about on the ground with a peculiar bandylegged trot like creatures driven to alien forms of locomotion and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows. (53–54)

This reads like the climax of a story, but in fact it's just the opening salvo in a novel that portrays violence in almost every permutation, a Hobbesian war of all against all in a place "beyond men's judgments [where] all covenants were brittle" (McCarthy 106). The kid moves among these people, miraculously surviving the Comanche attack and later joining a gang of scalphunters, "a pack of vicious-looking humans" who are the worst yet, "dangerous, filthy, brutal, the whole like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh" (McCarthy 78). This gang targets anyone with hair dark enough to pass for the Native Americans they have been contracted to eliminate, and their conflicts are numerous, deadly, and often arbitrary. When the leader of that group is finally killed himself, McCarthy writes that an old Yuman warrior raises an axe and "split the head of John Joel Glanton to the thrapple," using an archaic Scottish word for throat (McCarthy 275). McCarthy's

descriptions and word choices reflect these moments' extremity and strangeness, as if his sentences' rhythms and vocabulary must necessarily push the boundaries of language in order to render such things.

But the point, ultimately, is a larger one, especially for readers who wonder early on who they're supposed to root for in such a ubiquitously violent world. If no one group is better than any other, if everyone is capable of such appalling action, then why tell the story, beyond pointing out that the Old West wasn't the land of mythic justice that it's so often cracked up to be? While I think there's a lot to think about simply in McCarthy's descriptive practices—can violence be beautiful? If so, what are the implications?—he's up to more here, and hints at as much in the opening pages. The kid, the novel's protagonist, leaves his drunken father at fourteen and heads to Texas by way of Memphis, St. Louis, and New Orleans. As he approaches his destination, McCarthy tells us that he is now "finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay" (McCarthy 4–5).

This statement can be interpreted a number of different ways, but at bottom it poses a question about how the kid—this blank slate of sorts, a person remote from both origin and destiny, the circumstances of his birth and death—will or won't be affected by his exposure to violence. Will he shape creation, or be shaped? If so, to what end? It's a question that is answered enigmatically if at all and has spawned a robust scholarly discussion over the years. As precise as the novel is about the workings of violent human interaction, and what happens when people come crashing into one another with lethal intent and ruthlessness, it offers less about what happens to the soul in such cases, even though that's the very question it begins by asking. Or if it does tell you about the soul, about the human spirit, it does so in ways that are not easy to parse—as is, perhaps, appropriate. (I've offered this discussion of the novel without touching on either the character of Judge Holden or the

epilogue, both of which are essential but quite complex elements when considering what the novel has to say about violence and human nature. Too much, I think, for the space I have here.)

“Can you describe this?” a woman asks Anna Akhmatova during Stalin’s Great Purge of the Soviet Union, as they stand together in a prison queue in Leningrad. “Yes, I can,” she replies, as Akhmatova relates in the opening of her poem cycle *Requiem*. “And then something like the shadow of a smile crossed what had once been her face” (Akhmatova 2346). Horror that doesn’t stay beyond language’s reach, where all horror begins—it creates a small satisfaction, a realization that others will know, that the experiences won’t fade into nightmare. Even when Akhmatova goes on to describe what happened in part as a denial, a veiling, the power is still there:

No, it is not I, it is someone else who is suffering.
I could not have borne it. And this thing which has happened,
Let them cover it with black cloths,
And take away the lanterns . . . Night. (2348)

Pleasure, then—even if it’s just the shadow of a smile, someone else’s story that seems like your own. Maybe it’s your own because it creates the deepest kind of personal recognition, or maybe it becomes yours because it brings something utterly distant from your own life into sharp, exquisite focus, and that something stays with you. This is pleasure that provokes deep and often difficult reflection, even more so when you put those reflections in play with others’—in the kind of conversation that is perhaps more necessary than any other. “You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing,” the man tells the woman at the beginning of Marguerite Duras’ *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. “I saw *everything*,” she insists. “*Everything*” (15). And the story goes on from there.

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CRITICAL
CONTEXTS

The Foundations of Violence in Ancient Greek Literature

Thomas Palaima

In spring of 431 BCE, months before the beginning of what we may justly call the first long, continuous, and two-part world war in Western history, the so-called Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) between the city-state of Athens and her subject allies and the Spartans and their allies, many thousands of adult male citizens of Athens sat together in the theater of Dionysus beneath the south wall of the acropolis and took in the play we now call Euripides' *Medea*. The preceding fifty years had seen almost constant localized warfare in the greater Greek world. Athenian citizens were major participants in that widespread recurring violence (Palaima, "Civilian Knowledge").

The *Medea* was the first of the set of four plays by Euripides produced on that given day and the only one to survive. The title it is known by rightly identifies the character who is the focus of the play: Medea, a non-Greek princess from the furthest eastern limits of the Black Sea, who, as she herself admits in the play, has betrayed her father and fatherland for love of the Greek adventurer-hero Jason. Medea kills her own younger brother and cuts his body into chunks of bloody flesh that she, then even more sacrilegiously (if we can put such matters on a sliding scale), flings from Jason's ship into the sea, in order to slow the pursuit of her country's royal fleet. When Jason and Medea reach Jason's home city of Iolcus in northern Greece, Medea tricks the daughters of Jason's uncle—who has usurped power from Jason—into killing their own father in an act of rejuvenation magic that Medea makes sure will fail. Jason and Medea then flee to Corinth where King Creon gives them refuge.

The play is set in Corinth. It lays out for us how and why this exotic, feared, socially isolated, non-Greek woman—a murderess who deals in the dark arts of magic—decides to kill her children and then does kill them. The trigger event is the news that Jason will

abandon Medea and their two children, in order to secure material well-being and a renewal of his faded fame and prestige by marrying a young princess, daughter of the king.

A definitive scholarly commentary on the *Medea*, written by Denys L. Page seventy-five years ago, just before the outbreak of another horrific world war, had this to say about the key action in the play:

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. (xiv)

The abominable violence of a mother killing her children is not outside our experience, and I doubt whether it was outside the experience of the ancient Athenians. The larger question, however, is what set of cultural conditions made the ancient Athenian audience and still makes modern readers and audiences want to know how and why a mother could be brought into a psychological state and mindset in which killing her own children with her own hands becomes, to her, what she has to do.

As with elements of the Old Testament, the earliest recorded literary texts in ancient Greek were songs from a long-standing oral tradition that were selected, edited, and written down in order to ensure their preservation. From the time when alphabetic writing was first introduced, around the eighth century BCE, down through the full development in fifth-century classical Athens of many of the literary genres, especially poetic forms that we still consider canonical, Greek literature is mainly a public performance literature embedded in a still primarily oral culture. And it is run through with violence.

This is true even if we leave aside the two famous early epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, attributed to Homer. The two great Homeric song poems lay out, with an almost clinical accuracy, the hard realities—psychological, physical, emotional, and practical—of what human beings go through in practicing and experiencing violence: when state-sanctioned and state-organized armies are

away at war; when the inhabitants of cities and countries are fighting in defense of their territories, homes, families, and ways of life (the ancient Greek *politeia*, from the word *polis*, was used by the ancient Greeks for their peculiar form of city and is related to our word “politics,” that is, “matters having to do with living in a *polis*”); and when soldiers return home to their communities, where life has gone on without them and where even their closest friends and family members have not shared the sufferings and hardships they, as combat veterans, bring back hard-wired in their memories. These are aspects of violence we still want and need to know about as individuals and members of families and larger social groups when and after our country is at war.¹ So it is no wonder that the Homeric epics have survived and are translated anew generation after generation.

Violent acts and their immediate effects and after-effects, direct and indirect, on human beings consume the lengthy song poems—the *Iliad* is 15,693 lines long, the *Odyssey* 12,110. In the *Iliad*, over two hundred combat deaths are described in gruesomely graphic detail. They are so numerous and so grisly that one critic remarks, “in terms of sheer body count, most of those that perish in battle seem to have been created simply in order for others to kill them” (Marks 300).

In the *Iliad*, the goddess Hera offers up for annihilation the innocent citizens of the three friendliest cities (Argos, Sparta, and Mycenae) where she is worshiped dutifully and piously (Homer, *Iliad* 4.50–54). Agamemnon, commander-in-chief of the Greek forces attacking Troy, declares his aim to exterminate the Trojans as a people by killing all the males in the city, even male fetuses in their mothers’ wombs (Homer, *Iliad* 6.51–65). Priam, king of Troy, conjures up a nightmare image of what will befall him once his son Hector is killed by Achilles in combat. The very dogs, to which Priam once fed scraps from his table, will feast upon and mutilate the genitals of his corpse (Homer, *Iliad* 22.66–76).

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus, the returning king, slaughters the men who consumed his resources in his long absence and hangs the female servants who took pleasure with them. Earlier in the

cave of the Cyclops, Polyphemus grabs several of Odysseus' men and smashes their heads open upon the rocks in the same violently matter-of-fact way that, Homer notes in a simile, human beings kill unwanted puppies in a new litter (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.289–290). In the same episode, we get what is to us a ghastly, detailed description of what happens to an eye—in this case, the giant eye of a Cyclops—when it is pierced by a sharpened and fire-hardened wooden staff (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.387–394). It is worthwhile thinking about what sensibilities, cultural values and histories, life experiences, and personal expectations the audiences, who received such violent scenes during their realization in recitation (for song poems) or enactment (for plays), must have had.

The hero of the *Iliad* is Achilles. His name means “he who causes hurtful woe to the male fighting force” (*akhi-* from Greek *akhos*; see our word “ache”; *-lleus* ultimately from *lāos*). As the story of the *Iliad* unfolds, we see that Achilles causes countless sufferings for soldiers in both the enemy Trojan *lāos* (army) and his own Greek *lāos* (army). The hero of the *Odyssey* is Odysseus. He is, as the Coen and Stanley brothers played with his name in the soundtrack to the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the “man of constant sorrow,” literally “the man who *has to do with* painful sorrow.”² These two heroes enact what their names signify through violence, what Simone Weil in her classic essay on the *Iliad* calls “the use of force” (Holoka).

Ancient Greek mythmakers (the word *muthos* means simply “something uttered,” i.e., what we call a “story”) did not shy away from describing brutally violent acts. They told stories that describe extreme violence, which causes severe psychological and physical trauma, including macabre forms of death. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, a mother with her aristocratic women friends, while in the ecstasy (literally *ekstasis*, emotionally and psychologically “standing outside yourself”) of Dionysiac ritual in the mountainous countryside, tears apart her own son, the young King Pentheus, whose name comes from the root *path-* meaning “suffer” (see our English words “pathos,” “pathetic” and “sympathy”), and fixes his severed head on a pike. They think they have killed and beheaded a lion. She and

her fellow celebrants, carrying his mounted head, parade exultantly into the horrified city (*polis*, see *politeia* above) where the return to organized communal life brings them back to their senses.

The violence in Greek literature—excluding, hereafter, war literature *per se*—is wielded almost indiscriminately. Its targets include noble and reverent men and women, the old and the young, the strong and the weak, the helpless remnants of the fighting force of the hero Odysseus and newborn puppies, those who have sinned and those who are pure and righteous and helpless.

The violence often cascades and careens. In Euripides' play *Herakles*, performed in 430 BCE, a year after *Medea*, when the Peloponnesian War had begun and a devastating plague was breaking out in Athens, murders are planned and executed in mafia-like power struggles between the families of the hero Herakles and the usurping ruler Lycus. Put the word “don” in front of these two names, and it is easier to understand that we are seeing a clan blood feud play out between the family of Don Herakles and the families of two other ancient mafia godfathers. The violence here, however, is compounded by what our society would now diagnose as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) affecting Herakles (Mercouri), and it is mixed in with intra-family violence and what human beings conceive of as divinely sanctioned killing.

Lycus sets in motion the slaughter of Megara, the wife of Herakles and daughter of the legitimate king, Creon, and their three children. When they take refuge at an altar of Zeus, Lycus orders a pyre to be built around them and Megara and her three children to be burned alive. Herakles returns from a harrowing and traumatizing labor in Hades—his task was to bring the hound of hell, Cerberus, out of the underworld. He kills Lycus, but is then driven mad at the instigation of the goddess Hera, wife of Zeus, for no better reason than that she has always disliked Herakles. Iris, the messenger of the gods, and the *daimōn* (see below) Madness come down from Olympus to effect her plan. In his deranged state of mind, Herakles thinks he is killing Eurystheus, another hated power rival, who had set him on his twelve labors, and Eurystheus' children. Instead, he kills his own wife Megara and their three children.

All this takes place in Thebes, a city of violence from the time it was founded:

Thebes, where dragon teeth
Were broadcast and sprouted full-grown fighters
Berserk to kill each other.

Ares kept a few back
From the slaughter and they put down roots—their children's
Children grew up here in this city Kadmos
Built from the ground up.

(Euripides, *Herakles* 8–13, translation Sleight)

We sample the murderous fury that consumes Herakles when, having returned, he declares to Megara and the chorus of old men of Thebes what he intends to do.

As for me, for the matter is now in my hands,
first I'll go and tear down, foundations and all, the palace halls
of this new self-installed ruling family. I'll slice off his fucking
head

and throw it to the dogs to drag about like a chew toy. As for
the Thebans,

whoever was one of us, whoever we treated well and went over
to them,

I'll bring them down with this here unbeatable club of mine.
As for the rest of them, I'll spray arrows all over the fucking
place

and fill the entire sacred Ismenus river with corpses of all
kinds,

an all out slaughter, and the clear spring waters of Dirce, I'll
make them run blood red.

For who deserves my protection more than my wife, my kids
and my old man.

(Euripides, *Herakles* 565–575, translation mine)

Herakles' acts in obtaining vengeance will include decapitation, sacrilegiously defiling a corpse, and rampant clubbing to death of all Thebans who in any way associated themselves with the usurper's

family. He'll then create a bloodbath with his rapid-fire bow, a kind of ancient Bushmaster model XM-15. The slaughter it causes will pollute the sacred river Ismenus by choking it with dead bodies. And it will make what the Greeks literally call the "white" waters of the equally sacred Dirce spring and stream flow blood red.

Well before Alfred Hitchcock in his film *Psycho* (1960) orchestrated, with the body and eye of actress Janet Leigh in a scene set in a Bates Motel bathroom, the violent choreography of knife blade, shower head, tub drain, and shower curtain, Aeschylus in his tragedy *Agamemnon* has Agamemnon's unfaithful and long murderously hateful wife and queen Clytemnestra—hateful because Agamemnon had killed their daughter Iphigeneia in blood sacrifice to the goddess Artemis at the start of the Trojan expedition, in order to gain fair winds for the sailing of his armada—fawningly seduce him, on his triumphal return from Troy, into entering into the palace at the top of the site of Mycenae. There, she kills him with knife blow after knife blow in the royal bathtub (a rare luxury even in fifth-century Athens).

Clytemnestra comes out on stage afterwards, spattered with his blood, and describes her act in an orgasmic ecstasy:

I stand here where I struck, and the deed is done.

This was my work, I do not deny it.

I cast my vast net, tangling around him,
wrapping him in a robe rich in evil.

I struck him twice and he screamed twice,
his limbs buckled and his body came crashing down,
and as he lay there, I struck him again, a third blow
for underworld Zeus, the savior of the dead.

He collapsed, gasping out his last breath,
his life ebbing away, spitting spurts of blood,
which splattered down on me like dark sanguine dew.

And I rejoiced just as the newly sown earth rejoices,

When Zeus send the nourishing rain on the young crops.

(Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1380–1392, translation Meineck)

Clytemnestra shows pride in her plan and its execution. She has finally outwitted and put to death arguably the most powerful man in all of Greece, the commander-in-chief of the allied forces that took the citadel of Troy. She revels in giving the details of the three knife blows, as if she is a holy priestess blood-sacrificing a male victim in full prime in long-delayed compensation for the young daughter whom ten years before, Agamemnon, husband and father, had ritually slain (slitting her throat with a knife) before she had even reached marrying age. The blood that pulses from Agamemnon's wounds, wounds Clytemnestra has made, spurts upon her like refreshingly welcome bloody dew, a morning mist that falls upon and nourishes young plants growing in the field. No one who did not understand the psychological states of people committing violent acts could have written so macabrely vivid and riveting a passage. Aeschylus was a combat veteran. He had fought at the plain and beach of Marathon during the first Persian War (490 BCE), the Normandy of ancient Athenian history (Palaima, "When War").

How and why was extreme violence so prevalent in Greek literature? Why was it depicted so graphically in plays that were publicly performed at large-scale annual ritual dramatic festivals in the *polis* of Athens and songs that were publicly sung at other public festival competitions? What atmosphere, social norms, and worldviews made violence in literature commonplace? Why does it fascinate us now?

Violence had to be of interest and pleasing to the audience, or else the playwrights and singers would not have chosen violent themes for their tragedies and song poems. They were, after all, in serious public competitions and, to focus on tragedy, the subject matter of a play and its treatment were crucial for its success in performance. A chief social motivation for good behaviors or excellent achievements among men in Greek culture was the *kleos*, "communal fame," that they would win by performing well in what they were obliged to do as soldiers, citizens, athletes, and what we would call politicians—and in the simultaneously civic and religious song, dance and theatrical competitions put on within their *poleis* (plural of *polis*). Archetypically, Achilles was willing to trade a long

life in enjoyable and undisturbed obscurity for a short life with *kleos* as a soldier and field commander. For the tragic playwrights, victory at the festivals was serious business to a degree that we cannot fully comprehend.

One set of clues about the cultural environment for Greek literature of violence comes from what we know about Greek religious thought from the central text called Hesiod's *Theogony* (*Birth of the Gods*). Other insights come from Hesiod's *Works and Days*. In the *Works and Days*, Hesiod examines through a moral filter the history of Greek culture and the moral and ethical codes and behavior patterns that prevail in contemporary Greek society. The *Theogony* is generally compared, as a creation myth, to the book of *Genesis*. The *Works and Days* has elements that are parallel to biblical parainetic or morality literature.

As with the cultures of Egypt, Israel, and the Near and Middle East, the supernatural world that the Greeks, from 800 to 400 BCE, posited as affecting, if not fully controlling, human affairs was permeated with violence. The chief gods in these cultures were essentially "warrior kings" (Hiebert 876–880), who used violence or the threat of violence to maintain their dominance, to subject other forces (both spiritual entities and what we would consider natural forces within the physical universe) to their wills, and to keep the *kosmos* (the organized and orderly world) stable. The violence on high, as it were, reflected the conditions of power relationships in Greek culture of the period—recall here how violently Herakles exerts his power in the bloodbath he envisions and how Clytemnestra achieves her vengeance by using a bath as a sacrificial altar. Violence was wielded among the gods to establish and maintain a stable *status quo* under Zeus. This served as a paradigm for human beings who hoped that otherwise unattainable justice would prevail on earth through at least the threat of violent intervention from the divine sphere.

The *Works and Days* and *Theogony* of Hesiod, both song poems of about 1,000 lines in length using the same artificial dialect and dactylic hexameter verse form as the Homeric poems, reflected the view of natural and supernatural worlds imbued with violence

that prevailed throughout Greek culture from the time when these poems coalesced into their present forms ca. 700 BCE through the following three centuries.

The ancient Greeks in historical times, and even earlier, so far as we can tell from the economic documents (Palaima, "Linear B Sources") and depictions on wall paintings and man-made artifacts from the major palatial centers of the late Greek Bronze Age (e.g., Pylos, Mycenae, Thebes, Tiryns, Knossos) ca. 1600–1200 BCE, were polytheistic and held a shared belief in an eventually fixed pantheon of deities, who dwelled on Mount Olympus. In both works of Hesiod, however, the focus on an all-powerful storm god named Zeus, who can violently force natural and supernatural powers to his will, verges on monotheism.

The *Works and Days* opens with a short hymn to the Muses. They themselves, Hesiod tells us, sing in celebration about:

the will of great Zeus.
Easy for Him to build up the strong
And tear the strong down.
Easy for Him to diminish the mighty
And magnify the obscure.
Easy for Him to straighten the crooked
And wither the proud.

(Hesiod, *Works and Days* 6–12, translation Lombardo)

The Muses' own song makes clear that justice (*dikē*) ultimately resides in Zeus, a great hope for mortal human beings whose lives, as Hesiod describes prevailing conditions, are generally worse than Thomas Hobbes' famous description. Most human beings in rural areas in the early seventh century BCE lived in "continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man [was] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 76).

No small wonder, then, that the first principle of society that Hesiod takes up in the *Works and Days* is *eris*, which has a range of related meanings: "political or domestic strife," "conflict in battle," and most neutrally "a spirit of competition." In Homer, *Eris* is personified as a *daimōn*, a supernatural force that "distributes"

whatever powers it controls to mortals for good or for ill. *Daimones* (the plural form) are not what we would call full-fledged "gods," but they affect human behaviors, lives, and societies. *Eris*, as a *daimōn*, is a sister of the dreaded god of war Ares. *Eris* drives men on to war with one another.

Hesiod soon takes up why life is so difficult for human beings, why we have to strive and struggle, often with no real gain. At one time:

the human race
had lived off the land without any trouble, no hard work,
No sickness or pain that the Fates give to men
(and when men are in misery they show their age quickly).

(Hesiod, *Works and Days* 111–114, translation Lombardo)

But because Prometheus stole fire and brought it to mortals, Zeus ordered other divine beings (Hephaestus, Athena, Aphrodite, Hermes, the Graces, Persuasion and the Seasons) to construct for mortal men an irresistible "evil thing" (*kakon*), in fact their *very own* "evil thing," in which they would delight, embracing it in love. This evil thing was the first woman, infused by Aphrodite with "painful desire and knee-weakening anguish," supplied by Hermes with a "bitchy mind and a cheating heart" and "lies and wheedling words," and built by Hephaestus with a "face like an immortal goddess" and "the figure like a beautiful desirable virgin's" (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 77–102). Thus was Pandora brought into being. Her name is understood either as meaning "all-giver" of gifts, good and bad, or herself "all-gifted" with attributes by this consortium of divine designers and manufacturers.

Daily life was so bleak, hard, and randomly violent that what Pandora lets loose upon the world is not a small perfume jar, cosmetic case, or jewelry box of evils, as in many later and modern European depictions, but an entire large clay storage jar (*pitthos*) full of *kēdea lugra* (literally "miserable or mournful troubles," with the words here having the full force of the roots on which they are built: "misery" and "mourning") (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 115–116). A few lines later, Hesiod emphasizes that there are *muria lugra*, or

“tens of thousands of miseries”—a “myriad” is the highest number for which the Greeks had a word—now wandering throughout the world (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 121–122, li. 100). The verb “wander” is important because it emphasizes the randomness with which violent evil can strike human beings, a notion that Herodotus, the first major Greek historian, almost three centuries later picks up on in his encapsulation of what it means to be a human being: *pan ho anthrōpos sumphorē*, “a human being is entirely a matter of chance coincidence.” The very period in which Hesiod is living and singing shares in the conditions he puts *in illo tempore*, in mythic time. The earth is full of evils (*kaka* “bad things”). The sea is full of evils, too. And diseases voicelessly prey in silence upon human beings, day and night.

This prompts Hesiod then to tell us how the hard times in the world came about. It is here we may note the centrality of violence as a key to the wretched and disordered state of humankind. The story Hesiod tells, an adaptation of Near Eastern models, is the Myth of the Five Ages (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 129–234).

Human beings once dwelled in a Golden Age created for them by the “immortals dwelling in heavenly halls” in the time when Kronos—the major male Greek deity, whom Zeus, son of Kronos, overthrew—was dominant. This period was without diseases, without hard labors and without the pains of work. There was no getting old. Grain-giving cropland produced food abundantly of its own accord. Human beings did not go to war or murder one another, but they lived congenially at ease in fine cities and peacefully shared their products among each other. They were rich in healthy livestock, and they were *philoī*, “friends,” in the narrow Greek sense, with the blessed gods.

A *philos*, “friend,” is someone with whom one shares a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship. A common Greek tagline in tragedies and other works of literature bearing on the nature of friendship and the realities of living in Greece is that the best thing that one can do in life is “help your friends and harm your enemies.” In the hyper-pragmatic Greek moral world, however, this is dependent upon both parties in a friendship maintaining the

capability to be of benefit to each other. A downturn in health or personal fortunes or a wrong turn in choosing social alliances could turn former friends into non-friends or enemies. That everyone was a friend in the Golden Age shows that it is a true Never-never Land, an impossible condition to maintain in the real world that human beings continue to inhabit. In the real world, violence and sheer bad luck disrupt peaceful, and what we would call healthy, relationships.

This paradise of sorts came to an end. Hesiod remarks that the human beings of this Golden Age have become now themselves holy and good *daimones*. These Golden-Age *daimones* act as guardians of human beings and do their best to ward off evils, safeguard just acts, and “repay criminal acts.” Note what these three functions reveal about the non-paradisiacal outlook on human society of the audience for Hesiod’s song poems. For them the everyday expectation is that evils are prevalent, justice is endangered, and retribution needs to be sought for criminal acts. The guardian spirits from the golden age are givers of “abundance,” a true benefaction in an environment that yields the basic necessities of life begrudgingly and only when compelled to do so by continual hard work, human ingenuity and good luck with the weather, the environment and the dispositions and actions of other human beings in your family, clan and broader community.

The human beings of the succeeding Silver Age took a long time to mature and then lived short adult lives. Far from being *philoī* of the blessed gods, they had no desire even to attend upon the gods (*therapeuein*, cf. English “therapy”) or to make sacrifices on the holy altars dedicated to the gods, pious behavior that Hesiod says is *themis* (a “set down law”) for human beings who act according to established customs. But the fatal flaw of the humans of the Silver Age was that they could not keep themselves from *atasthalos hubris*, “reckless or wicked violent action” (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 155–156, li. 134).

Hubris, or in its Latinized form *hybris*, is the Greek value word that stands for various forms of violence that has social consequences. There is no generally accepted etymology for the word, though one attractive proposal derives it from two roots that mean “high” and

“heavy.” It, then, literally means something that defies or violates the law of nature, whereby objects that have weight fall down under the force of gravity—i.e., something that is heavy should not, and actually cannot, be high. *Hubris* generally has the sense of violating a set boundary or the established rules of the physical world, human society, or prescribed behavior towards the gods. For this reason, it is used in modern English to describe hybrid plants and animals. In producing hybrids, human thought and skill have defied the laws of nature.

Angry with their impious acts, Kronos does away with men of the Silver Age. His successor as “warrior king” of the gods, Zeus, creates men of the Bronze Age (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 164–177). These human beings epitomize violence. They are characterized as a race (*genos*, see our English word “genocide”) that is *deinon*, “terrifying,” and *obrimon*, “mighty, strong.” We are told these men were preoccupied with *hubries* (plural), “wantonly violent acts,” and *stonoenta*, “acts that are literally made of groans, wailings, lamentations.” They kill each other off and death takes them, although they are *ekpagloi*, “frighteningly terrifying.”

Next came a “divine race of heroes” made by Zeus (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 180–194). This race behaves more justly and nobly. They are even called demigods (*hēmitheoi*). They precede the race of human beings of Hesiod’s own time, the Iron Age. This stage is a clear interpolation into the scheme of generations of human beings in steady decline and designated by metals of decreasing value. The cycles of Greek myths about heroes made the addition of this phase necessary in order to make sense of traditional history.

The heroes are killed off, however, through the violence of evil war (*polemos kakos*) and the dread battle cry or din of war (*phulopis ainē*) in such monumental war adventures as the *Seven Against Thebes* (the prototype for Kurosawa’s *The Seven Samurai* and the Hollywood western *The Magnificent Seven*) and the Trojan War.

With this background of the negative evolution of human beings, Hesiod arrives at the Iron Age in which he lives. His view of the Iron Age (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 200–234) is violently apocalyptic. Here, even toil and labor have an inherent violence

that ceaselessly, day and night, wears down and destroys men. Like an Old Testament prophet, Hesiod proclaims that Zeus will destroy men of this age on moral grounds. There will be a dissolution of all the social connections and interactions that make society function and life worthwhile.

Fathers will be at odds with their sons. Guests will be disconnected from hosts. The so-called *xenia* relationship between arriving outsiders and unrelated heads of households reduced and curtailed violence by obliging strangers to behave respectfully towards one another in codified roles as guests and hosts.

In Hesiod’s Iron Age, brothers will be at odds with each other and children will disrespect parents once the parents have become old. Cities will be stormed and sacked. Men who respect oaths, adhere to justice and are just plain good will be out of favor. Evil-doers and men who are “violence incarnate” will be held in high esteem. The end game will see the two socially significant *daimones* named *Aidōs* (social shame that assures right, proper, and good behavior) and *Nemesis* (retribution for wrongdoing) abandon the earth, leaving behind *algea lugra* (“mournful pains”) for death-beset human beings. In the end, there will be no defense at all against evil:

There go Shame and Nemesis. And horrible suffering
Will be left for mortal men, and no defense against evil.

(Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 233–234, translation Lombardo)

At this point, Hesiod offers his most famous story, besides the tale of Pandora, in the *Works and Days*. The tale of the hawk and the nightingale (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 235–245) is a stunningly raw description of the law of tooth-and-claw violence. Its only saving grace is that its message that “might makes right irrelevant” just might persuade the corrupt petty kinglets who wield power and authority in backwater territories in Hesiod’s time to be fearful that Zeus might assert his power over them. In fact, Hesiod says explicitly that it is a “fable for kings” (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 235), i.e., a story that they need to think about.

The hawk says to the nightingale, as he flies on high with her in his talons:

No sense in your crying. You're in the grip of real strength now.
And you'll go where I take you, songbird or not.
I'll make a meal of you if I want, or I might let you go.
Only a fool struggles against those who are stronger.
He will not win and he suffers pains in addition to disgrace.

(Hesiod, *Works and Days* 240–244, translation Lombardo)

Indeed, Hesiod summons up an apocalyptic vision of what the warrior sky god Zeus, dispenser and protector of Justice, will bring to pass for human beings who behave violently and lawlessly.

But for those who live for violence and vice,
Zeus, son of Kronos, broad-browed god, decrees
A just penalty, and often a whole city suffers
For one bad man and his damn fool schemes.
The son of Kronos sends them disaster from heaven,
Famine and plague, and the folk wither away,
Women stop bearing children, whole families
Die off, by Zeus' Olympian will. Or another time
He might lay low their army, or tumble down
Their Walls, or sink all their ships at sea.

(Hesiod, *Works and Days* 276–285, translation Lombardo)

The *Theogony* of Hesiod reinforces in the divine sphere the violence and instability that in the *Works and Days*, after the golden age, have pervaded the human sphere. In the *Theogony's* scheme, one epoch ruled by a chief male deity succeeds the next. Kronos, the youngest son of the earth mother Gaea and the first supreme male god Ouranos (the vault of the sky), in complicity with his mother, castrates his father. As we might now expect, Hesiod describes the scene in all its gloriously gory splendor:

From his dark hiding-place, the son reached out
With his left hand, while with his right he swung
The fiendishly long and jagged sickle, pruning the genitals

Of his own father with one swoop and tossing them
Behind him, where they fell to no small effect.
Earth soaked up all the bloody drops that spurted out,
And as the seasons went by she gave birth to the Furies
And to great Giants gleaming in full armor, spears in hand.

(Hesiod, *Theogony* 179–186, translation Lombardo)

Later, Zeus, with the assistance of three fantastically powerful, early-born monsters known as the *Hekatonkheires*, the “Hundred-Handers,” comes to power in an all-out war against the monstrous Titans, who were born from Ouranos before his castration. Zeus unleashes his own violence to subdue opposing supernatural forces and demonstrate his power to one and all:

And now Zeus no longer held back his strength.
His lungs seethed with anger and he revealed
All his power. He charged from the sky, hurtling
Down from Olymp[u]s in a flurry of lightning,
Hurling thunderbolts one after another, right on target,
From his massive hand, a whirlwind of holy flame.

(Hesiod, *Theogony* 690–695, translation Lombardo)

Yet mortal human beings still lived in the world that Hesiod, Homer, Herodotus, and the tragic playwrights preserve for us. It is a violent world in which:

... Night bore hateful Doom and black Fate
And Death and Sleep and the brood of Dreams.

And deadly Night bore Nemesis too, more misery
For mortals; and after her, Deception and Friendship
And ruinous Old Age, and hard-hearted Eris.
And hateful Eris bore agonizing Toil,
Forgetfulness, Famine and tearful Pains,
Battles and Fights, Murders and Manslaughters,
Quarrels, Lying Words and Words Disputatious,
Lawlessness and Recklessness.

(Hesiod, *Theogony* 211–212, 223–230, translation Lombardo)

This is the world the ancient Greeks learned of and knew from their central enculturating texts. They knew and feared that sons could kill their fathers and vice versa. They knew about incest, fratricide, frenzied mass killing, and infanticide. They knew a mother could kill her children. They explored the circumstances, conditions, inner psychological state, and triggering events that could cause a mother to kill her children. And in Aristotle's view, what they witnessed aroused in them pity and fear, and it then somehow purified or distilled those natural emotions surrounding their reality-based anxieties.

Euripides' *Medea* appeals to us now, not as an unrealistic horror film, but because we, along with the ancient Greeks, understand that the world is a violent place and it pays for us to know what leads to violent acts that only seem to have been ruled out by strong social, religious, educational, and legal principles and taboos.

The play offers a stunning psychological portrait of a powerful woman brought by powerful erotic emotions into a position of isolation and powerlessness in a culture not her own, but one she chose, while betraying every important social link to her own culture: fatherland, father, and brother. Medea is a woman with strong powers in the black arts and with strong passions. She has a strong love for her children. She has religiously deep feelings of oath-bound love for the now middle-aged Greek adventurer hero Jason, whom she considers her husband. She is a woman betrayed by a shell of a hero, an anxious middle-aged man looking now for comfort and position, trading his reputation, his *kleos*, for security and status. Jason is a man capable of believing his own lies.

Like so many ancient Greek texts, Euripides' *Medea* uses violence to make us see who we are as human beings and how artificial the limits on our violent instincts and actions are. *Medea* helps us not to tell so many lies about human violence and not to trust fully in the lies we do tell.

Notes

1. For more on this issue, see Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America*.

2. See our English word "anodyne."

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Contemporary War Narratives: Story-Truth, New Journalisms, and Why We Write

Lydia Neuman

My friend Tom Druecker tells a joke: “How many Vietnam vets does it take to screw in a light bulb?” Before you can say “I don’t know, how many?” he interrupts and growls, “Of course you don’t know, you weren’t there!” It’s a familiar trope, and it works especially well delivered by a big, bearded, sixty-something man who happens to have been a marine in Vietnam. The joke is meaningful because underneath the caricature of the crusty vet, we recognize Tim O’Brien’s cluster of axioms about the difficulty of telling the truth about war. “True war stories do not generalize” (O’Brien 84). “In a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true” (O’Brien 88). “A true war story is never about war” (O’Brien 91). “Story-truth,” O’Brien famously says in *The Things They Carried*, “is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (203). The firsthand experience of terror is a rapid-fire concatenation of exterior events and interior responses, and memory is a special kind of fiction.

In the chapter “Speaking of Courage,” Norman Bowker, recently home from Vietnam, cruises the seven-mile loop around the lake in his hometown. It’s the Fourth of July, and he’s restive amid the iconic ambience of suburban American summertime—the picture-perfect houses surrounding the lake, the oppressive heat easily displaced by the Chevy’s air conditioning, the radio out of Des Moines, the imminent picnics and fireworks, the neon-lit A&W. Bowker is desperate to talk about the night Kiowa died—about his shame at not having saved his friend, and the less permissible shame that his failure of courage cost him a medal. But everyone who might listen is remote. His father, whose car he’s driving; the former, now-married girlfriend who lives in one of the neat houses by the lake; the carhop and the intercom operator at the A&W. They’re all contentedly ignorant of the horrors of war and the dissonance

between inner and outer reality that attends what we now recognize as PTSD.

In the next chapter, “Notes,” O’Brien explains that the impetus to write “Speaking of Courage” was a letter in which Norman Bowker asked him to “say something about the field that night. The way Kiowa just disappeared into the crud. You were there—you can tell it” (O’Brien 179). Describing how he wrote and rewrote “Courage,” O’Brien affirms the power of language to process trauma, to “objectify your own experience [and] separate it from yourself” (179–180). He adds a disclaimer—“I did not look on my work as therapy” (O’Brien 179)—implying that therapy yields false or feel-good closure. In the 2007 documentary *Operation Homecoming*, O’Brien qualifies: “I think there’s a false notion that we all ought to recover from everything—divorce and broken homes and wars—that we all ought to heal. And I don’t believe in it. I believe the opposite, that there are some things you shouldn’t heal from, that are unhealable. And if they are healable, you oughtn’t do it anyway. There’s something to be said for remembering, and *not* healing.” Confusion and pain are okay, but silence is deadly. Unable to satisfy “the simple need to talk” (O’Brien 180), Bowker ultimately kills himself. In the chapter’s final lines, O’Brien reveals that “Norman Bowker was in no way responsible for what happened to Kiowa. Norman did not experience a failure of nerve that night. He did not freeze up or lose the Silver Star for valor. That part of the story is my own” (182). This is the happening-truth that undoes and upholds the story-truth of “Courage,” and we would be hard-pressed, from a twenty-first-century liberal standpoint, to deny the therapeutic value of the confession, the narrative, or the meta-narrative.

Writing about violence is thorny. It’s prone to sentimentality, false reassurance, self-indulgence. It risks merely inviting Schadenfreude, rendering horror as spectacle, and pandering to prurient interest. In a postscript to *Lolita*, Nabokov frames the danger of the last in artistic rather than moral terms: “[In pornography] obscenity must be mated with banality because every kind of aesthetic enjoyment has to be entirely replaced by simple sexual stimulation” (313). He describes his own standard: “A work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords

me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, kindness, tenderness, ecstasy) is the norm" (Nabokov 314). The argument is for beauty and sensuousness over morality and message; the suggestion is that compassion may be a requisite feature of art. Perhaps empathy, decency, and humanity are integral to sublime experience. By that logic, a worthy aesthetic of violence would treat "ugliness" not as metaphysical (chance) evil, or simply moral evil, but as a dynamic in which fear is transmuted to anger, and terror to trauma. Conceptualized as a kind of chemical reaction, the products of violence are grief and shame, which themselves breed physical, psychic, social, and institutional damage.

Writing is a potential palliative. Well-chosen words can, in theory, compel a hearing in whatever cosmic court of law adjudicates extralegal injuries. Writing can accuse, and also avenge, affording the opportunity, as George Orwell puts it, "to get your own back on the grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood" (392). In his 1946 essay, "Why I Write," Orwell counts such "sheer egoism" among three other motives: "aesthetic enthusiasm," "historical impulse" and "political purpose" (392). Thirty years later, in 1976, Joan Didion cribs Orwell's title, admiring its "aggressive" first-person imperative and catchy assonance. She describes writing as "a hostile act . . . an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space" (Didion 5), and denies any political or "intellectual" aspirations. She can't traffic in abstraction, and must focus exclusively on the "periphery," on what she can "see and taste and touch" (Didion 6). Didion's priority is definitely aesthetic; objects dictate form or "grammar." "The picture tells you how to arrange the words" (Didion 7). This dictum recalls the ethos of the modern Imagist poets—and the Structuralist critics who point out that *signifiers* (words) don't reflect *referents* (things) according to natural law. But for Didion, the writer is a gifted medium, an almost passive conduit for language who records phenomena and perception with perfect fidelity, as if such a thing were possible.

Didion and her cohort were the leading practitioners of the New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s. In narrative or long-

form journalism, as the genre came to be known, they pursued a truth-equals-beauty ideal, treating wide-ranging subjects with a sociological bent and novelistic structures. They gathered their stories through rigorous reporting, which endured as the hallmark of the next iteration of the literary journalism tradition. Contemporary New New Journalism, as it's sometimes called, borrows the techniques and attitudes of anthropology: the discipline of field-work, the principles of ethnography, the cultural or sub-cultural immersion now called "embedding." The embedded writer generally keeps a low profile in her finished work; both her person and perspective are practically invisible.

Pam Colloff is a journalist who writes about brutal crimes and the ensuing wrongful convictions that multiply victims and compound ruin. Telling these stories—any stories—she says, requires a great deal of access. She "embeds" with her subjects for brief, intense intervals, and despite her presence in their lives, often at critical moments, she's nowhere to be found in her stories. I ask Colloff what she thinks about Didion's claim that writing is "the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion" (Didion 5). "Didion *would* say that," she laughs. And it's true; Didion is brilliant, but there's a ferocity and an air-tight quality to some of her work that's redolent of narcissism—a constitutional inability to admit other realities. I ask Colloff about her preoccupation with violent subjects, hoping to validate my own fascination with morbidity and tragedy, and to reassure myself that it transcends voyeurism. She describes her inclination toward violence as two-pronged: "There's the inherent dramatic tension of ordinary people in extreme situations," she says. "And then there's the way that violence reverberates through generations" (Colloff). The spiraling ripple effects of trauma are not the voyeur's object. Fully developed portraits of dysfunction ask questions, demand empathy, resist answers. They educate and edify. Is this "advocacy" or "activist" journalism? "I enjoy storytelling," Colloff says, "so the narrative always comes first. But if a story happens to be about social justice—if the story can help someone—that's a bonus" (Colloff).

* * *

"You may well ask why I write," says the narrator in Ford Madox Ford's 1929 novel, *The Good Soldier*. "It is not unusual in human beings who have witnessed the sack of a city or the falling to pieces of a people to desire to set down what they have witnessed for the benefit of unknown heirs or of generations infinitely remote; or, if you please, just to get the sight out of their heads" (Ford 5). Witnessing serves a cautionary, cathartic purpose, and a variety of nonfiction forms testify to traumatic events. Long-form journalism unpacks newsworthy stories with an eye toward detail and deeper meaning. Memoir filters select moments or events through the lens of a particular sensibility. Essays *assay* their contents, weighing them in order to determine significance, sometimes roaming and identifying their "stories" elsewhere. Documentary filmmaking is perhaps the contemporary apotheosis of the witnessing narrative.

The 2010 film *Restrepo* chronicles parts of a fifteen-month deployment of American soldiers in Afghanistan. Sebastian Junger made the film with the late photojournalist Tim Hetherington. The two lived and worked alongside the Second Platoon of the 173rd Airborne's Battle Company in the isolated Korengal Valley, widely considered one of the most dangerous positions in the war. The film employs some traditional documentary devices (interviews, captions, an alternating pattern of action and commentary), but there are no talking heads who presume authority beyond their own experience. There are no dramatizations or voiceovers, no reassurance that insight or resolution is forthcoming. Unsteady camera-work derives not from a self-conscious effort toward low-tech authenticity but from the reality of documenting two extremes of unpredictability: combat and boredom. Real-time coverage of the routine produces scenes of rare and wonderful economy, such as one in which a soldier works to adjust the position of a .50 caliber machine gun. He's just climbed onto the ledge of a sandbag bunker's firing hole when a voice sloshes through his walkie-talkie. The otherwise unintelligible words end in a drowsy question—*Howzafaah?*—and the soldier frees up a hand to answer.

"How's the what?"

"The fam," [the voice responds with zero inflection.]

"The family? They're pretty good . . ." [The soldier has just returned from leave.] "It was a good time, man. I got to hang out at the ranch and everything like that . . ." [He squats, balancing on the ledge.]

"Your family owns a ranch?"

"Of course," [says the soldier, clipping his answer so he can continue to maneuver his body around the gun.]

"Like cows and pigs and chickens and horses ranch?" [his buddy asks].

"No." [The soldier puts the walkie-talkie down and leans out toward what looks like a precipitous drop.]

"Like what kind of ranch then?" [Now the soldier is struggling to adjust the tripod underneath the gun. He mutters "fuck" and grabs the walkie-talkie.]

"It's like a ranch just with like land, you know, with gates and stuff and trucks and whatnot. Some guns, some wildlife, you know, that you shoot at."

"Okay, so just a whole bunch of land that they kill stuff on?" [We appreciate the absurdity and abundance of America.]

"Yeah," [the soldier says.] "Kind of like this."

"Yeaah," [the friend says, drawing the word out into a kind of little-kid whine.] "But we're not hunting animals, we're hunting people." [The distinction sounds like an effort at accuracy, not irony.]

"Hearts and minds," [the soldier says.]

"Yeah," [the friend says.] "We'll take their hearts and we'll take their minds."

No soundtrack accompanies the film's close-up moments. No music, cutaway edits, or other cues help us to recover as a soldier sobs, having just learned, in the middle of a firefight, that his friend Sergeant Rougle is dead. In another scene, we can't rationalize the catastrophic operation that kills innocent children, and we can't help but sympathize, afterwards, with the stupefaction—likely the hatred—of the villager who watches helplessly as a beast of an American helicopter lands on the roof of the bombed-out house—his own?—to disgorge a colonel who, by way of apology, offers a lecture about holding out for jobs instead of taking money from the Taliban. For all the bravado and genuine courage on display in *Restrepo*, fear is conspicuous, too. We watch American soldiers during a prelude to a firefight, as they register that they are prey. When they respond to enemy fire, their movements are unlike the Hollywood version of battle, in which warriors rush deliberately forward. Here, momentum is sometimes canceled by confusion, and we see split-seconds of terrified hesitation. Later, when members of Second Platoon reflect on their experience in the Korengal, fear and grief manifest in their eyes as something not yet metabolized. The color of their irises is plain and their pores practically visible as they speak, prompted—but just barely—by an unseen interlocutor. Talking about Rougle's death, Sergeant Hajar says, "I still obviously haven't figured out how to deal with it inside. The only hope I have right now is that eventually I'll be able to process it differently. I'm never going to forget it. I'm never going to even let go of it. I don't want to not have that as a memory." On its face, *Restrepo* is utterly apolitical. It doesn't address the war's causes, or its moral or political implications. As with much of the work that exhibits the innovations of the New Journalisms, the film is essentially a series of vignettes without an agenda or a conventional storyline. But our connection to the men of OP Restrepo, while seemingly direct, is mediated by the filmmakers, whose access and approach afford an immediate, intimate level of witnessing.

* * *

This strain of documentary has a literary counterpart, and war stories—nth-degree examples of "ordinary people in extreme circumstances"—are some of the most successful experiments with a hybrid form that pools the ambition of the novel, the methods of reportage and ethnography, the explicitly personal slant of memoir, the flexibility of the essay, and the graphic power of film to illuminate intersecting narrative arcs and those which approach each other asymptotically. In his own book, *War*, Junger is frank about the impossibility of journalistic distance in certain situations: "You can't write objectively about people who are shooting at you," he says (26). But you can't write objectively about people who are protecting you either, and Junger's life is, to a great extent, in the hands of the soldiers he's covering. He's worked in Afghanistan before, but "this time I'm not interested in the Afghans. I'm interested in the Americans" (Junger 25). The acknowledgement borders on jingoism, but given the isolation and acute danger of the Korengal, Junger can be forgiven for assuming some of the bias of the men he purports to document. He's living, more or less, with the same level of privation and risk. Early in *War*, a soldier admits that "there's nothing like [combat], nothing in the world" (Junger 33). Junger tells us that "for a nineteen-year-old at the working end of a .50 cal during a firefight that everyone comes out of okay, war is life multiplied by some number that no one has ever heard of" (144). His arm's length shrinks as the book proceeds: "The .50 is badass. It doesn't have to hit you and it can still tear you open. It's just a sexy weapon" (Junger 151). Beginning a three-page rumination on the intoxicating effects of firepower, Junger says, "The offers of weapons started on my first trip" (212). He congratulates himself for abstaining, but eventually he and Hetherington half-relent, allowing themselves a tutorial on how to "load and shoot every weapon at the outpost" (Junger 213). "What you *really* wanted to do was use them somehow, but that was so wildly forbidden that it took you a while to even admit you'd had the thought" (Junger 214). In *War*, "you" often feels like it means "me" or "I."

Especially since Vietnam, ambivalence toward violence has been a common theme in firsthand war stories. "The truths are

contradictory,” writes Tim O’Brien in *The Things They Carried*. “It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can’t help but gape at the awful majesty of combat” (O’Brien 87). O’Brien’s formulation echoes something that was generally left unsaid until Bill Broyles, Jr.’s essay, “Why Men Love War,” which appeared as a “Documentary” feature in *Esquire* in 1984. Having served as a marine in Vietnam, Broyles considers the “utopian” dimensions of war. He analyzes the guiltiest of pleasures—“the thrill of killing”—and identifies the love of war as a male propensity that “stems from the union, deep in the core of our being, between sex and destruction, beauty and horror, love and death” (Broyles 61). Broyles posits combat as a kind of male analogue to childbirth—a way for men to “touch the mythic domains in our soul” (61). These days, though, the link to gender seems tenuous; women in combat report being similarly impressed with the camaraderie born of singular purpose (stay alive, kill the enemy), the transcendence glimpsed through physical endurance, and the delights of artillery.

Writing about the war in Iraq a quarter-century later, journalist David Finkel encounters the same sentiments in young men from dysfunctional, often violent families who make up a significant demographic of the warrior population. In his 2013 book *Thank You for Your Service*, a soldier named Adam Schumann returns from Iraq with severe PTSD and wistfully recalls his first two deployments—“a front seat to the greatest movie I’ve ever seen, the sexiest feeling there is” (Finkel, *Thank You* 5). Channeling Adam, Finkel articulates the difficulty of maintaining the kind of intensity that obviates existential angst:

It is such a lonely life, this life afterward. During the war, it wasn’t that way . . . Over time the war came to mean less and less until it meant nothing at all, and meanwhile the other soldiers meant more and more until they came to mean everything. . . . To be a soldier in combat was to fall in love constantly (Finkel, *Thank You* 86).

Adam himself says simply, “I miss it. Holding a gun and being with a group of guys. Camaraderie” (Finkel, *Thank You* 139). Similarly,

O’Brien experiences a gnawing malaise when he’s transferred to a “cushy duty” after being shot in Vietnam. He misses the danger of the bush and the potency of friendships forged in terror:

There were times when I missed the adventure, even the danger, of the real war out in the boonies. It’s a hard thing to explain to somebody who hasn’t felt it, but the presence of death and danger has a way of bringing you fully awake. It makes you see things vivid. When you’re afraid, really afraid, you see things you never saw before, you pay attention to the world. You make close friends. You become part of a tribe and you share the same blood—you give it together, you take it together. (O’Brien 219–220)

O’Brien connects the lure of combat not to sex, but to fear and vulnerability, and to the profound kinds of loyalty and love they inspire. In writing about the seductiveness of violence in war, O’Brien, Finkel, Broyles, and Junger all hint at something missing in the everyday. The vitality of war, it seems, recommends more opportunities for *communion*—with people, with the elements, with tools. The list of reasons that men love war is not a call for violence, but for intimacy, passion, poetry, craftsmanship—concerns that may explain some writers’ attraction to danger and violent subject matter, and why traumatic experience often compels people to write.

* * *

Finkel’s *Thank You for Your Service* is an account of the psychological fallout of the Iraq War. Several veterans’ stories are braided into the central throughline of Adam Schumann’s “after-war” (11)—his battle with the demons of three deployments—and the struggles play out against the backdrop of a military culture ill-equipped to handle the vagaries of emotional trauma. The book’s prologue splices Schumann’s short journal entries, in italics, into Finkel’s summary (also italicized) of the soldier’s decline. Having effectively merged Schumann’s voice with his own (and he’s the better writer, after all), Finkel is now authorized to speak for him. Throughout the book, Finkel performs empathy by incorporating his subjects. He preserves their voices (their urgency, their idiomatic quirks, their

imperfect grammar) by framing their dialogue with speech and thoughts transposed to a third-person, mostly present tense. As an author, Finkel is both everywhere and absent on every page.

By the penultimate chapter of *Thank You for Your Service*, we're emotionally exhausted by the harrowing stories and relieved when a chef and an aide sit down to work out the menu for an official dinner to be hosted by General Peter Chiarelli. The dinner's theme is "suicide prevention," and the menu-writing scene, which spans five pages (239–243), is a wry look at the business of making meaning. There will be a soup with butternut squash, parsnips and mushrooms.

"You could call it an autumn vegetable bisque trio," the chef says.

"Seasonal?" asks the aide, noting it's not quite autumn yet.

"You could do seasonal," the chef says. "That would be safer."

"Seasonal vegetable," types the aide, and pauses. "What'd you say? Trio?"

"Yeah. Trio," says the chef. "But you might put it at the front."

"Tri? Tri-seasonal?"

"You could use three."

"Tri-Seasonal Vegetable Bisque," types the aide. "Now we're in the main. What's it going to be?"

"Lamb," says the chef.

"What are we going to call it?" asks the aide.

"Lamb," says the chef.

[...]

"S'mores," the chef says, about dessert.

"We gotta make it sound good," the aide says.

"We'll use the new gelato machine and make a chocolate gelato, a meringue for the marshmallow, a graham cracker, and give it a crazy name."

"Newfangled?"

"Uh..."

"The Chiarelli s'mores? S'mores . . . s'mores . . . Suicidal s'mores?"

"No . . . How about reconstructed?" the chef says.

"Reconstructed s'mores. That's fun," the aide says. He types it in. He changes Reconstructed to Deconstructed . . . "That's a pretty good menu." (Finkel, *Thank You* 241–243)

The dinner is ultimately cancelled, the effort to perfect the presentation wasted. But the menu-writing scene underscores the sensitivity of writing itself, where meaning is shaded by the smallest nuances of vocabulary and syntax—Didion's self-evident "grammar." The s'mores are clever because a deconstructed s'more wouldn't be a trio of ingredients but an exercise (ridiculous and altogether less "fun") of separating the idea of the s'more from its constitutive ideology. The invocation of the post-structuralist premise—the inevitable disconnect between representation and reality—reminds us that so much language is fatuous and that journalism itself, with its ideal of transparency, may be folly. We're reminded, too, that Finkel is very good at what he does.

In its own way, the military is compulsive about language and certainly about documenting and witnessing. In *Thank You for Your Service*, Finkel describes a Warrior Screening Matrix that assesses suicide risk and recommends or denies soldiers admission to a Warrior Transition Battalion Complex, or WTB (48). Having made it to the WTB, Tausolo Aieti must collect signatures from thirty-

nine of its offices (Finkel, *Thank You* 143), and sign a Contract for Safety promising not to kill himself (Finkel, *Thank You* 145). When Jessie Robinson commits suicide, his wife's counselor presents her with a "Feeling Word List" of three-hundred-forty-seven choices. A suspected suicide generates a "Commander's Suspected Suicide Event Report, also known as a 37-Liner" (Finkel, *Thank You* 155). Autopsy reports and VA medical records record endless clinical details. In *The Good Soldiers*, the Family Contingency Workbook asks deploying soldiers what kind of music they want at their funerals (Finkel, *Good Soldiers* 12). Overseas, "a book called *Counterinsurgency FM 3-24* [contains] 282 pages of lessons" (Finkel, *Good Soldiers* 27-29), and every military operation is illustrated by an "event storyboard . . . that will forever make the event seem different from anything ever before it" (Finkel, *Good Soldiers* 283-284). "Official death narratives," written with varying degrees of literacy—often by soldiers who have watched their friends die—all end with the same excruciating understatement: "Nothing follows" (Finkel, *Good Soldiers* 73). Both of Finkel's books feature moving remembrances composed by non-writers: "a eulogy so overflowing with hurt it was like listening to the exact moment of someone being transformed by heartbreak" (*Good Soldiers*, 122); an obituary for a twenty-one year-old soldier who kills himself: "a Boy Scout, a member of his church's Celebrate Life Science Quiz team [who] loved his dog 'Sarah'" (*Thank You*, 205).

Thank You for Your Service is a kind of mass-portrait of grief and loneliness. "The truth of the after-war is that you're on your own" (Finkel, *Thank You* 148). People write for "therapy," for connection. Banalities, grievances, and memories accumulate in journals. Hurt is telegraphed in the mean shorthand of the text message: "Im not doing this. U don't wanna b mature and pick your phone up then im done" (Finkel, *Thank You* 190). There are references to writing not just as narrative, but as symbol, object, talisman: Adam's "Saskia" tattoo, which spells out his wife's name "in letters constructed of stick figures in various poses of having sex" (Finkel, *Thank You* 12). The words "Always Kiss Me Goodnight" stenciled by Saskia on their bedroom wall (Finkel, *Thank You* 13). Lists, lost and found like artifacts: Adam's soldier-grandfather's "Places I Have Been"

list (Finkel, *Thank You* 17), widow Amanda Doster's "Perfect Man" list—"one of those exercises in hope" (Finkel, *Thank You* 121). Number five says that her perfect man is "understanding of my undying love for James and isn't threatened" (Finkel, *Thank You* 121). Amanda's rituals of grief often take the shape of itemized lists, or litanies. The moving foreman estimates her household contents at "fifteen thousand pounds . . . maybe sixteen thousand" (Finkel, *Thank You* 30). Amanda will carry James' ashes herself.

Into his tool room now. The rider mower will go to the new house, she tells the movers. The four hammers. The three saws. The old boom box up on that shelf. The two chainsaws. The workbenches. The steel wool. The rusty nails. All of it, actually, every bit of it, even an old peanut butter jar filled with sawdust.

On to the bookshelves. Yes to the brochure titled "101 Reasons to Own a Chainsaw," yes to *The Complete Book of Composting*, yes to *Military Widow: A Survival Guide*, yes to *Single Parenting That Works*, yes to the rest . . .

Yes to the mops. No to the firewood. No to the jacket that James hung on a hook when he came in from splitting the firewood . . . She'll move the jacket, and not that they're asking, but she'll move him. (Finkel, *Thank You* 31-32)

These are the things she carried. It's a peculiar irony that, especially in the fog of grief, *stuff* can weigh heavily, while words often ring hollow. In *Thank You for Your Service*, well-intentioned words often come across as empty, or worse. The title of Finkel's book is itself a phrase that sounds, to many, careless or callous, or both. A flyer blithely advertises a retreat for soldiers suffering from PTSD: "Healing Heroes, Healing Families!" (Finkel, *Thank You* 125). Signs say "We Support the Troops" (Finkel, *Thank You* 127), and bumper stickers exhort drivers to "Pray For Our Troops" (Finkel, *Thank You* 252). Stuck behind one, Saskia's road rage flares.

Finkel's first book, *The Good Soldiers*, tracks the Second Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment as it moves into Baghdad for the 2007 "surge." Each chapter opens with an anodyne sound bite from

President Bush, and proceeds to a “true” story—e.g., one that “if truly told, makes the stomach believe” (O’Brien 84). Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Kauzlarich, who commands the 2-16, is diligent about bridging linguistic and cultural divides. Kauzlarich learns to say “dear friend” and “what’s up” and “thank you for asking” and “I am one sexy bitch” in Arabic, which makes people laugh. He learns to say “It’s all bullshit” and “stupid monkey.” “*Allah ye sheelack*, he found himself saying. I hope you die” (Finkel, *Good Soldiers* 100). Kauzlarich endears himself to the Iraqi Colonel Qasim, who throws him a birthday party amid the poverty, corruption, and chaos of war-torn Baghdad. “Most astonishing . . . more so than even the pizza, was the cake. It was three chocolate tiers that were covered in icing shaped into swirls and flowers. Each tier had candles, and sparklers, too, and propped on the very top was a big cardboard heart with writing on it. ‘HAPPY Birthday KoLoNiL K!’ it read” (Finkel, *Good Soldiers* 189). Hearts and minds, and the mysteries of spelling.

Finkel’s flood of “documents”—wayward translations, empty slogans, bureaucratic jargon, sanitized accounts of violence and death—argues, against striking examples of heartfelt expression and his own deft prose, for the inadequacies of language in representing violence. To read Finkel’s work is to encounter both the failure of words in the face of intense experience and the eloquence of ordinary people as they try to articulate and ease their pain.

* * *

Journalism can function as a conductor of empathy. Dexter Filkins’ 2008 book, *The Forever War*, opens with an afternoon’s “entertainment” in Kabul—a public Taliban amputation and execution. Like Finkel and Junger, Filkins embeds with military units and covers American soldiers, but he also engages deeply with the people and cultures of Afghanistan and Iraq. He recalls his introduction to Kabul:

I drove in from the east. I rode in a little taxi on a road mostly erased, moving slowly across the craters as the Big Dipper rose over the

tops of the mountains that encircled the capital on its high plateau . . . I passed checkpoints manned by men who searched for music. I stopped halfway and drank cherry juice from Iran and watched the river run through the walls of the Kabul gorge. There was very little electricity then, so I couldn’t see much of the city coming in, neither the people nor the landscape nor the ruined architecture, nothing much but the twinkling stars. (Filkins, *Forever War* 18–19)

Filkins’ voice is lyrical and his sensibility is visual, cinematic. His mind’s eye beholds the imagined as well as the observed, and his description of entering a war-ravaged city points to the existence of beauty everywhere—in nature and cities, in the cosmos and society. *The Forever War* catalogs the best and worst of human nature; Filkins observes the capacity for generosity and violence, kindness and misery, humor and grief—and the frequency with which the first of each pair arises in the context of the second:

In my many trips to Afghanistan I grew to adore the place, for its beauty and its perversions, for the generosity of its people in the face of madness. The brutality one could witness in the course of a working day was often astonishing, the casualness of it more so; and the way that brutality had seeped into every corner of human life was a thing to behold. And yet somewhere, deep down, a place in the heart stayed tender.

I sat in a mud-brick hut near Bamiyan . . . and a man and his family pressed upon me, their overfed American guest, their final disk of bread. (Filkins, *Forever War* 24)

Filkins’ appreciation for cultures at war with his own makes him sound less “heroic” than Finkel or Junger. He’s curious about Americans and “foreigners,” about the powerful and the marginal, about “good guys” and enemies, about the Taliban. “One of them would be sitting across from you in a restaurant, maybe picking at a kebab, looking at you from across the centuries” (Filkins, *Forever War* 25). Filkins is a journalist with an ethnographer’s receptivity. He taps the vein of memoir, too, and is conscious of the tensions between these approaches. Like his subjects, he’s vulnerable to the

effects of violence and war. Back home, the US has become, for him, an alien place where “people were serious about the fillings in their sandwiches, about the winner of last night’s ballgame I got back to the world, and the weddings and the picnics were the same as everything had been in Iraq, silent and slow and heavy and dead Your days may die but your dreams explode I couldn’t have a conversation with anyone who hadn’t been [to Iraq] about anything at all” (Filkins, *Forever War* 339–340).

In 2004, escorted by marines with whom they were embedded, Filkins accompanies his colleague, the photojournalist Ashley Gilbertson, to a recently shelled mosque in Falluja. Gilbertson needs a photo of a dead insurgent for the *Times* and a twenty-two-year-old marine, Billy Miller, is killed when he insists on leading the way as the group ascends the crumbling, narrow stairs of the mosque’s minaret to where the body lies.

Miller was on his back; he’d come out head first. His face was opened in a large V, split like meat, fish maybe, with the two sides jiggling.

“Please tell me he’s not dead,” Ash said. “Please tell me.”

“He’s dead,” I said.

I felt it then. Darting. Out of reach. You go into these places and they are overrated, they are not nearly as dangerous as people say. Keep your head, keep the gunfire in front of you. You get close and come out unscathed every time, your face as youthful and as untroubled as before. The life of the reporter: always someone else’s pain. (Filkins, *Forever War* 210)

Now the pain is Filkins’, too. The last line reflects the loss of a marine and an illusion—one that we sense has been under stress for a while. Filkins critiques the ideal of the journalist who is stoic in his detachment—and, implicitly, writers (including himself) who are curiously brave in spite of self-effacing constitutions. Do they aspire to the heroism they document? Does he? Is there a cost to that “courage”?

Filkins’ “Atonement” appeared in *The New Yorker* in 2012. The piece details Lu Lobello’s efforts to locate a woman whose father and two brothers Lobello’s unit killed, along with other innocent civilians, in Baghdad in 2003. Nora Kachadoorian was gravely injured when the marines of Fox Company shot at her family’s blue Mercedes, but she survived. While still in Iraq, Filkins talked to Nora’s mother, Margaret, to members of Fox Company (though not Lobello), and to others. “Atonement” opens in San Diego. It’s eight years later, and Lobello is awake on a dark night of the soul. He records a video message for Nora, whom he’s finally identified and connected with on Facebook. She lives in Glendale, California, now, not far away, with her mother and husband, whom she met while recovering from the attack. They immigrated to the US after three years as refugees in Damascus. “I need to talk to you, if you let me,” Lobello says. “I have so much to say to you. I have so much to say” (Filkins, “Atonement” 94).

Although they’ve never met, Lobello solicits Filkins’ help in facilitating a face-to-face meeting with Nora. Together, they drive to the Kachadoorians’ and “Lobello did not quite say it, but . . . I felt that what he was really looking for was absolution” (Filkins, “Atonement” 99). In light of Filkins’ own experience in Iraq—and especially Billy Miller’s death—confession and forgiveness would seem to weigh heavily and personally. Filkins and Lobello arrive at the Kachadoorians’ and sit in the living room, near a “framed photograph of the dead Kachadoorian men” (100). Lobello cries. He apologizes, and the Kachadoorians forgive him. He and Assad, Nora’s husband, go outside to smoke a cigarette. The poignancy of the rapprochement is underscored by the presence of Nora’s and Assad’s little boys, Joseph and Sam, who are playing nearby. Their presence confirms that the cycle of violence has been arrested; the next generation may inherit hurt, but not hatred, and the story they learn will contain friendship.

“Atonement” is a story that “happens to help someone,” as Pam Colloff put it. Both Lobello and the Kachadoorians return to the scene of the crime, as it were, and find a measure of healing in the confrontation. Perhaps Filkins, the writer, does, too. While

“Atonement” demonstrates the therapeutic value of dialogue, *The Forever War* contains repeated references to “talking” as the essence of democracy, about which Iraqi citizens are variously hopeful and cynical. Asked for “the best thing about Saddam being gone,” a young doctor, now working in a hospital without electricity, replies, “only the free talking” (Filkins, *Forever War* 138–139). A Shiite woman comes out to vote, and is ironically, though not unreasonably, furious about the American occupation: “Democracy . . . it is just talking,” she tells Filkins (*Forever War* 244), who acknowledges, amid an unchecked wave of brutal sectarian murders, that the new Iraqi constitution is “all about words . . . that empowered nobody, restrained no one” (*Forever War* 321). But if “free talking” doesn’t provide security or resources, there seems to be consensus, in Filkins’ book, that it enables imagination—a way to negotiate the gulf between war and normalcy, despair and hope. Filkins’ work—like O’Brien’s, Finkel’s and Junger’s—describes that passage by particularizing the roots and ramifications of violence. Despite the omission of politics per se, this seems like a deeply political project insofar as it agitates and advocates, not for policy, but for more voices and stories—for self-help, for democracy, for literature.

Writing can effect reconciliation—psychic and actual. We write to witness, to remember, to memorialize. To accuse and to avenge. To apologize, to atone, to resolve. To imagine, to create, to progress. Writing is utilitarian. Sometimes, we write to survive. And “sometimes,” says Tim O’Brien, “stories can save us” (255). Filkins, Finkel, and Junger impose narrative structure on fundamentally chaotic experience. They mold horror into beauty, as it were, and their texts occasion recognition, empathy, identification. As a reader, the experience is exquisite. Yet this kind of storytelling is ethically fraught. Tom Druecker’s joke (*You don’t know, you weren’t there!*) reminds us that the third-person narrator of stories like these treads on delicate ground. The stereotype of the Vietnam vet, defensively proprietary of his own experience, reminds us additionally that speaking for someone else—the very act of representation—is audacious. Perhaps, though, it’s also genuinely courageous.

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