



Studi e Ricerche

Studies in American Literature and Culture



“One Step Beyond the Hero”

*Disrupting War and Violence
in American Literature and Culture
Collected Essays*

Giorgio Mariani



University Press



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ EDITRICE

Collana Studi e Ricerche 165

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La pubblicazione è stata realizzata con il contributo dell'Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza" - Dipartimento di Studi Europei Americani e Interculturali, Fondi Progetto Grande di Ateneo 2021 dal titolo "Reloaded: Redrawing Linguistic, Literary and Cultural Boundaries, 1922-2022", titolare del progetto prof.ssa Iolanda Plescia.

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Sapienza Università Editrice

Piazzale Aldo Moro 5 – 00185 Roma

www.editricesapienza.it

editrice.sapienza@uniroma1.it

Iscrizione Registro Operatori Comunicazione n. 11420

Registry of Communication Workers registration n. 11420

ISBN 978-88-9377-372-0

DOI 10.13133/9788893773720

Pubblicato nel mese di marzo 2025 | *Published in March 2025*



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Impaginazione a cura di | *Layout by:* Giorgio Mariani

In copertina | *Cover image:* Illustrazione di Fabio Simonelli

*For Masturah,
always and forever*

The birds they sang
At the break of day
Start again
I heard them say
Don't dwell on what has passed away
Or what is yet to be

Ah, the wars they will be fought again
The holy dove, she will be caught again
Bought and sold, and bought again
The dove is never free

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in

LEONARD COHEN, *Anthem*

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Preface and acknowledgements

The essays collected in this volume were written over the span of twenty-five or so years. Some were published while I was working on my book, *Waging War on War. Peacefighting in American Literature* (University of Illinois Press, 2015); others after the book came out. Regardless of the date of their first appearance, all the pieces gathered here bear a connection to the ideas I tried to develop in *Waging War*. These essays, that is, are not only concerned with the issue of how violence and war are represented, but also with the way the texts (or films) I explore shed (more or less successfully) a critical light on the use of force. This volume, therefore, offers—among other things—further examples of the paradoxical notion that to wage war on war and violence one is always at risk of falling into the very rhetoric one wishes to oppose. Since this paradox, which provided the title of my book, is rehearsed in some detail in the first two essays of this volume, and resurfaces in several other pieces, I will not belabor the concept here.

The first essay explains why I chose the Emerson quotation (“One step beyond the hero”) for the title of this volume. What I call half-jokingly Emerson’s “superheroism” is meant to provide a critical perspective on the matter of war and violence—a critical perspective that cannot altogether transcend them but can, hopefully, disrupt the rhetoric of war and violence. I take the verb “disrupt” from Fredric Jameson’s discussion (in his book *Archaeologies of the Future*, Verso, 2005) of Jürgen Habermas’ reading of Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on History.” There Jameson notes that Habermas sees Benjamin’s critique of progress as being also a way to preserve “the future as a source of disruption.” This disruptive potential is largely, in Jameson’s view, what “the Desire called Utopia” (his book’s subtitle) is all about. Even though my essays repeatedly show how

complicated are our efforts to imagine (let alone realize) a world free of violence, brutality, and coercion, my goal is not to undermine the Utopian desire for a non-violent future. To the contrary, by calling attention to how writers and filmmakers deal with both violence and war, I wish to promote a critical scrutiny of culture that may help achieve a peace that is synonymous with justice and not the mere absence of war. I try to read literature and film, that is, by safeguarding the possibility of a future peace as a source of disruption, while all along keeping in mind that our world is one of endless wars, massive arms build-ups, and concerted efforts by the powers that be to stifle any aspiration for peace and justice by promoting the notion that only violence can shield us from violence.

Many of the essays gathered here were written in response to a variety of invitations and occasions, and they all focus on some of the main research interests of my academic career: US war literature and war cinema; the Western; contemporary American Indian literature; political and philosophical discussions of war and peace, and of violence and non-violence. While I made small changes (especially in the two essays that originally appeared in Italian) and corrected a few mistakes, the texts are only minimally different from the ones that were originally printed in the journals and edited collections I credit below. Only the essay on Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* and Terrence Malik's *The Thin Red Line* is unpublished, except for a short section on Spielberg's movie. The choice to leave the essays substantially unchanged, inevitably makes for some repetition. This, however, allows each essay to stand on its own—or so I hope.

I would not have been able to write a single line of this book without the support and love of my wife, Masturah Alatas, who has unconditionally and generously sustained my intellectual endeavors for nearly four decades now. She read and edited many of the texts, suggesting much-needed corrections and providing insights, though she is in no way responsible for whatever flaws may still be there. As always, my greatest debt is to her. I am also grateful to our sons Giordano and Dario Iscandar for their love and care. They have helped me in more ways than they can probably imagine.

I am also thankful to my old-time friend Fabio Simonelli for contributing the drawing for the book cover, where he provides an interesting

graphic reading of my title, with a boot taking “a step beyond the hero” by trampling on and breaking a gun, midway between medals, on the one side, and a peace flag, on the other.

Many friends and colleagues have inspired and facilitated in manifold ways my work over the years. Even though I know my list will be incomplete, I wish to express my gratitude to John Bryant, Paola Cabibbo, Roberto Cagliero, Bruno Cartosio, Jane Desmond, Virginia Dominguez, Walter Gruenzweig, Gordon Hutner, Donatella Izzo, Paweł Jędrzejko, Djelal Kadir, Cristina Mattiello, Franco Moretti, Donald Pease, Alessandro Portelli, Ulfried Reichardt, Stefano Rosso, Anna Scannavini, François Specq.

Finally, even in our digital age, nothing of substance can be written without good libraries. Many thanks for their invaluable help to the staff of the Biblioteca di Lingue e Letterature Straniere of the Università Sapienza; the Alexander Library of Rutgers University (New Brunswick); the Library of the University of Illinois at Urbana – Champaign; the Cambridge University Library.

I am grateful for permission to reprint, or reprint in translation, the following, previously published materials: “Emerson’s Superhero,” *RIAS—The Review of International American Studies* 13, No. 1 (2020); “Are Stephen Crane and Ambrose Bierce the Inventors of the American ‘Anti-War’ Story?,” *Iperstoria* 13 (2019); “Reimmaginare il passato: Il mito della frontiera, la violenza e il cinema western revisionista (1882-1993),” in *Un fascino osceno. Guerra e violenza nella letteratura e nel cinema*, ed. Stefano Rosso (Verona: ombre corte, 2006); “Negotiating Violence and Identity in Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer*,” *Forum for Inter-American Research* 4, No. 2 (2011); “Fabulations of the Exception: Law, Justice, and Violence in Louise Erdrich’s *The Round House*,” in *Recognitions. Crossing Territories across Time, Space, and Textuality in the US and Beyond*, eds. Enrico Botta et al. (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2024); “Due Anishinaabe nella Grande Guerra: storia, arte e occasioni mancate in *Blue Ravens* di Gerald Vizenor,” in *Indiani d’America, incontri transatlantici*, ed. Fedora Giordano (Torino: Accademia University Press, 2018); “The Human Smoke Controversy, and Beyond: Remembering the Unpopular Pacifism of World War II,” in *Past (Im)Perfect Continous. Trans-Cultural Articulations of the Postmemory of WWII*, ed. Alice Balestrino (Roma: Sapienza Università Editrice, 2021); “Against

Embedded Literature: Brian Turner's Iraq War Poetry," *Iperstoria* 16 (2020); "War, Poetry, and the Noir: Elliott Colla's Baghdad Central," *Bad Cities. Literature and Urban Violence*, ed. Ugo Rubeo (Mimesis International, 2023); "Mission of Mercy/Mission of Murder": Saving Private Ryan e la cultura dei Baby Bombers," *Ácoma. Rivista internazionale di Studi Nordamericani* 18 (2000): "Peace, War, and Critique," *RIAS—The Review of International American Studies* 16, No. 2 (2023).

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1. Emerson's Superhero

Of bondage and the intellect

When, in his hyper-canonical “The American Scholar,” Ralph Waldo Emerson asked men (and perhaps women, too) to achieve the condition of “Man Thinking” and resist becoming “the parrots of other men’s thinking,” going on to lament that Americans had for too long listened to “the courtly muses of Europe,” he was performing an early post-colonial critique of what we may well call the American captive mind.¹ Though to my knowledge Emerson never used the phrase anywhere in his work, one could easily argue that the danger of seeing one’s own mind captivated by some force external to the self, was his life-long, obsessive preoccupation. As he put it in the same lecture, “I had better never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system. The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul” (57). Colonialism, for Emerson, was not only that emanating from European models, which made the “spirit of the American freeman [...] timid, imitative, tame” (70). When Emerson lamented that writers had “Shakspearized [sic]” for two centuries, he was referring not so much to American writers imitating British models, but to “the English dramatic poets” themselves, who were after all only a symptom of a more general problem

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Poems* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), pp. 54, 70. Further references are cited parenthetically. An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a plenary talk at the conference “Captive Minds: Norms, Normativities and the Forms of Tragic Protest in Literature and Cultural Practice.” September 20-23, 2018, Szczirk, Poland. I am grateful to the organizers, and especially to Paweł Jędrzejko and Małgorzata Poks, for the invitation to participate.

affecting people and culture everywhere. "The literature of every nation bear me witness" (58). For Emerson there is a force we may call subliminal colonialism, which is operative not only within one's own culture, but even within one's own self, which can captivate our mind, enslaving it to norms and rules that do not emanate from one's own innermost—or, as Emerson put it in "Self-Reliance," "aboriginal"—self. To quote again from "The American Scholar," "Genius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over influence" (58).

Even based on such a cursory presentation of Emerson's preoccupation with the self's integrity, it would be possible to draw some connections with Czesław Miłosz's notion of the captive mind, though neither Emerson nor Thoreau nor any other Transcendentalist are anywhere mentioned in Miłosz's book.² Notwithstanding the widely different socio-historical contexts their respective work grew out of, both Emerson and Miłosz were troubled by what seems to be a nearly instinctual habit on the part of most human beings to conform to the ruling ideas and concepts of a given historical epoch. Though Emerson lived in what is commonly identified as one of the world's earliest modern democracies, he was aware that the mind could easily become captive also in what was, to a certain extent, a free society. Emerson knew of course that the pre-Civil War United States could not be really called a free country as long as slavery was tolerated, and in a famous (to some infamous) journal entry of 1852, he wrote of having woken up at night "& bemoaned myself, because I had not thrown myself into this deplorable question of Slavery, which seems to want nothing so much as a few assured voices," adding however that this would mean "my desertion of my post, which has none to guard it but me. I have quite other slaves to free than those negroes, to wit, imprisoned spirits, imprisoned thoughts, far back in the brain of man, -- far retired in the heaven of invention, and which, important to the republic of Man, have no watchman, or lover, or defender, but I."³ According to James Read, "This passage reveals, not indifference toward slavery, but instead a fierce battle between two duties, both of which Emerson recognizes as legitimate, and which come into conflict because the time demands of fulfilling each duty are

² See Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, tr. Jane Zielonko (New York: Knopf, 1953).

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson in His Journals*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 437.

enormous.”⁴ Whether we agree with Read's defense of Emerson or not, what is worth noting here is that, instead of contrasting his own condition as a free subject to actual physical and political slavery, Emerson worried about the “imprisoned spirits, imprisoned thoughts” which only with an utmost and constant psychological exertion he could hope to liberate. His own mind, if not properly guarded and cultivated, could become captive too, and he too could lapse from the status of Man Thinking to that of the slavish bookworm.

Minds, then, can become captive under totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, where, due to sheer fear or with the scope of securing some personal advantage, individuals pretend to embrace the ideologies of the ruling party. However, from an Emersonian viewpoint, one wonders whether these individuals could be called captives. When one's conformism is merely formal and not substantial, the individual mind would appear to preserve a degree of freedom and even though Emerson would not hesitate to call cowards the people afraid of speaking their minds, he seems far more preoccupied by those who cannot even begin to think because they blindly accept and introject whatever norms and ideas they receive from traditions, books, political leaders, the public opinion. So, before looking more closely at what can be made of Emerson's thinking when it is applied to the context of political protest, I would like to dwell for a while longer on another influential use of the concept of the “captive mind” that is perhaps less familiar to Western scholars, but which I believe is important to mention in this context because it once again raises the issue of the extent to which a mind may remain captive under by and large democratic conditions.

In two articles appearing in the early 1970's in *The International Social Science Journal*, the Malaysian sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas analyzed at length what he described as the problems created by “the captive mind” to the development of what nowadays we refer to as post-colonial countries.⁵ In his essays, Professor Alatas—whose work became more widely known in the West after Edward Said discussed it in a key

⁴ James H. Read, “The Limits of Self-Reliance: Emerson, Slavery, and Abolition,” in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. A. M. Levine and D. S. Malachuk (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), p. 161.

⁵ Syed Hussein Alatas, “The captive mind in development studies,” *International Social Science Journal* XXIV, No. 1, (1972), pp. 9-25; “The captive mind and creative development,” *International Social Science Journal* XXVI, No. 4, (1974), pp. 691-700.

chapter of his own *Culture and Imperialism*—lamented that an uncritical acceptance of the former colonial powers' ways of seeing, studying, and conceptualizing the world, was hindering the "creative development" of many Asian societies, both culturally and politically.⁶ Alatas provides a long list of the defining traits of the "captive mind." I will quote only three entries: "[1] A captive mind is the product of higher institutions of learning, either at home or abroad, whose way of thinking is dominated by Western thought in an imitative and un-critical manner. [2] A captive mind is uncreative and incapable of raising original problems. [...]. [3] It is unconscious of its own captivity and the conditioning factors making it what it is."⁷ All this sounds pretty much Emersonian to me, notwithstanding the fact that Alatas never refers to American transcendentalism in his articles. While the Emerson connection has been never explored, scholars and writers have speculated about the extent to which Alatas may have been inspired by Miłosz's widely known book. According to Alatas' biographer, Masturah Alatas, Miłosz's and S.H. Alatas' captive minds are quite different. The minds of people captivated by the totalitarian Communist regimes of which Miłosz spoke, "were minds at risk if they allowed themselves to remain captive." But at least some of these minds "were still, nevertheless, great minds," she writes in her book, *The Life in the Writing*. For Professor Alatas, instead, "a captive mind is not a great mind yet because it cannot think creatively and originally, and is held captive by western paradigms of thinking."⁸ A similar point is made in an essay by Clive Kessler: "The Stalinist apologist of whom Miłosz wrote knew his own situation but was clever enough, and too clever by half, to suppress his knowledge of it, while for Alatas the immobilized postcolonial citizen was blocked culturally and intellectually, only in part by his own consent, from knowing his own situation."⁹ On the other hand, when emphasis is placed on the captive mind's unawareness of its own captivity, the resemblance with Emerson is striking. Alatas, like Emerson, is addressing the context of

⁶ See Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), pp. 245-61.

⁷ Alatas, "The captive mind and creative development," p. 691.

⁸ Masturah Alatas, *Syed Hussein Alatas. The Life in the Writing* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2010), p. 122.

⁹ Clive Kessler, "Syed Hussein Alatas (1928-2007). Wise Muslim Rationalist, Culturally Grounded Cosmopolitan," *Akademika* 73 (2008), p. 135.

countries whose formal independence is only a few decades old, and rather than simply rejoicing at this newly acquired freedom, very much like Emerson, he laments the uncreative spirit infecting the former colonies, and hence their inability to provide original solutions to the cultural, social, and economic problems they are facing. I would not want to push the comparison too far. Emerson's stubborn and irreducible individualism, his praise of "Whim," and his disregard for all forms of "foolish consistency" are always on the verge of flowing into an anarchism that either seems to ignore the need for social cohesion or else is at risk of striking a merely intellectual pose, with little or no purchase on the real world. These are traits that a sociologist and a committed political thinker like Alatas would have had trouble relating to. However, some of Emerson's writings are by no means indifferent to the ethical and political questions that any theory of the captive mind must sooner or later confront. For example, thanks especially to the work done over the last two decades by scholars like Len Gougeon, Emerson's contribution to the anti-slavery and abolitionist movement has been duly emphasized.¹⁰ Here I want to focus, however, on an aspect of Emerson's work that has received comparatively little attention: his contribution to pacifist and anti-war *thinking*.

I put the stress on the word *thinking* because I believe that Emerson's importance lies mostly, if not exclusively, at the level of theory. Unlike Thoreau, Emerson never went to jail for refusing to pay a poll tax in opposition to the Mexican-American War (and slavery). Indeed, many believe it was Emerson himself who paid Thoreau's tax, thus limiting his pupil's prison experience to one single night. Moreover, when the Civil War came, Emerson not only did not oppose it—he was its enthusiastic, perhaps even somewhat cynical supporter. "Ah! sometimes gunpowder smells good," he famously exclaimed in 1861, as he campaigned for "the most absolute abolition" of slavery.¹¹ Emerson's conversion to the necessity of war—which he did know to be a form of evil—to abolish what he considered the even greater evil of slavery, may have been largely

¹⁰ Besides Len Gougeon's *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2010), more generally on Emerson's politics, see the essays collected in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. A. M. Levine and D. S. Malachuk (University Press of Kentucky, 2011).

¹¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Notes," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 11 (Houghton Mifflin, 1904), p. 579.

responsible for the neglect visited by scholars on his early essay "War," an address he originally delivered at the invitation of the American Peace society. I have analyzed in some detail this text in my book *Waging War on War. Peacefighting in American Literature*, and I am not going to rehearse my entire argument here.¹² I will only say that in the book my main preoccupation was to show how Emerson worked hard to oppose the notion of peace as being synonymous with inaction. "The peace principle" — Emerson explained — "can never be defended, it can never be executed, by cowards. The manhood that has been in war must be transferred to the cause of peace, before war can lose its charm, and peace be venerable to men."¹³ If one looks at this passage from what I would like to call a captive mind perspective — something that I did not do in my book but I would like to do here — it could be argued that in order to emancipate humankind from its tragic fascination with war (a fascination that Emerson explains on both historical and psychological grounds in the early parts of his essay), individuals must first undergo a veritable cultural revolution that would enable them to get rid of the notion that war is something full of charm as well as to understand that peace is fully compatible with what Emerson calls "manhood." The term is unfortunately inescapably masculinist, but I think it could be shown that for Emerson it is not so much connected with being male as with terms such as force, energy, mental and physical prowess. Here Emerson's mind, too, is in part imprisoned by the times' entrenched beliefs, though we should not forget that, from the Enlightenment onwards, pacifists have routinely been accused of being weak, ineffectual, sentimental — in a word, "feminine". Emerson's insistence on the manhood of the anti-war militant, like Mohandas Gandhi's belief that peace fighters had to be trained like soldiers and display an even higher courage than the latter, as well as Martin Luther King's own insistence on the *power* and *force* of non-violence, are all attempts at sabotaging the deeply held conviction that only through war and violence — paradoxically and ironically

¹² See Giorgio Mariani, *Waging War on War. Peacefighting in American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), pp. 41-45.

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "War," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 11 (Houghton Mifflin, 1904), p. 171.

enough—peace can be obtained.¹⁴

Emerson was keenly aware of the contradictory position he was forced to occupy by his argument in favor of peace and against war. He wanted the abolition of war, but he knew that was equivalent to advocating going to war against war. As Kenneth Burke would put it nearly a century later in one of his perhaps most Emersonian moments, one can never think of war and peace as being “at peace.”¹⁵ It was both practically and logically impossible. Peace and war could only be “at war,” irreducibly opposed to one another. Here was—and it is still with us today—an apparently insoluble challenge for any mind that did not wish to be captive to the lure and “charm” of martial ideas. If, as both the fiercest warmonger and the tamer students of warfare would argue, peoples and nations go to war to secure some kind of “peace”—if, in other words, all wars are at bottom conceptualized as wars to end war—how can we distinguish the “good war” that the anti-war or pacifist thinker wishes to wage on war itself, from the “bad war” of the pro-war camp? At least a partial and tentative answer to this question may be found in the hortatory conclusion of Emerson’s “War” essay:

The cause of peace is not the cause of cowardice. If peace is to be defended or preserved for the safety of the luxurious and the timid, it is a sham, and the peace will be base. War is better, and the peace will be broken. If peace is to be maintained, it must be by brave men, who have come up to the same height as the hero, namely, they will carry their life in their hand, and stake it at any instant for their principle, but who have gone one step beyond the hero, and will not seek another man’s life; men who have, by their intellectual insight or else by their moral elevation, attained such a perception of their own intrinsic worth that they do not think property or their own body a sufficient good to be saved by such dereliction of principle as treating a man like a sheep.¹⁶

¹⁴ I have analyzed in some detail the Emersonian echoes of Gandhi’s ideas about war, violence and non-violence, in the second chapter of *Waging War*.

¹⁵ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 337.

¹⁶ Emerson, “War,” p. 174.

Long before Gandhi and King, here Emerson laid out the challenge facing the man (or woman) who truly wished to take that perhaps fatal though necessary, "step beyond the hero."¹⁷ Emerson's mind here is trying hard to liberate itself from one concept (that of heroism) not by banning it from its conceptual vocabulary but by redefining it to make room for a different way of looking at the world of strife and conflict. Faced with a situation that Syed Hussein Alatas would describe as one of "intellectual bondage and dependence" on an apparently unshakable tradition, Emerson chooses to proceed through "constructive imitation."¹⁸ He resorts, that is, to what Kenneth Burke defined as a "homeopathic" approach, which, unlike an allopathic strategy, is based "on the feeling that danger cannot be handled by head-on attack, but must be accommodated."¹⁹ Hence, rather than rejecting the notion of "heroism" à la Brecht ("Unhappy is the land that needs a hero"), Emerson takes it to a higher level. If the hero is the one who is not afraid to die for one's country and one's beliefs, which hero would be greater than the one who would go into battle ready to risk his life without abdicating his belief in non-violence, and therefore unwilling to stoop so low as to think the salvation of his property or even his own bodily integrity a sufficient cause for hurting others? Killing a man is equivalent "to treating a man like a sheep." The true hero would be the one who, having gone one step beyond the heroes of old, would in fact no longer be called a hero but would be someone for whom no term yet exists. For the time being we may think of her as a kind of—literally—*ultra* or *superhero*, someone who has ventured *beyond* charted behavioral patterns and embraced a *higher* moral principle.

Emerson's "War" was written roughly a century before Gandhi, first, and King, a couple of decades later, turned his visionary statement into political practice. Though neither Gandhi nor King (except at the very end of his life, when he took a stand against the US military involvement in Indochina) were primarily engaged in anti-war protests, they were

¹⁷ In *Walden*, perhaps echoing Emerson's essay, Thoreau expressed a similar concept: "Only the defeated and the deserters go to the war, cowards that run away and enlist." See Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, p. 312.

¹⁸ Alatas, "The captive mind and creative development," p. 692.

¹⁹ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Towards History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 45n.

opposing the daily violence that colonialism, racism, and imperialism visited on millions of people belonging to the "darker" races. And they did so, for the most part, asking the protesters they led not to respond to the violence of the army or the police that confronted them. They asked, in other words, not one or two exceptional individuals, but masses of thousands of people to take, in Emerson's terms, "one step beyond the hero," even when they saw their own infants or loved ones brutalized and sometimes murdered before their own eyes. As both King and Gandhi argued, images of this one-way violence would shock world public opinion, and civil rights and independence would be obtained with much less bloodshed than the one following any attempt to put up an armed resistance.

Let me say at once that, much as I admire the unbelievable courage displayed by those who took part in the demonstrations in India and the American South, I am not convinced that the strategy of absolute non-violence Emerson theorized, and Gandhi and King tried to apply in actual practice, can always be adequate to redress wrongs, and achieve peace and social justice. Yet this is not my main concern in this essay. All I wish to emphasize here is that, at the end of the day, not even non-violence can be as violence-free as we may at first think. In other words, while we may believe that, as Emerson put it, once we are unwilling to strike our opponents, no matter how vicious they might be, we resist treating them like sheep, we are in fact ready to let our oppressors treat *us* like sheep. It is certainly no accident that in his address Emerson resorted to the image of an animal that immediately evokes the scene of sacrifice. One may very well argue that, without ever mentioning him, Emerson is asking us to be like Christ: to rebel, but to do so by accepting that our desire to speak the Truth may force us into the position of the sacrificial lamb. The problem appears to be insoluble. We can renounce violence—we can turn ourselves, our bodies and our minds into a living embodiment of Peace. But as long as we will be struck, maimed, and killed by our oppressors, it would seem that War will continue to triumph. To the extent that opposition to violence requires a sacrifice of self, it paradoxically reinforces the logic it wishes to escape. All we can do is hope that, by breaking up what René Girard has identified as the circle of mimetic violence, our enemies may be tempted to mirror *our*

behavior: to imitate, that is, our non-violence.²⁰ Historically there have been indeed cases in which non-violence has worked this way. But this is far from being the norm. As the American theologian Kelly Denton-Borhaug has noted in a discussion of how we may find alternatives to the sacrificial system of war, proclaiming one's willingness to die for the cause of peace may be a way to reinforce rather than undermine the logic of sacrifice.²¹ This is obviously also the case with Emerson's new "hero," whose renunciation of violence takes on heroic—or better, super-heroic—proportions by virtue of her readiness to become a pacifist martyr.

It is certainly no accident that thinkers as diverse as the afore-mentioned Girard and Denton-Borhaug, as well as the American protestant theologian Walter Wink and the Italian Catholic dissenter Enzo Mazzi, and many others, have all taken issue with the *ideology* of sacrifice that is generated by the *sacrificial* reading of the Passion.²² While many would disagree with Girard's claim that "There is nothing in the Gospels to suggest that the death of Jesus is a sacrifice," there is a broad agreement among Christian pacifist theologians that "The passages that are invoked to justify a sacrificial conception of the Passion both can and should be interpreted with no reference to sacrifice in any of the accepted meanings."²³ This is no mere terminological dispute. To construct the Passion as a sacrifice that all super-heroic human beings may wish to imitate would entail accepting the inevitability of violence rather than trying to imagine the conditions under which violence may be, if not altogether eliminated, at least contained and moderated. To return to Emerson's superhero, the point is by no means to diminish the extraordinary novelty of his imagined figure, produced by a mind trying to think beyond the commonsense of his day, but simply to suggest that even such a superhero would be at risk of being captivated by an

²⁰ See especially René Girard's seminal *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

²¹ Kelly Denton-Borhaug, *U.S. War-Culture, Sacrifice and Salvation* (London: Equinox, 2011).

²² See René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Denton-Borhaug, *U.S. War-Culture*; Enzo Mazzi, *Cristianesimo ribelle* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 2002); Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

²³ Girard, *Things Hidden*, p. 180.

ideology at odds with Emerson's rebellious spirit. The ideology of sacrifice has in fact been historically deployed either to promote war and violence (because, as Girard has taught us, violence *is* the sacred) or else to invite people to acquiesce and obey to the powers that be. To put it in different terms, there is no guarantee that even pacifism may not be incorporated, paradoxically, in a logic of war.

The lesson to be drawn from the argument I have made thus far is a simple, though hard one. War and Peace need to be constructed as irreducible opposites. They need and must be, to reiterate Kenneth Burke's point, "at war" with one another. To imagine the two "at peace," is to imagine the age-old scenario of war as the only instrument that can guarantee the peace. On the other hand, to imagine the two "at war" means to accept that even peace has something warlike about it, and it cannot claim to be as pure and absolute as we may wish it to be. This is a contradiction, or even better, a foundational antinomy we must accept. We cannot extricate ourselves from this double-bind, but we can certainly keep our eyes and minds open so that both the violence that is "structural" and internal to any society, and the violence of outright warfare that nations deploy against other nations, may be superseded by forms of conflict and disputation from which physical violence may be banned, or banned for the most part. Let me be clear. I am by no means suggesting that anti-war struggles are ineffectual as long as they remain peaceful or, on the contrary, that to wage war on war we must resort to the violence we wish to be free of. The point is rather to acknowledge that, given the inescapably and necessarily conflictual nature of all human societies, the goal of anti-war cultures and practices must be that of transcending the "antagonistic" framework of war by adopting what Chantal Mouffe, in her book *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically*, identifies as forms of "agonistic" confrontations that will not erase conflict but will "sublimate" it into a contest between adversaries who respect each other, not enemies whose ultimate desire is to destroy one another.²⁴ This ideal condition may be described as one of bloodless warfare, or, seen from an opposite perspective, as a form of agonistic peace, and it is indeed an ideal that depends on the good will of both sides to settle disputes through dialogue and political negotiations rather than through war and violence. It is a condition that is not

²⁴ Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013).

easy to achieve, but most Western European nations, after the apocalypse of World War Two, for some decades were able, *grosso modo*, to substitute "antagonism" with "agonism."

"Peace" literature

One would be foolish, of course, to ignore that nowadays Europe is threatened by the resurgence of vicious nationalisms, not to mention the increasing structural violence plaguing internally its societies, and which is most visible in the xenophobic sentiments embraced and fanned by several European governments. More generally, one could observe that, far from ushering in an era of everlasting peace, economic globalization has turned out to be largely responsible for sparking armed conflicts in many areas of the planet. Whether one agrees with the notion advanced by Italian political scientist Carlo Galli in *La Guerra Globale* that "globalization is a world of war," it would be impossible to deny that, from Africa to the Middle East, from Afghanistan to Ukraine, the planet is shaken by violence and endemic, apparently endless, conflicts.²⁵ The question of how to oppose war and promote peace is therefore as urgent as ever and it may be symptomatic of this need that over the last few years no less than three major anthologies of pacifist and anti-war writings have appeared in the United States. I cannot discuss these works here in detail. I do wish, however, to briefly dwell on some general features shared by these anthologies, because they seem to further substantiate the point I have been trying to make so far. To put it bluntly, taken together, these three praiseworthy efforts to create a canon of "peace literature" capable of providing a counter-balance to the much more studied, revered, and popular "war literature," offer a literal textbook demonstration of the thesis I have presented here concerning the impossibility — in both theory and practice — of thinking the tension between "peace" and "war" as an absolute opposition. As I hope to have shown in my observations on Emerson's (and others') attempt to forge an alternative to the war-peace dichotomy, it is well-nigh impossible to trace a clear-cut,

²⁵ Carlo Galli, *La Guerra Globale* (Bari: Laterza, 2002), p. 55. My translation.

insurmountable line between these two concepts, just as it is hard at times to understand where non-violence ends, and violence begins. The idea of "peace" that emerges from these three anthologies is deeply conflictual. What these works suggest, I propose, is that peace must be defined as the real movement which, to abolish the present state of war, must be itself pugnacious, courageous, and ultimately willing to take that daring, dangerous "step beyond the hero" we have so far discussed. At the same time, however, the writings collected in these volumes offer a clear indication of how, historically regarded, anti-war movements have been anything but struggles of Beautiful Souls against an Ugly World.

The intention animating the collections under consideration is perhaps no better illustrated than in one of Bill Watterson's "Calvin and Hobbes" comic strips reprinted on page 621 of Lawrence Rosenwald's *War No More. Three Centuries of American Antiwar & Peace Writing*, the richest of the "peace literature" anthologies I just mentioned.²⁶ The widely known characters created by Watterson are a six-year old boy named Calvin, and his stuffed tiger Hobbes, who in Calvin's imagination is a living, speaking being, endowed with his own independent personality. In the first table of the strip, Hobbes asks an equally helmeted Calvin, "How come we play war and not peace?". This question is answered by Calvin with a sagacity that goes well beyond his supposedly infantile consciousness: "Too few role models." As Rosenwald writes in introducing the strip, "Anyone making an anthology like this one is responding to the problem Calvin identifies, and hoping to offer a partial remedy: to help people learn how to 'play peace' if they so desire."²⁷ Since we learn how to play a game by imitating those who are already experienced players, the role of a "peace literature" must necessarily be that of providing inspirational models even though, as will become clear in a moment, the models showcased by the three volumes differ widely not only because of their respective historical groundings, but also in terms of temperament, ideological affiliations, and, most importantly perhaps, of the position they occupy along the

²⁶ *War No More: Three Centuries of American Antiwar & Peace Writing*, ed. Lawrence Rosenwald (New York: The Library of America, 2016).

²⁷ *War No More*, p. 621.

continuum running—to resort to Duane L. Cady's useful terminology—from Warism to Pacifism.²⁸

All three anthologies put on full display, rather than hide, the contradictions and ambivalences around which they are built. *We Who Dared to Say No to War: American Antiwar Writing from 1812 to Now*, published in 2008, is the outcome of the collaboration between a scholar from the Left (Murray Polner) and one from the Conservative front (Thomas E. Woods, Jr.).²⁹ This is an interesting choice because, first, it calls into question the belief that anti-war thinking is an exclusively prerogative of the Left, and, second, it makes room for a substantial number of anti-war pronouncements which have come from the Right. This ideological openness is to be found also in the other two collections. For example, both *Not in Our Name: American Antiwar Speeches, 1846 to the Present*, edited by Jesse Stellato, and *War No More*, publish Barack Obama's 2003 speech against George W. Bush's "dumb war" against Iraq, as well as Senator Robert Byrd's elegant oration against the same war.³⁰ These two texts are also printed in the Polner and Woods anthology and at this point may well be defined as "classic" anti-war addresses. I can easily imagine many objecting to the inclusion of figures like Obama—the president who continued the Afghanistan war, who helped tear apart Lybia, and who master-minded the drones' war—and Byrd, a conservative democrat who, in his youth joined the Ku Klux Klan (which he later regretted), and also supported with no hesitation the Vietnam War (and of this he never repented). What is perhaps the unintended goal of these anthologies is to show that, when we look closely at the historical record, many anti-war militants were by no means absolute pacifists, and even the absolute pacifists were at times either ambivalent about the morality of their position or else stood accused of being interested in saving only their own personal sense of morality, regardless of their choices' practical consequences. Emerson is by no means an exception. Many others were

²⁸ Duane L. Cady, *From Warism to Pacifism: A Moral Continuum* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

²⁹ *We Who Dared to Say No to War: American Antiwar Writing from 1812 to Now*, eds. M. Polner and T. E. Woods, Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

³⁰ *Not in Our Name: American Antiwar Speeches, 1846 to the Present*, ed. J. Stellato (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), pp. 188-93; pp. 199-207; *War no More*, pp. 694-97; 709-11.

sincere in loving peace but found that under certain conditions such inclination could not be followed through.

In sum, not all the "role models" found in the pages of these three impressive collections are some version of Emerson's pacifist superhero. Some authors do live up, or struggle to live up to that ideal. Think for example of all those, from Eugene Debs to Bayard Rustin, from Don Benedict to the Berrigan brothers, who spent time in prison for resisting war and the draft. Yet, many are men and women whose choices were often circumstantial, and who, like former US president Barack Obama, not only were selective in their opposition to war, but never tried to hide this fact. If one reads carefully his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech—a text understandably not reprinted in any of these three anthologies, because, notwithstanding the occasion and the obligatory nods to Martin Luther King, it is no anti-war address but actually an argument in favor of "just wars"—one realizes that to call Obama a hypocrite will not do. One may be—like I am—very critical of his presidential conduct both at home and especially abroad, but Obama, like many other authors who appear in these anthologies, would most likely contend that "absolute pacifism" of the kind preached by the early Emerson, in its Christ-like purity, is, regrettably, not always applicable.

We may, as I already noted, be troubled at seeing separated by only a few pages authors as different as, on the one hand, Dwight Eisenhower—who was Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during World War Two—and, on the other hand, Don Benedict and David Dellinger, who served harsh prison sentences for refusing to serve in Eisenhower's army. And yet not only the latter's denunciation of the "military-industrial complex" has become a text often quoted by anti-war and left-wing activists all the world over, but many *contemporary* anti-war writers and militants may be—ironically enough—more sympathetic to Eisenhower than to those pacifists who, like Dellinger or Bayard Rustin, believed that not even the fight against the Nazi and Fascist menace justified going to war. Of course, when one reads about the prison ordeal of a young man from a very rich family like David Dellinger, who, as he put it, "went straight from Yale to jail" because, like fellow war-resister Milton Mayer, he considered war to be the essence of Fascism, it is difficult not to admire his commitment to the pacifist ideal. No serious reader would dare call Dellinger a coward

for refusing to serve in the so-called "Good War." Indeed, he would certainly be a fit candidate for the role of Emersonian superhero. However, the book that has most recently defended pacifist and anti-war activity in the West before and during the early phases of World War Two—Nicholson Baker's *Human Smoke*—has been attacked by commentators on the Right, the Center, *and* the Left. In fact, the Baker essay reprinted in the Rosenwald anthology and devoted to "The Dangerous Myth of The Good War" was originally written also as a response to Katha Pollit, who, in the widely-circulated leftist US magazine *The Nation*, had confessed, after reading Baker's book, the she "felt something [she] had never felt before: fury at pacifists."³¹

World War Two is of course an ultimate test case for both pacifists and anti-war thinkers, because if not a "Good War" it would seem to come pretty close to be the ideal "just war." No wonder that in his essay Baker refers to it as "pacifism's great smoking counterexample," the archetype invoked whenever America decides that a new "Hitler" like Saddam, Milosevic, or Bin Laden looms on the horizon and must be confronted with military force. However, even granting that from the Allied perspective the *jus ad bellum* during World War Two was unimpeachable, this still leaves open the question of the *jus in bello*—of the way in which Great Britain and the US conducted the war.³² Baker's controversial book raises several objections regarding not only the morality of the relentless pounding and eventual fire-bombing of German cities but is also skeptical regarding their effectiveness. The Allied air-raids were *objectively* as savage as the German Blitz on London, and to boot, as a member of Churchill's cabinet observed as early as 1941, "Bombing does NOT affect German morale." On the other hand, as General Raymond Lee argued, it was good for "The morale of the British people [...] if the bombing stopped, their spirit would

³¹ Nicholson Baker, "The Dangerous Myth of The Good War," in *War No More*, pp. 736-55; Katha Pollit, "Blowing Smoke," *The Nation*, April 3, 2008, <https://www.thenation.com/article/blowing-smoke/>. Here, and in the paragraph below, I anticipate points that are discussed at greater length in the essay "The *Human Smoke* Controversy, and Beyond: Remembering the Unpopular Pacifism of World War Two," included in this volume.

³² These concepts are elucidated in Michael Walzer's classic, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

immediately suffer.”³³ Now, any criticism of how the Allies fought the war is likely to elicit *reductio ad hitlerum* counterarguments, as if questioning, say, the firebombing of German cities is tantamount to arguing that Hitler and Churchill were war criminals of the same ilk. They obviously were not, and it strikes me as somewhat intellectually dishonest to argue that this is what Baker wishes to suggest. This is not to say, however, that we should not feel free to investigate the morality of the Allied conduct of the war, and more so precisely because, since the fall of the Soviet empire, references to World War Two have constantly been employed to provide the moral capital necessary to promote the wars waged by the US and its allies.

There is also a more general question that is worth asking given the present essay's focus on issues of mental captivity. How useful is a theory of the “captive mind” to discuss these thorny, perhaps undecidable problems? As has been the case with all wars, immediately before and during the Second World War pacifist and anti-war militants split into different factions. Absolute pacifists like David Dellinger and Bayard Rustin could have easily claimed that those who converted to the necessity of opposing militarily the Nazi-Fascist barbarity had been too easily seduced by the appeal of the very martial ideologies they had formerly pledged to resist. But for the interventionist front, the minds of absolute pacifists were imprisoned in an ideal which, under the circumstances, could not bring about the peace and justice they all desired. I think it is to the credit of thinkers and activists like Dellinger and Rustin that they hardly accused their former comrades of betrayal. They stuck to their principles and paid a very heavy price for doing so, but while they did defend their choices both in writing and in practice, they did so without striking any fundamentalist pose. They qualify as Emersonian superheroes not only because they did not respond violently to the violence of the state that imprisoned them, and to the jailers who taunted or beat them, but most importantly because they believed they had first and foremost to answer to their conscience. This, however, should not blind us to the fact that along with many who went to war simply because that is what they were told to do by the state, there were several who chose to go only after a period

³³ Nicholson Baker, *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), p. 434.

of torturous self-scrutiny. The passages in the Rosenwald anthology from Don Benedict's *Born Again Radical* are both exemplary and moving in this regard. "Coming out of a quarantine as a known pacifist serving my second term," Benedict writes, he was assailed by doubts regarding the correctness of his decision not to serve. Placed under confinement, he ruminates that "Violence ought not to be stopped by violence [...]. Nevertheless, my belief in pacifism as an absolute was shaken. How could I stay in solitary if I was unsure that what I was doing was right? What if I were wrong?" After spending 366 days in the Danbury Federal Correction Institute, in 1943 he finally enlisted in the Army Air Corps, serving in the South Pacific. As he recalled the moment of leaving the prison, many years later, he wrote: "Something fine was being left behind. Also certitude. Also my youth. I knew I would never come back."³⁴ Benedict did not claim to have finally found the *right* answer to his dilemma. In fact, he claims that "certitude" left him the moment he chose to give up on his protest. He went on to fight, but his doubts and his uncertainties were not left behind. This is perhaps the ultimate sign of a mind that is not captive—the mind that knows that its own freedom is always questionable; the mind that knows that Thinking, with an Emersonian capital T, means also to think *against itself*. The only way to avoid intellectual bondage, that is, is to leave always within one's mind some room for doubt.

If we think of the non-captive mind as one which, while holding fast to some basic moral principles, is endlessly, even mercilessly scrutinizing itself—as a "mind on fire," to quote the title of Robert Richardson's intellectual biography of Emerson—many (though by no means not all) of the writings collected in these anthologies, for all their passionate and unswerving commitment to the cause of peace, would also deserve to be identified as exercises in what Herman Melville's Ishmael would have called "earnest thinking," which "is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea."³⁵

I don't know whether, as Rosenwald writes, the letters exchanged by Yvonne Dilling and Mary Jo Bowman (two Christian activists

³⁴ Don Benedict, *Born Again Radical*, in *War No More*, p. 595.

³⁵ Robert Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, eds. J. Bryant and H. Springer (New York: Longman, 2007), p. 110.

participating in the anti-imperialist movement in Central America at the time of the Sandinista revolution), are "the greatest American conversation on violence."³⁶ Yet there is no question that they comprise an exemplary dialogue in which, their different views notwithstanding, the two writers always contemplate the possibility of being wrong about their choices. If both share the belief that a rigorous Christian vision is irreconcilable with an instrumental conception of violence, Dilling, working in close contact with the Sandinistas, realizes that no matter how theoretically reprehensible, armed resistance seems at times inescapable. Bowman, on her part, does not answer by simply reiterating the dogmas of non-violence, and she is willing to acknowledge that these, too, have their limits. At times she even comforts her friend, writing, "I doubt that any of the classical proponents of nonviolence on your list would condemn the use of armed confrontation in a desperate resistance to tyranny" (580). She respects her friend's agonizing self-doubting, but she also warns her (rightly, to my mind) about the danger of a revolutionary rhetoric equating the revolution with the coming of the Kingdom of God. She is particularly troubled by the legendary poet and revolutionary Trappist monk Ernesto Cardenal's argument about armed struggle being not only an instrument of justice but an act of love. "Is it possible" — Bowman wonders without irony — "to love one's enemies by killing them?" (581).

Though she is less willing than her interlocutor to set aside her belief in the principle of non-violence, Bowman knows all too well she cannot extricate herself from the condition in which both history and her own personal vicissitudes have placed her. She does not think even for a moment that by sticking to what her conscience tells her, she is thereby innocent of the violence around her:

In a very real sense there is blood on my hands, my bloody pacifist hands. I am guilty of murder. Forgive me if I seem to overdramatize, but consider this: our federal tax dollars have been used time and again to fund thousands of atrocities [...]. I have never carried a gun [...] but my money has supported and my silence has allowed some of the most brutal violence

³⁶ Yvonne Dilling and Mary Jo Bowman, "Revolutionary Violence: A Dialogue," in *War No More*, p. 567. Further references are cited parenthetically.

in the history of the world [...].

The more I allow myself to face that truth about my participation in a violent world, the more my faith and my intellect call me to humility and compassion rather than to doctrinaire ethics. I cannot hope for a clear conscience. I can only hope that my ethical choices are motivated by love rather than fear [...].

The crucial question is [...w]hat does it mean to hold up Jesus' model of resisting evil by dying rather than killing, amidst a world so permeated with violence—whether it be verbal threats on the streets, psychological violence done to minorities, institutionalized violence inflicted on the unemployed, or bombings plotted to counter Central American insurrectionists? (583)

As Bowman insists, the condition of "peace" enjoyed by those who are not actively involved in violent actions can hardly absolve them from the obligation to question their "passive" participation in the systemic-structural violence around them. To her credit, it is Bowman herself—the one less willing to give up on non-violence—who formulates the sharpest critique of "peacetime pacifism": "I know that a pacifism untested is an affront to those who suffer. I must take sides, on behalf of the victims of the oppressive powers. I must either be willing to take on suffering or keep my mouth shut" (584).

Tragic choices?

The adjective that first comes to mind to describe the dilemmas that serious war resisters had to face and the impossibly difficult choices they had to make is, I suppose, "tragic." And as the fate of both King and Gandhi attests, the ranks of *peace* warriors have indeed suffered tragic losses. This is not surprising since at the heart of tragedy there is conflict and conflict is what any form of protest—including, as I have insisted, peaceful protest—is bound to fuel. Though I think it would be an exaggeration to say that all protest has at bottom a tragic character, protest of the kind Emerson had in mind in his "War" essay, or Thoreau envisioned when he called for our lives to be the "a counter-

friction to stop the machine [of government]" can indeed be tragic.³⁷ Whenever we feel we must put at stake our own lives in defense of a just cause, our protest would seem to take on a tragic character. One might argue that also facing the possibility of being jailed, exposed to police brutality, or simply dealing constantly with the hostility or the indifference of our fellow citizens are all unpleasant consequences a protester or dissenter must face, though I would not consider all these circumstances "tragic," or tragic in the same degree.

In what I have just said, I have used the terms "tragedy" and "tragic" as referring in a general way to sad, painful events involving death or suffering. What I would now like to do, however, is investigate what happens if we adopt a more technical use of these terms. To do so, I will draw on an example from literary history. Building on Thomas Mann's idea that the centrality of tragedy in modern German culture was a consequence of a weak national state, literary scholar Franco Moretti has written that this condition resulted not only in "a tragic version of political struggle" but also "[i]n the notion of conflict as something which must inevitably lead to a crisis, and of crisis as the moment of truth."³⁸ In Moretti's view, the world of modern tragedy—the world of Ibsen and Strindberg, to quote two notable examples—stands in opposition to the world of the novel, where there is no single "moment of truth." In his view, that of the novel is the world of bourgeois compromise, a social environment of conversation and conventions, with no apocalyptic flashes or revelatory crises. "The interdependence of truth and crisis in tragedy," instead, paves the ground in Moretti's view for "the classical rhetoric of revolutionary politics" (258), which he sees exemplified in Georges Sorel's *Réflexions sur la violence*, with its theory of the General Strike. "The superior 'morality' of the General Strike—Moretti argues—lies in its forcing social actors to their ultimate forgotten 'truth'. It is never conceived by Sorel as a process (as in Rosa Luxemburg's roughly contemporary writings), but as a single, 'instantaneous' event. As an Apocalypse: the Moment of Truth" (258-59). It is a sad though well-known fact, Moretti adds, that

³⁷ Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," in *War No More*, p. 73.

³⁸ Franco Moretti, "The Moment of Truth," in *Signs Taken for Wonders. On the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 253. Further references are cited parenthetically.

the "tragic image of revolution as the Moment of Truth—with the inevitable corollary that social truth can only emerge in the crisis of a civil war" (259) found admirers on both the Left and the Right. To those who would accuse him of implying that Right and Left share the same culture, Moretti replies that this is by no means his point. What he wishes to argue, instead, is that "it is virtually impossible to extricate the Left from the Right *whenever the Left adopts a 'tragic' worldview*" (260). A non-tragic world view is not, however, one that necessarily excludes the possibility of revolution or other moments of crisis. It is, instead, one that would consider "the moment of crisis neither as the *only* moment of truth, nor as the moment of the *only* truth" (260).

As Moretti writes in the penultimate paragraph of his essay, his concern with these matters is by no means only literary or theoretical, as his example of a Left adopting a tragic worldview is no other than Italian left-wing terrorism, a destructive and self-destructive phenomenon that has left a deep scar on his (which is also my) generation. The "supposed uniqueness" of the revolutionary crisis, "in its superstitious intractability [...] blinded us to the reality of much of the world around us, because it suggested that it was a 'false' world, an untrue one. In order to escape its misleading appearances, we basically had to make our way, no matter how, towards the moment of crisis, and then Social Truth would finally emerge in all its unequivocal clarity" (261). Here lies the fatal flaw of the tragic worldview: the naïve belief that the enormous complexity of our social universe may be transcended by finding some "unique" critical juncture that would allow us to bring down the whole edifice of lies, deceptions, and compromises that clouds our vision. My readers may wonder at this point why I dwell on a notion of the tragic that may well be relevant to the context of terrorism but would seem to have little to do with the forms of protest I have been discussing in this essay. The reason is twofold. To begin with, a fascination with the tragic may infect even pacifist and anti-war thinking. For example, Emerson's moment of revelation, which has been so important to my argument, could also be constructed as one of fanatical pacifist martyrdom in which *only* the superhero can attain a Truth unavailable to those who lack her courage. To the extent that, as I mentioned earlier, a sacrificial aura continues to hover over Emerson's passage, the temptation to see political protest as a moment of personal redemption should never be discounted. The consequences of this may not be even

remotely as tragic as the ones deriving from the embrace of terrorism, but to expect super-heroic qualities from masses of people may be unrealistic and counterproductive. Sacrifices like the ones Gandhi and King asked for may be possible only under exceptional conditions and in any case should not be imagined as a value in itself (how could the willingness to be clubbed or shot at, be perceived as a value?) but as the possible *consequence* of a set of values—the ideal of non-violence upheld in very specific circumstances.³⁹

The second reason has to do with the need *not* to see the complex, and as we have seen, at times self-lacerating choices anti-war militants had to make, as “tragic” ones. When Mary Jo Bowman had to decide whether to embrace or resist an armed revolution, and when Don Benedict, in his solitary confinement, literally tortured his own soul wondering whether he had to join the Allied army or not, we may be tempted to say that they were confronted with “tragic” choices. They both felt they could not, at one and the same time, hold on to the imperative of non-violence and the need to alleviate the suffering of those they wished to save. But, in fact, their predicament was far from the tragic one Moretti describes. If a tragic worldview is one that sees the moment of crisis as the moment of *truth*, then the crises experienced by militants like Bowman and Benedict were anything but tragic, as they did not culminate in some moment of illumination. Quite the opposite. Benedict tells us that it is precisely “certitude” that he lost as he left the jail to join the army, and, consequently, also a life of doubt. Bowman, on her part, ends with silence, wondering whether she should simply “shut up.” She has made a choice, but she is by no means sure that is the *right* choice. We could be no farther from the scenario of apocalyptic illuminations which, according to Moretti, is a feature of modern tragedy. The decisions taken by both Benedict and Bowman are based—as they know all too well—on a form of moral *compromise* which is the opposite of the tragic devotion to an uncompromising Truth. Bowman and Benedict simply do not know whether they will be more morally correct and politically effective by sticking to non-violence or by giving it up. They have no way of predicting which choice will yield the most desirable result. Theirs is not a choice

³⁹ I am here adapting Moretti's notion of how revolution should be understood to the idea of a non-violent revolution. See Moretti, “The Moment of Truth,” p. 260.

between courage and cowardice, but one between two different ways of displaying their courage.

To reject the notion of political protest as a form of tragedy, therefore, is not to say that those who fight for peace and social justice will not be faced with difficult, at times very painful choices, nor to suggest that—because they cannot be altogether sure of the moral ground on which one stands—their opposition to the status quo would only be weak and tentative. Just because we remain open to the possibility that our choice may not be the most appropriate or effective one, does not mean we should not stand by it with all our hearts and minds. It simply means that we should act responsibly but not fanatically. Most importantly, perhaps, it means that we need to acknowledge that we live in a world in which many different historical, social, and cultural conditions coexist, requiring a variety of differently nuanced approaches to be amended. Concerning one of the questions that has preoccupied me the most in this essay—that of the relation between violence and non-violence—I would like to conclude by quoting a passage from an essay by Simon Critchley that I think encapsulates a good deal of what I have been trying to argue:

There are contexts where a difficult pacifism that negotiates the limits of violence might be enough. But [...] there are also contexts, multiple contexts, too depressingly many to mention, where nonviolent resistance is simply crushed by the forces of the state, the police, and the military. In such contexts, the line separating nonviolent warfare and violent action has to be crossed. Politics is always a question of local conditions, of local struggles and local victories. To judge the multiplicity of such struggles on the basis of an abstract conception of nonviolence is to risk dogmatic blindness.⁴⁰

The risk we face, in other words, is that of letting our mind become captive once again. Emerson himself wrote in "The Uses of Great Men" that "every hero becomes a bore at last."⁴¹ Depending on the circumstances, even a superhero may not be our best role model.

⁴⁰ Simon Critchley, "Nonviolent Violence," in *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 239.

⁴¹ Emerson, "The Uses of Great Men," in *Essays*, p. 627.

2. Are Stephen Crane and Ambrose Bierce the Inventors of the American “Anti-War” Story?

The question of anti-war literature has been one, if not most likely the, major preoccupation of my scholarly life.¹ I first became interested in it as I was writing my Rutgers dissertation on Stephen Crane; it has stayed with me as I edited, in 1996, a collection of essays on the representation of war and violence in American literature and culture entitled *Le parole e le armi*; it never abandoned me in the nearly two decades it took me to complete my book *Waging War on War. Peacefighting in American Literature*, a study whose title signals how my inquiry reached a conclusion that is as paradoxical as it is, at least to my mind, inescapable.² But to proceed in an orderly fashion, I suppose that, first, I should explain what I mean by “the question of anti-war literature.” Simply put, that question may be unpacked as follows. While we all have an intuitive understanding of what war literature is—even though this label too has become increasingly unstable, as our understanding of both “war” and “literature” has changed considerably over the last two or three decades—what is “anti-war literature” is much less clear. Of course, one could simply say that anti-war literature is the literature

¹ This essay is a slightly revised version of a text I presented on June 15, 2018 at l’Université Paris Diderot, during the “A19Symposium.” I wish to thank Cécile Roudeau and Thomas Constantinesco for the invitation to take part in the event.

² *Le parole e le armi. Saggi su guerra e violenza nella letteratura e cultura degli Stati Uniti d’America*, ed. Giorgio Mariani, (Milano: Marcos y Marcos, 1996); *Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

that paints war in a negative light. At this point, however, one would be tempted to claim that, at the very least since Shakespeare's History Plays, it is hard to come across a literary text worthy of its name that would not cast a critical shadow over the business of men killing other men. Indeed, one of the greatest French philosophers of the twentieth century argued that one could hardly find a more uncompromising critique of war than Homer's own *Iliad*. This text has traditionally been read (and many continue to read it) as celebrating the virtues of the Greek martial spirit, and of a civilization built around the cult of the hero, who, by dying in battle, achieved his apotheosis and a claim to immortality. According to Simone Weil, on the contrary, the *Iliad* was relentless in showing that in fact the hero "is a thing dragged in the dust behind a chariot."³

And yet, regardless of whether one finds Weil's reading of Homer persuasive or not, we can hardly ignore that, over the centuries, literature has made a significant contribution to what, for lack of a better term, I will call the war myth—the notion, that is, that no matter how brutal, bestial, and bloody, war is where some of the best qualities of man have taken shape. This is a point conceded even in what are to my mind two of the most intelligent and original anti-war manifestos of the nineteenth and early twentieth century: Ralph Waldo Emerson's lecture, "War" (1838) and William James's famous essay "The Moral Equivalent of War" (1910). Emerson: "War educates the senses, calls into action the will, perfects the physical constitution, brings men into such swift and close collision in critical moments that man measures man. On its own scale, on the virtues it loves, it endures no counterfeit, but shakes the whole society until every atom falls into the place its specific gravity assigns it."⁴ James: "We inherit the warlike type; and for most of the capacities of heroism that the human race is full of we have to thank this cruel history. Dead men tell no tales, and if there were any tribes of other type than this they have left no survivors. Our ancestors have bred pugnacity into our bone and marrow, and thousands of years of peace won't breed it out of us. The popular

³ Simone Weil, *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*, trans. Mary McCarthy (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1965), p. 6.

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "War," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. 11 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), p. 153.

imagination fairly fattens on the thought of wars.”⁵ Both Emerson and James, later in their essays, try to sketch how and why human beings should break with the tradition shaped by what, in a memorable phrase, James describes as a “gory nurse.” But the point I wish to make here is simply that, as soon as one begins to delve deeper into the subject of war literature, one realizes that, however unlikely the notion of “pro-war” literature might be, the idea that all war literature can and must by definition be “anti-war” literature is equally untenable. What makes us rest comfortable in our belief that a novel, a play, or a poem about war is in some way or another also a critical statement on either war in general, or at least on a particular war, is the fact that we would not dignify with the name of literature a text that would hide, sublimate or culpably allegorize away the material havoc of war.

It is something akin to this logic that, I presume, made US film director Stephen Spielberg once say that “every war film is an anti-war film.” What I take this to mean is that every honest war film, by showing the horror of warfare, cannot help but be anti-war, and this would also be the case, I suppose, of Spielberg’s own *Saving Private Ryan*, a movie that may otherwise be read as drawing a rather alluring picture of US patriotism that actually reinforces rather than call into question the myth of the “Good War.”⁶ At this point one is understandably tempted to swing towards the opposite position and agree with François Truffaut’s argument that “There could be never an anti-war film, as the violence in such film would inevitably excite the viewer to the point of siding with one group over the other.” I will return to Truffaut’s point, but for the time being I just wish to underline that, while it continues often to be used—and often rather nonchalantly, I must say—the label “anti-war literature” does not designate textual artifacts endowed with certain objective, or relatively objective, structural, formal, or philosophical features. As the paradigmatic example of the *Iliad* shows, the exact same text can be read in strikingly different ways, and that is not so much because the text itself may be

⁵ William James, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” in *Writings, 1902–1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Library of America, 1987), p. 1283.

⁶ See the penultimate essay in this volume. I take the Spielberg and Truffaut quotations from Mariani, *Waging War*, p. 225n.

ambiguous or undecidable, but simply because there is little agreement as to what qualifies as an "anti-war" perspective. Moreover, the key terms of this debate—war, peace, pacifism, anti-warism, violence, and non-violence—are historically determined, so that we should be wary of assigning an absolute label to any given text.

What seems to be clear, though, is that as Kenneth Burke put it in a page of his *Grammar of Motives*, we are simply unable to imagine the relation between war and peace in terms other than a struggle between the two terms, and not as "Peace and War at peace."⁷ Thus, even a text taking an unequivocal position against war, would inevitably be caught in a form of opposition and rejection of something considered unacceptable: in a war against war, to quote the title of my book, which of course repeats an anti-war or pacifist slogan uttered numerous times in both literary and political discourse. It is not rare, in fact, for anti-war stories or novels, to end with acts of defiance or open rebellion that are marked by a sort of anti-militaristic violence. Take, for example, one of the most classic of American anti-war novels, Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got his Gun* (1939). After describing in excruciating and claustrophobic detail how a mutilated soldier "survives" as pure consciousness in a body that is reduced to a nearly complete vegetable state, the end of the novel delivers a literal anti-war call to arms: "Make no mistake of it we will live. [...] You plan the wars, you masters of men—plan the wars and point the way and we will point the gun."⁸ Or take the last page of William Faulkner's *A Fable*, a novel published in 1954 but devoted, like Trumbo's, to World War One. There, a disfigured French war veteran tries to disrupt the military train that follows the funeral of the Marshall, the figure the novel identifies as a veritable God of War. It is hardly surprising that Faulkner would choose to end the novel with such a scene considering that, in a preface to the novel that his editor decided to suppress, Faulkner claimed that his was not "a pacifist book," adding that "pacifism does not work, cannot cope with the forces which produce wars." "[T]o put an end to war," he concluded, "the men who do not want war may

⁷ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 337.

⁸ Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny Got his Gun* (New York: Bantam, [1939] 1970), p. 243.

have to arm themselves as for war.”⁹

Before turning to a reconsideration of the two authors who many would consider as the originators of the US anti-war story, let me add that, in a nutshell, what I do in my book is to trace the ways in which certain texts that are concerned to a remarkable extent with war and violence try to resist or at least make visible the risk of being themselves caught up in the violence they wish to denounce. My theoretical polar star in this critical project has been the work of Kenneth Burke, whose remarks on the relation between war and peace, though somewhat scattered across many of his works, strike me as not only brilliant but also extremely useful as tools for literary analysis. The slogan that Burke coined for the epigraph of his *Grammar of Motives* (1945), *Ad Bellum Purificandum*, is the Latin version of the war-against-war concept. Burke’s reasoning was that since we cannot—and perhaps we should not even try to—get rid of the disputatiousness that marks all human societies, we need find ways not to eliminate conflicts altogether, as that would simply give rise to further and perhaps even worse violence, but to educate our litigious natures to forms of non-violent confrontation. Burke was mostly preoccupied with questions of rhetoric and with the philosophy of form, of course, but even though she never mentions him, Chantal Mouffe’s recent book, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, may well be considered as an extension of the notion that war needs to be purified, in an explicitly political direction. Mouffe’s thesis is precisely that “a central task of democratic politics is to provide the institutions which will permit conflicts to take an ‘agonistic’ form, where the opponents are not enemies but adversaries among whom exists a conflictual consensus.” In what she defines as an “agonistic order,” “conflicts, although they would not disappear, would be less likely to take an antagonistic form.”¹⁰

William James’s essay “The Moral Equivalent of War” can be considered one of the founding documents in this homeopathic tradition wishing to resist violence by channeling it into forms of democratic conflict. However, it is only fair to say that the essay has also been read critically by scholars as diverse as T. J. Jackson Lears and Richard

⁹ Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, Vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 1494.

¹⁰ Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), p. xii.

Poirier.¹¹ The former, in his classic and invaluable study of the rise of modern culture in turn-of-19th-century America, in a rich chapter devoted precisely to the 'martial spirit' that infected those decades, claims that James's essay shared many of his contemporaries' anxieties regarding the softness and meaninglessness of a modern life lacking the spur provided by fear of God or fear of enemy. Poirier, for his part, laments James's inability to stick to his pragmatism when he seems to concede that there is something 'essentially' pugnacious in human nature. In sum, even James's ability to fully embrace the pacifism that he advocated as vice-president of the Anti-Imperialist League appears to be compromised by his inability to imagine a mental, cultural, historical, and political space that would be free of the "martial spirit" Lears (and others before and after him) have seen as one of the distinguishing traits of the age. When, now more than three decades ago, I began exploring the representation of class and war in the work of Stephen Crane, Lears's *No Place of Grace* provided me not only with an invaluable historical reconstruction of the 1890s, but also with a welcome critical outlook. As I read and re-read *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane's war stories, and his war correspondences, along with Ambrose Bierce's Civil War stories, and the work of lesser figures such as Richard Harding Davis or Marion Crawford, who were in their days extremely popular, I could see how relevant the cult of masculine violence in these works was, and I couldn't help be surprised by the fact that, by and large, criticism seemed to have ignored the connection altogether. So, initially, my interest was, I suppose, more historical than theoretical. I wanted to investigate how a writer like Crane (and to a less extent Bierce, whose work was not my primary interest) could be understood in a different light if his texts were read along with the popular literature of the day, following Fredric Jameson's suggestion that the relationship between "high" and "mass" culture had to be understood dialectically, by paying close attention to the different ideological and rhetorical strategies texts employed to come to terms with

¹¹ T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), p. 123; Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 114–19.

the cultural and political anxieties of a given socio-cultural formation.¹²

However, when I began to zoom in on *The Red Badge*, what I have called the anti-war question became inescapable and acquired a relevance that went beyond an assessment of Crane's attitude vis-à-vis the culture of his time. Here was a text that was justly considered as the first great war novel of American literature, notwithstanding the fact that it was about a war its author could not have experienced first-hand (he was born in 1871). Moreover, Crane at that point in his life had never witnessed war or military action of any kind—except for American football, a form of 'warfare' that, as Bill Brown has shown in his splendid book on Crane, provides one of the key metaphors of the novel.¹³ The question that interested me was not so much whether Crane personally liked or disliked war (though I must admit that in the book that grew out of my dissertation there are moments in which I lapse into this sort of biographical considerations). What was much more urgent for me was to figure out why later writers and critics often turned back to this novel and saw it—in a way analogous to what has happened to the *Iliad*—as a kind of ur-American war novel that was also at the same time the American ur-anti-war novel. In a landmark introduction to Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Schweik* penned in the early 60s, Leslie Fiedler wrote that "The chief lasting accomplishment of World War I was the invention of the Antiwar Novel." "It is certainly true"—he added—"that before the 1920s that genre did not exist, though it had been prophesied in the first two-thirds of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*."¹⁴ Here Fiedler implicitly agreed with those critics of Crane who saw the ending of the novel as inconsistent with the ironic register of most of the narrative. One surmises that, if the so-called Binder edition of Crane's novel—"The Red Badge Nobody Knows" as the critic called it, published only in 1979—had been

¹² This is a point Jameson has made often. Classic statements of his position can be found in Fredric Jameson, "Utopia and Reification in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1 (1979), pp. 130–48; *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 281–99.

¹³ Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Leslie Fiedler, "The Antiwar Novel and the Good Soldier Schweik," foreword to Jaroslav Hašek, *The Good Soldier Schweik* (New York: New American Library, 1963), p. vi.

available to Fiedler, he might have concluded that the genre had been surprisingly prophesied by the *whole* of Crane's novel.¹⁵ In the Binder edition, as we know, the irony levelled at Henry Fleming seems to be sustained till the very last line of the text, and this would suggest that Crane's unmasking of his protagonist's supposed 'heroism' was thorough and uncompromising.

But the question I raised years ago, and which I think continues to be relevant if one wishes to claim for *Red Badge* the status of anti-war novel, was whether, even assuming that the novel's critique of Fleming was sustained till the very end, that was enough to read the text as a critique of the martial spirit of the times. My answer was then—and remains even now, though I confess to having kept up with critical developments in Crane studies somewhat irregularly—that it was not. I argued, and would still argue, that if we continue to measure Henry's behavior through the yardstick of the twin notions of heroism and cowardice as they are defined by the novel, we have not made much progress in detaching the novel from the martial spirit of the 1890s. However, what I want to propose here, as I look back with some detachment at the somewhat presumptuous tone of what I wrote years (decades!) ago, so typical of someone fresh out of graduate school, is that it is ultimately not so important whether we agree or not that *Red Badge* is truly an anti-war novel. What matters is where the reader sees the anti-war features of the text as taking shape. Let's say, for example, that we believe that the frank description of war's brutality has an important didactic value. As an early reviewer of the novel put it, "a book like this, with its vivid pictures of the realities of war, and of the way in which the heroic strife affects the individual combatant, is more likely to cool the blood of the Jingo [...] than a hundred sermons or tracts from the Peace Society."¹⁶ Here we would all have to agree that Crane broke with a narrative tradition in which the mangled bodies of soldiers and the bloodiness of war were for the most part kept hidden from view (even though one must admit that in novels like *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Deerslayer*, James Fenimore Cooper did not shy

¹⁵ Henry Binder, "The Red Badge of Courage Nobody Knows," Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*, ed. H. Binder (New York: Norton, 1982), pp. 111-58.

¹⁶ *Stephen Crane: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Richard M. Weatherford (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 105.

away from the goriness of frontier warfare). However, this is a point on which Crane's contemporary William James begged to differ. His view was nearly opposite: "The horror makes the thrill," he wrote, going on to add that "the military party denies neither the bestiality nor the horror, nor the expense; it only says that these things tell but half the story."¹⁷ Twenty years later, Kenneth Burke echoed James by writing that "the greater the horror, the greater the thrill and honor of enlisting." "Horror, repugnance, hatred," he went on to argue, provided a dubious base on which to build a pacifist outlook—indeed, they "might well provide the firmest basis on which the 'heroism' of a new war may be erected," an insight that a work like Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, seems to substantiate in important ways.¹⁸ So, on whether Crane's "photographic realism" is anti-war or not, one may conclude that the jury is still out, though personally I would insist that as we have learned from image theorists such as John Berger and Susan Sontag, the pedagogical and political value of "photographs of agony" is at best ambivalent. On this, or on similar points, we may never reach an agreement, but I think it is important that at least we acknowledge that our dissensus stems from the fact that we disagree on whether a given formal, stylistic, or cultural feature of a text may count as evidence of its anti-war disposition.

Let me now turn to what some would consider a more likely candidate for the role of originator of the anti-war narrative in American letters. Ambrose Bierce collected his war fiction in *In the Midst of Life. Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, a book that appeared in 1891, scarcely four years before Crane's *Red Badge*. My take on Bierce, as the reader would have probably guessed by now, is that he is not the anti-war writer many have made him out to be, notwithstanding the fact that his representation of war's brutality is unromantic and unflinching. As I noted in a short piece that appeared in *Studies in American Fiction* in 1991, and was later included in my book on Crane and American 1890s popular culture, the same critics who went as far as calling Bierce's stories "peace tracts," would also argue that Bierce "was far from being a

¹⁷ William James, "The Moral Equivalent," pp. 1287-88.

¹⁸ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 239; Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, Vol. 1: *Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

pacifist," and that he enjoyed "the companionship and the excitement of war."¹⁹ In my own reading of some of his war stories, I tried to highlight this ambivalence, by insisting that in his narrative machinery there is simply no slot free from the logic of war and aggression, so that any attempt at criticizing the martial universe becomes impossible. Bierce's irony points to the irrationality and monstrosity of war, no doubt, and yet his own ironic assaults are regulated by an ill logic that parallels the one ruling the army world. For example, in "The Coup de Grace," the only humane thing captain Madwell can do for his horribly wounded and agonizing friend sergeant Halcrow is to thrust his sword into the latter's breast and thus put an end to his suffering. Analogously, in "One kind of Officer," Captain Ransom, though aware all along that he is firing on his own troops, is too much of a soldier to question the orders he has received, first, or to say a word in his defense, later, when he is sentenced to death for obeying those orders.

Now, while I must say that I have not come across any sustained rebuttal of my argument, I confess to having been asked in conversation about why I left out from my discussion of Bierce's stories the one that is not only the most frequently anthologized, but which also seems to wear on its sleeve its anti-war credentials. The question I was posed was of course rhetorical. Its subtext was that I was not engaging "Chickamauga" because it did not fit into my argument. Here was an unequivocal anti-war text I was deliberately ignoring for the simple reason that its features resisted the interpretive framework I had set up to deal with the other texts in Bierce's collection. While I acknowledge that "Chickamauga" is different both structurally and thematically from Bierce's other war stories, and while I respect of course those who wish to see it as a denunciation of the utter senselessness of war (it is certainly no accident that, while emphasizing that Bierce "was no pacifist," Lawrence Rosenwald has included the text in his prestigious anthology of American anti-war and peace writing, *War No More*), I would like to take up the challenge and explain why I would still refrain from describing "Chickamauga"

¹⁹ Giorgio Mariani, *Spectacular Narratives. Representations of Class and War in Stephen Crane and the American 1890s* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), pp. 126-27.

as an anti-war text.²⁰ Again, my aim is not to convince anyone that my interpretation is more adequate than others, but to call attention to a set of features that we may take to be broadly critical of the martial spirit and explain why I would hesitate to describe them as evidence of an anti-war position.

I will begin by observing that at a first reading not only the story would seem to be unequivocally anti-war but could even be considered as providing a sort of allegorical anticipation of what would later come to be the classic war (and perhaps “anti-war”) narrative. Considered in its broad outline, the story features what appears to be an innocent boy who, his head filled with romantic notions on the chivalry of warfare, ventures into the woods to play his imaginary war games. He is ironically scared at the sight of a rabbit, and like any archetypal young soldier he is forced to discover both his fear and his at least latent cowardice. Later, however, he reaches unawares the margins of a real battlefield, where he encounters the unromantic, ugly side of war. A group of wounded, devastated soldiers are crawling on their hands and knees, but to the boy they form “a merry spectacle.”²¹ He even tries to play piggyback with one of the bloodied men, the way he has been taught to do with his father’s “Negro” hands. Since the child’s disability as a deaf-mute is revealed only at the end of the story, the scene can be read as an illustration of how ideology fashions its own version of the real. Unable to let go of his war fantasies, the child sees himself as the ‘leader’ of this strange army and it is only later, when he reaches his farm and finds the horribly mutilated body of his mother, killed by a shell, that the traumatic real world finally shatters the imaginary one in which he has taken refuge all along. Her “white face turned upward, the hands thrown out and clutched full of grass, the clothing deranged” (52), the mother’s dead body stands for the obscene content that the war narrative cannot assimilate. At this point, the child’s disability becomes allegorically poignant. His terrifying, inhuman scream may be seen as an early example of that loss of language vis-à-vis the horror of warfare which, from Walter Benjamin’s remark on the

²⁰ *War No More: Three Centuries of American Antiwar & Peace Writing*, ed. Lawrence Rosenwald (New York: The Library of America, 2016), pp. 99-105.

²¹ Ambrose Bierce, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (San Francisco: E.L.G. Steele, 1891), p. 47. Further references are cited parenthetically.

silence of returning World War One soldiers, to Kurt Vonnegut's laconic comment on the impossibility of saying anything intelligent about a massacre, would become a staple of war narratives. Indeed, one could argue that the child's terrifying cries could be glossed with what is perhaps the shortest war story ever told, as reported in Michael Herr's *Dispatches* on the Vietnam War. "Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened."²² At the end of every war story there is traditionally something that cannot be communicated. This something may be factual, as in Herr's case, or emotional and psychological, as in Bierce, but it is something that seems to defy language and understanding.

The soldier, in "Chickamauga" as in countless other war stories, survives and makes it back home, but can he really 'tell' the tale any better than Bierce's child? Before I try to explain why, notwithstanding all I have said so far, I would still resist calling "Chickamauga" an anti-war story, let me add that it would seem to be a story capable of escaping Truffaut's strictures on the supposedly anti-war film. Bierce's text provides us with an illustration of the cruelty and violence of war, but it would be difficult to maintain that in so doing it encourages the reader to take a side in a war whose nature and contours are left, I think deliberately, rather vague. One may follow Bettina Hofmann's intelligent reading of the text and agree with her that neither the boy nor his father and mother are as innocent as one may perceive them at first to be. We are told at the beginning of the story, for example, that the boy fares from a genealogy of ancestors "born to war and dominion as a heritage" (41). Though he is way too young to be considered personally guilty, there can be no question that, equipped with his "wooden sword," the child is cast as a symbol of that same southern mentality that made Mark Twain lay the blame of slavery and the Civil War at the feet of sir Walter Scott. As Hofmann writes, "the boy is presented as heir to a romanticized chivalric and heroic past, qualities which form an essential part of the southern myth" —a myth, the story subtly suggests, to which the child's family actively contributes.²³ The story, then,

²² Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Avon, 1978), p. 6.

²³ Bettina Hofmann, "Focalization in Ambrose Bierce's 'Chikamauga'," *The Ambrose Bierce Project Journal* 1, No. 1 (Fall 2005), <http://www.ambrosebierce.org/journal1hofmann.html>.

would seem to provide a critique of the martial spirit, while simultaneously also avoiding the pitfall of encouraging the reader to take a side in the war at hand. The victims—both the mother and the crawling, moribund soldiers—are southerners, but this does not trigger any anti-Northern animosity, and not only because, as we have just seen, the South may share much of the responsibility for the catastrophe of war. They elicit our sympathy precisely because their victimhood is emphasized. They evoke pity, not a desire for revenge.

Thus far I have apparently argued against myself, by trying to show how “Chickamauga” may indeed be read as a true, uncompromising anti-war story. Before I try, as it were, to undo what I have done so far, let me stress that I do not consider conferring or withdrawing the badge of “anti-war” upon a story as a sign of, respectively, moral praise or condemnation. I happen to believe that there are dozens of war novels, war stories, and war memoirs, which are interesting and praiseworthy though, to my mind, to identify them as anti-war would be to incur in a category mistake. Let me repeat something I said at the beginning of this essay. I am fully aware that to write, stage, or perform anti-war sentiments is a paradoxical activity—an attempt, no matter how peaceful and non-violent, to wage war on war, so I am fully aware that, on my own terms, no anti-war sentiment or action can be thoroughly “pure.” Let me quote Kenneth Burke again. It is simply impossible to imagine “Peace and War at peace.” They must be at war with one another. When they are not—as in the famous Latin dictum, *si vis pacem para bellum*—it is only because “peace” has been cannibalized by war. As William James put it, “Every up-to-date dictionary should say that ‘peace’ and ‘war’ mean the same thing, now *in posse*, now *in actu*.”²⁴ So, if thinking, writing, and acting against war is necessarily contradictory, on what basis can we describe a given text as more convincingly anti-war than another? In my view, based on two main criteria. 1) Does the would-be anti-war text display some awareness of its antinomic status? Is it conscious, so to speak, of its own impossibility? The more it is, the more it will prevent the reader from smugly occupying any comfortable high moral ground. 2) Does the would-be anti-war text offer a standpoint, no matter how unstable and questionable, from which something other than a war-saturated world may be imagined? Is it

²⁴ James, “The Moral Equivalent,” p. 1283.

able, in other words, to counter the spirit of war with a set of alternative values and to be so bold as to imagine these values as able to defeat, rather than succumb to, war?

Bierce's "Chickamauga" must be praised for breaking the conventions of war writing that had prevailed until then in 19th century America. If we exclude some of Walt Whitman's and Herman Melville's Civil War poetry, "the horrors of war" had largely been hidden from view by a flood of patriotic and militaristic rhetoric. By intelligently playing off the deaf-mute child's perspective against the narrator's viewpoint, Bierce succeeds in de-sublimating war, puncturing the chivalric ideal with a tableau of grotesque violence. Bierce was unquestionably one of the first writers to insist that war was irremediably ugly, a point that even after the bloodbath of the Civil War needed to be made if it is true that, as late as 1879, no other than General Sherman had to warn a graduating class of the Michigan Military Academy with the following words: "There is many a boy here today who looks on war as all glory, but, boys, it is all hell."²⁵ However, this awareness on Sherman's part seemed to have had no mitigating effect whatsoever on his strategy of total warfare against the American Indians in the post-Civil War period. It is a sad fact, and one that may be difficult to process, but there is plenty of evidence to show that the acknowledgment of the brutality, murderousness, and unrelenting barbarity of war has rarely been enough to stop people from waging war.

Both Bierce, in his ironic portrayal of the child's fantasies, and Sherman, in his outright dismissal of the chivalric ideal, recognized the gap between the romantic myth of war and its revolting carnage, and yet neither of them seems capable of imagining a world that would not be ruled by the passions of war. In his to me still unsurpassed *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes wrote that "Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact."²⁶ A statement of fact. War is horrible. Violence is ugly. War kills the soldier, but also, at random, the civilian. There is clarity in Bierce's description of war. It does not deny its horror, though

²⁵ "William Tecumseh Sherman," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_Sherman.

²⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), p. 143.

it does not provide much of an explanation. True, there are references to a bellicose tradition of domination that continues to be handed down from parent to child and this is indeed a sign that, as Barthes observed, even “the most natural object contains a political trace, however faint and diluted, the more or less memorable presence of the human act which has produced, fitted up, used, subjected or rejected it.”²⁷ Bierce is in fact telling us that war is not a natural, but a man-made object, and as such, at least theoretically subject to reform.

But then again, man too is part of nature, and it is no accident that war has often been explained as the by-product of some “natural” or even “biological” in-born human aggressiveness. It is in this sense that, paradoxically, even the most unflinching depiction of the horror of war can make the men who are part of it “innocent.” If, to quote Barthes again, one makes contingency appear eternal, historical intention turns into natural justification. So, to conclude, the answer I can provide to the question raised in the title of this essay is both yes and no. The realism of Bierce and Crane set the ground for the emergence of the modern war story, both in the US and elsewhere, and their prose often lashed out in ironic and grotesque ways against the ‘heroic’ ideology underlying the martial spirit of their age. However, if one happens to believe—as I and others far more knowledgeable in these matters than me do—that to insist on the ugly and gruesome side of war without imagining how to actively oppose war, falls short of taking an anti-war position, then my answer can only be a resounding “no.” Moreover, the contradictions displayed by late 19th century narratives of war have been by and large inherited by the tradition that would follow in their wake.

To be frank, I have often thought that, to repeat what Ralph Waldo Emerson said of man in general, the anti-war novel is a “golden impossibility” as the line such a text must walk is indeed a hair’s breadth. As Bierce’s “Chickamauga” itself shows, the line between the “maimed and bleeding men” scattered around the battlefield and the “merry spectacle” the deaf-mute child perceives is thinner than we may realize. As Bierce observes, “the points of the compass were reversed” (52) only once the child recognizes that the building ablaze is his own home and the body of the dead woman is that of his mother. Only when we

²⁷ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 143.

are hit—literally—close to home we seem to take stock of the truth of war, but even acknowledging such truth, to paraphrase what Henry David Thoreau said of voting for the right, is doing nothing to get rid of war. The deaf-mute child's "inarticulate and indescribable cries—something between the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkey" may well be the only immediate response to the physical and moral devastation of the blind fury of war. But let us not forget that Bierce went on to add that such was "a startling, soulless, unholy sound, the language of a devil" (53). True, Bierce is to this day famous as the author of *The Devil's Dictionary*, but I doubt he meant to impart any positive value to the child's desperate reaction. Whatever the case might be, we will probably need something better than the language of a devil to resist the devil's work.

3. Reimagining the Past: The Myth of the Frontier, Violence and the “Revisionist” Western Film (1982-1993)

I think nowadays, while literary men seem
to have neglected their epic duties, the epic
has been saved for us, strangely enough,
by the Westerns, [...] has been saved for
the world by of all places Hollywood.

— Louis Borges (1967)¹

The epic, the novel and the frontier

The literary debates that followed the American Revolution were to a large extent informed by the idea that only an epic poem could unequivocally establish the cultural identity of the new American nation. This search for an American epic, however, clashed with two important and incontrovertible facts. First, although it continued to enjoy prestige among the intellectual elite, the epic genre had entered an irreversible crisis. The literary scene was now increasingly dominated, both in England and in the United States, by the novel, while in the field of poetry the short (or relatively short) lyrical

¹ This is one of the epigraphs chosen by Lee Clark Mitchell for his valuable *Westerns. Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1996). Mitchell himself took it from a previous study of the genre by Philip French (*Western. Aspects of a Movie Genre* [London: Secker & Warburg, 1973], p. 6), who does not provide a source for Borges’s comment.

compositions characteristic of the romantic season were very distant in form, structure, and inspiration not only from the great Homeric and Virgilian epics, but also from the chronologically closer ones of Milton, Tasso and Ariosto. Secondly, although American intellectuals longed for a Yankee Milton capable of reinventing the epic on the basis of the republican values of the New World, the belief that "courage in battle was at best a barbarous means to the heroic end of creating an empire based upon rural virtues, profitable commerce, and libertarian politics," clashed head-on with one of the fundamental characteristics of the epic.² Was it possible to sustain the epic idea of the warrior hero in a cultural context espousing an anti-martial idea of heroism? Was an epic with a leading peaceful hero imaginable? And, perhaps most importantly, was the epic form—the expression of a "barbarian" culture in its Homeric version; of an imperial design in the Virgilian vulgate; of an aristocratic viewpoint in Ariosto and Tasso—ultimately compatible with democracy and the rationalist rethinking of war?³

Joel Barlow, an author read today only by specialists, had tried to provide an answer to these dilemmas, but his *Columbiad* (1787), although in several ways an interesting text, was far from successful from both an artistic and political viewpoint.⁴ Furthermore, while many traditional New England intellectuals continued to believe—as Barlow also did to some extent—that only the American Revolution could provide an epic subject for the American writer, by the 1820s and 1830s a growing number of authors and critics had become convinced that the American common man "was more likely to be moved by the heroism of conquering the land than by more recollections of neo-Virginian gentlemen creating the world's republic in

² John P. McWilliams, *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 34.

³ On the representation of war in Tasso and Ariosto, see Antonio Scurati, *Guerra. Narrazioni e culture della tradizione occidentale*, (Roma: Donzelli, 2003), pp. 141-76, as well as the important, detailed reflections on war and the epic in the first part of the book (pp. 3-108).

⁴ For an examination of the poem's artistic and ideological flaws, as well as of what I take to be an interesting, noble effort to produce a sort of "peace epic," see my "An American Counter-Epic? War and Peace in Joel Barlow's *Columbiad*," in *Waging War on War. Peacefighting in American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), pp. 87-105.

Philadelphia.”⁵ The world of the frontier—where Americans struggled with wild nature, clashed with the Indians, and had to overcome prodigious obstacles in their attempts at creating a new civilization—although lacking the “epic distance” of a bygone, preferably archaic past, was a world that could provide writers with unmistakably “epic” heroes, motifs, and scenarios.⁶ However, it was necessary to set aside the idea that the epic had to be a long poem in verse. On the contrary, epic contents had to find expression in cultural productions reserved not for an intellectual elite, but accessible to the common man. The epic could survive and be regenerated only thanks to the novel.

What we may wish to call the democratization of epic discourse on the level of form, however, was matched by a marked setback on an ideological level. No matter how contradictory his *Columbiad* turned out to be, Barlow's dream had been to create an epic of peace in which the use of force and war would be represented as an inevitable though nevertheless deplorable detour on the path to achieving universal harmony between peoples and nations. Such a vision—which drew inspiration from the political philosophy of eighteenth-century Europe and from the Enlightenment understanding of Greco-Roman classicism—was embodied in the figure of the gentleman farmer, who would take up arms only in extreme cases, as a last resort to defend republican values. This figure was rather distant from the heroes we usually associate with American culture, both popular and highbrow. The advent of a romantic sensibility, with its attendant re-discovery of the myth of war as the necessary forge for the spirit of the nation, cannot by itself explain the resurgence of a heroism in which martial virtues were once again privileged. The success met by novels devoted to the experience of the frontier starting from the 1820s should rather be seen as a return to the origins of American literature—a return to those typically colonial genres such as the Indian war narratives and the captivities, the earliest best-sellers in American

⁵ McWilliams, *The American Epic*, p. 66.

⁶ On “epic distance” and other morphological as well as thematic features of the epic genre, see Mikhail Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 3–40.

literary history. If the clash with England, on the one hand, and the process of political and institutional construction of the new nation, on the other, had forced the intellectual class to keep its eyes fixed on the East, the subsequent consolidation of the settlements along the eastern seaboard increasingly encouraged Americans to look West, where an immense continent lied awaiting to be explored and "civilized," and where the drama of the old colonial frontier could be re-played on a larger scale.

Two events encapsulate this new historical and cultural epoch. In 1828 the elections for the presidency of the United States were won by Andrew Jackson, the candidate of the Democratic Party. Although this grouping inherited the legacy of the old Jeffersonian-Republican alignment, "the era of politics as a sphere reserved mainly for the elite" had by now passed and both the new party—which sold itself as the party of the "common people"—and its leader were far from the models established by the Founding Fathers.⁷ The new president of the United States could not be assimilated to the figure of the gentleman farmer. During the war with England of 1812-1815, at the command of his frontiersmen, Jackson had conducted ruthless military campaigns against the Southeast Indian tribes of the Creek and the Seminole. Later, as president, he paved the way for the deportation of the Cherokee nation from the state of Georgia to the territory of Oklahoma, even though the Supreme Court itself had partially upheld the tribe's appeal. In short, Jackson stood out as the hero of the new immigrants hungry for lands and opportunities: an example for all those pioneers who saw in the American Indians nothing more than obstacles to be removed by resorting to a violence that in their opinion was as legitimate as necessary. The stereotyped, but to some extent positive, images that had characterized the Enlightenment or Roussovian vision of the Indian were set aside and replaced by more markedly racist depictions portraying Indians as diabolical and bloodthirsty creatures.⁸

⁷ Oliviero Bergamini, *Storia degli Stati Uniti d'America* (Bari: Laterza, 2002), p. 73.

⁸ There are numerous studies on the changing representations of indigenous peoples in American culture, ranging from the pioneering and still valuable *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind*, by Roy Harvey Pearce (1953; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) to Robert F. Berkhofer's *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*

The other crucial event of these years was a literary one. In 1826, exactly half a century after the declaration of Independence, James Fenimore Cooper published *The Last of the Mohicans*, a novel which, among its many merits, had that of inventing the so-called western formula: a combination of characters, plot, and scenes that would be taken up again and again (and of course modified, but never completely abandoned) in thousands of stories, plays, films, comics, and children's books. Against the backdrop of a majestic, wild, and often sublime nature, Cooper grafted the American traditions mentioned above (captivities, Indian war narratives) onto the archetypal elements of the adventure story and made the most of the contrast between the forces of civilization and those of the wilderness, already introduced in *The Pioneers* (1823), the novel in which the legendary character of Natty Bumppo had made his first appearance. While *The Pioneers* was largely a novel of manners, in *The Last of the Mohicans* Cooper was completely aware of the epic dimension of the story. It is no accident that various epic conventions are evoked several times in the novel (from the clash between two warrior leaders to the funeral rituals with which the book ends, two *topoi* that come straight from the *Iliad*) and that numerous chapters begin with epigraphs taken from Homer's poem. Nor is it a simple coincidence that, from D. H. Lawrence to Leslie Fiedler, from Richard Slotkin to Martin Baker and Roger Sabin (whose study on the global success of Cooper's novel is not by chance subtitled "History of an American Myth") critics have repeatedly placed emphasis on the epic, archetypal, and mythological quality of the text.⁹

If there can be no doubt regarding Cooper's intentions to elevate

(New York: Random House, 1978), Lucy Maddox's *Removals: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Politics of Indian Affairs* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), and Helen Carr's *Inventing the American Primitive: Politics, Gender, and the Representation of Native American Literary traditions* (New York, New York UP, 1996), just to name a few.

⁹ D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, (1923; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 52-69; Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, (New York: Criterion, 1960), 170-212; Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), pp. 466-68; 484-507; Martin Baker, Roger Sabin, *The Lasting of the Mohicans: History of an American Myth* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995).

to epic dignity a type of adventure that would later become known as the western story, we must add that only some incarnations of this fundamental literary and cinematic American genre have matched the quality of the prototype. One may legitimately lament that the label "epic" is often applied to the western genre in a casual way, and that when the clash between civilization and wilderness, between pioneers and Indians, or between sheriffs and outlaws takes on blatantly Manichaean contours, the Homeric traces of the story all but disappear. As every reader of the *Iliad* knows, it is the equal greatness of the contenders and Homer's celebrated equanimity between the Achaeans and the Trojans that contribute decisively to making the work a great epic. But if the western achieves a genuine epic grandeur only on some occasions, the numerous points of contact with the epic on both a structural and thematic level cannot be overlooked. By the same token, there is no denying that this genre represents a formidable cornerstone of American culture.¹⁰ Inextricably intertwined with the greatest American myth of all times—the myth of the frontier—the Western has its roots in the experience of the first European settlers and then follows the entire development of American history even when the world of the frontier was no more.¹¹ There is no other

¹⁰ On the relationship between the western and the epic, see, among others, Vincent Marston, "Epics and Westerns," *Classical Outlook* 54, No. 7 (March 1977), pp. 76-79; Martin Winkler, "Classical Mythology and the Western Film," *Comparative Literature Studies* 22, No. 4 (1985), pp. 516-40; id., "Tragic Features in John Ford's *The Searchers*," in *Bucknell Review* 35, No. 1 (1991), pp. 85-108; Mary Whitlock Blundell and Kirk Ormand, "Western Values, or the People's Homer: *Unforgiven* as a Reading of the *Iliad*," *Poetics Today* 18, No. 4 (1997), pp. 533-69. On a more strictly cultural and philosophical level, some affinities can be traced between the reconstruction of the epic contest offered by Antonio Scurati in *Guerra*, and what Jane Tompkins writes regarding the anti-Christian scenarios of the western world, where the hero's masculinity can only be tested by risking (and giving) death (See *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1992], especially pp. 23-45). From a slightly different perspective, vice versa, the virtual omnipresence of the duel in the western story makes it a perfect exemplification of that "eternal seductiveness exercised by war" that survives in late modernity, when any attempt to imagine war as a duel can only prove to be pathetically inadequate in the face of the reality of increasingly technological conflicts. On all this, see Scurati, *Guerra* (Roma: Donzelli, 2003, pp. xiv-xxiv).

¹¹ As Richard Slotkin writes, "The Myth of the Frontier is our oldest and most characteristic myth, expressed in a body of literature, folklore, ritual, historiography, and polemics, produced over a period of three centuries. According to this myth-

genre in American culture that can boast such longevity and adaptability to different political and cultural contexts, so much so that all the best studies on the Western are always and inevitably also studies of how the basic formula has been continuously reinvented and invested with new meanings, springing from different historical-cultural contexts and concerns. As John Cawelti had already observed decades ago, a good part of the extraordinary success and durability of the genre lies in the fact that western stories allow us to “project the tensions and preoccupations of the present into the legendary past in order to seek in the imagination some kind of resolution or acceptance of conflicts of value and feeling that cannot be solved in the present.”¹²

The Western narrative and the problem of violence

One of the “tensions” that, since *The Last of the Mohicans*, the western story has taken upon itself to investigate and “resolve,” concerns of course the legitimacy of the use of violence as a “civilizing” tool. From this point of view, even in the epic of the West it is possible to perceive an echo (faint or strong, depending on the case) of the ethical dilemma with which Barlow had struggled. Indeed, if on the one hand the world of the frontier in the Western is a decidedly wild world, where the rules of a “normal” society must often be suspended, on the other hand this does not mean that the use of violence

historiography, the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievement of a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy, and a phenomenally dynamic and ‘progressive’ civilization. The original ideological task of the Myth was to explain and justify the establishment of the American colonies, but as the colonies expanded and developed, the Myth was called on to account for our rapid economic growth, our emergence as a powerful nation-state, and our distinctively American approach to the socially and culturally disruptive processes of modernization.” (Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* [New York: Harper, 1992], p. 10). This volume completes the trilogy begun by Slotkin in 1973 with *Regeneration Through Violence*, and then continued with *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985).

¹² John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 259.

is considered as both obvious and inevitable. For example, although the first authors of western stories such as Cooper, or the much inferior Robert Montgomery Bird, may have been very distant from the Enlightenment ideals of a Barlow, the audience they addressed was still one of Christianized readers among whom the use of weapons was less widespread than is often believed, and clashed with basic ethical and religious concerns.¹³ Of course, unlike Barlow, Cooper did not think it was his job to advocate for universal peace. This, however, does not mean that—despite his tacit approval of certain forms of violence—he subscribed uncritically to a martial ideology. Although he seemed to endorse a kind of Homeric heroism, Cooper did not fail to adopt a critical point of view regarding the violent nature of the American frontier in general, and of his own hero, in particular.

Similarly, all the major western stories—whether written or filmed—that followed Cooper's great novel are characterized by a narratological convention whose significance has often been underestimated by commentators: that of the comparison between the hero and a female figure (generally originating from the East) who represents the Christian and non-violent values of society. Before turning his violence on the villain (or villains), the hero must face the obstacle of a beloved woman who declares herself against the use of violence. Of course, the hero cannot heed the heroine's prayers because the Western code of honor prevails over any moral concerns. In the West of the myth "a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do," though this will not prevent the hero from obtaining, in addition to the life of his antagonist, also the woman he desires, because the latter will transcend her ethical preoccupations in the name of love. From the Molly of *The Virginian* by Owen Wister (1902) to the Jane of *Riders of the Purple Sage* by Zane Gray (1912), or, to move from literature to cinema, from the Amy of *High Noon* (dir. Frank Zinnemann, 1952) to the Marian of *The Knight of the Lonely Vale* (dir. George Stevens, 1953), the Western is populated with heroines who go from pacifism to the arms

¹³ Robert Montgomery Bird is the author of *Nick of the Woods, or the Jibbenainosay: A Tale of Kentucky* (1837), an illustrious example of that fiercely anti-Indian attitude that Herman Melville would later stigmatize in his novel *The Confidence-Man* (1857) as "the metaphysics of Indian-hating." For a discussion of America's "gun culture," see Giorgio Mariani, "Ad bellum purificandum, or, Giving Peace a (Fighting) Chance in American Studies," *American Literary History* 21, No. 1 (Spring 2009), pp. 96-119.

of a man who has just committed murder, as if the ultimate objective of the story was not so much the defeat of the bad guys as the submission of women and their non-violent principles. As Jane Tompkins brilliantly argued in her study of the Western genre, "[i]t cannot be fortuitous that the shoot-out is staged time and again in Westerns as a direct violation of what the woman in the story wants."¹⁴ It cannot be fortuitous because, as Tompkins insists, the Western is in many ways a masculine (and fiercely patriarchal) response to the "domestic novel," "the antithesis of the cult of domesticity that dominated American Victorian culture."¹⁵ In its desire to marginalize and subjugate the figure of women (and the evangelical culture that this figure generally symbolizes), the Western defends an idea of violence as the only effective tool for resolving social conflicts.

We could say that if the Western is a type of story aspiring to be a great American popular epic, it is also a story that is imagined in a relationship of continuity with the martial values of the traditional epic. The gender/genre war which, especially after Cooper, the Western engages with the "domestic novel" and female evangelical culture, however, testifies to the need of including—so as to better contain it—a point of view diametrically opposed to that embodied by the hero and the genre as a whole. The perspective that the Western must prove ineffective can be summed up in the words with which Amy (Grace Kelly) in *High Noon* tries to stop Willy Kane (Gary Cooper) before the shoot-out with Frank Miller's gang: "I don't care who is right and who is wrong. There must be a better way for people to live!" In many respects the Western has the function of proving that those who think like Amy are wrong. There is no "better," different way than using force to ward off those who threaten society. The Western genre "exists in order to provide a justification for violence," which does not mean that we should ignore Amy's cry as it demonstrates, at least, that the use of violence is never an undisputed or natural choice.¹⁶ The use of force advocated by some is often opposed by others. If we forget this, not only we become ideologically complicit

¹⁴ Tompkins, *West of Everything*, p. 143.

¹⁵ Tompkins, *West of Everything*, p. 39. On the construction of masculinity in the western story see also Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns*.

¹⁶ Tompkins, *West of Everything*, p. 227.

in the violence that the genre aims to propagate, but we end up giving credence to the mythology of an American society with a uniformly violent past.¹⁷

Although one can imagine a deconstruction of the Western that would focus on the female point of view within its stories, there is no denying that the cultural function of the genre is to provide a justification for the use of force in defending the social compact. This is a feature of the Western that seems capable of surviving all (or almost all) of its evolutions. Even during the golden age of Western cinema there was no shortage of films that were in some ways innovative. One can think, for example, of *The Indian Lover* (1950; dir. Delmer Daves) or *Fort Apache* (1948; dir. John Ford), where one can find a critical perspective on the settlers' or the US army's conduct towards the Indians. Then, since the end of the 1960s—after the civil rights movement, the counterculture, the marches against the Vietnam War—we witness the production of films that try, more or less successfully, to take the Indians' viewpoint, such as *Soldier Blue* (1970; dir. Ralph Nelson,) or *Little Big Man* (1970; dir. Arthur Penn). These films explicitly denounce the violence of colonization but remain largely imprisoned in a paradox. On the one hand, they tend to confirm a vision of the West as a wild place dominated by violence and continue to present the hostilities between Indians and Whites in often simplistic, if not Manichaeian terms (the roles are simply reversed). On the other hand, the critique of violence is ambiguous because the spectator is asked to sympathize with the defensive violence of the Indians. Now, in some respects this is a step forward: recognizing that Indians had the right to resist and fight back grants indigenous peoples a certain dignity on a political as well as on a cultural and human level. Being able to side with the Indians at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, however, remains a small consolation, especially if you consider how that defeat of the US army served to promote an even more ferocious and ruthless anti-

¹⁷ On the ideological and cultural significance of the image of a "wild" and violent West, see the interventions by Stewart Udall, Robert Dykstra, Michael Bellesiles, Paula Mitchellmarks and Gregory Nobles in *How the West Got Wild: American Media and Frontier Violence*, a roundtable discussion organized in 1999 by the Western Historical Association in Portland, and later published in *Western Historical Quarterly* 31 (Autumn 2000), pp. 277-95.

Indian campaign.¹⁸ In short, although some of these films (Penn's, for example) have indisputable merits from both an aesthetic and a political-cultural point of view, it cannot be said that they make any effort to outline that "better way of living" invoked by Amy in *High Noon*.

This is not to say that the attempts to rethink the Western from an innovative perspective are not worth paying attention to. What has come to be known as the "neo" or "revisionist" Western, began to take shape in the Sixties, along with a wholesale reconsideration of America's historical and cultural legacy, and thus of the Myth of the Frontier as well. However, the anti-war and pacifist sentiments of the times seemed to have been only partly translated into the "new" Westerns of those days. The massacres of Indian civilians in films like *Little Big Man*, for example, were clearly meant to evoke the specter of My Lai and other horrors of the Vietnam conflict, but the nexus between violence and national identity was never the object of a sustained critical reflection. Indeed, as has been noted, the post-Sixties Western became generally much more explicitly violent than its ostensibly more ideologically conservative predecessors. It would therefore appear that the desire to call attention to violence ended up, paradoxically, by reinforcing rather than undermining the Myth of the West as an endemically and inescapably ruthless and violent world. Violence was denounced and at the same time turned into a more captivating spectacle than it had been in earlier Westerns. One is tempted to say that, though the Western may certainly accommodate a wide variety of preoccupations and cultural perspectives, it cannot subject to a serious critique its most intimate *raison d'être*—its commitment to discounting *High Noon's* Amy's pacifism as naïve and misguided.

Another shortcoming of the early "neo" or "revisionist" Westerns was their reluctance to engage a cultural landscape different from the

¹⁸ For a splendid (literary) example of how to reconstruct this episode "made up of many stories" by accounting for the complexity of the conflict between Whites and Indians, see James Welch (with Paul Stekler), *Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Big Horn and the Fate of the Plains Indians* (New York: Norton, 1994). On the mythology born around "Custer's Last Stand," and especially on its political and ideological uses, see the last chapter of Richard Slotkin's *The Fatal Environment*.

classic one.¹⁹ Not only did women and ethnically marked characters continue to play by and large marginal and stereotypical roles, but even those movies wishing to take the American Indians' side did not seem interested in offering more historically and ethnographically accurate accounts of the native tribal world.²⁰ It was only in the Nineties, with the disintegration of the Soviet empire and the onset of what Donald Pease has described as "a new state fantasy [...] that changed the terms of the cold war settlement from liberal individualism to liberal multiculturalism," that US citizens have more thoroughly "imagined dis severing themselves from the nation's shameful monocultural past."²¹ One of the cultural events overlapping with the first Clinton presidency, and which Pease sees as especially significant in the nation's "collective disassociation from its shameful past," was the Smithsonian's Institution's "The West in America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920," an installation "which interpreted westward expansion from the perspective of indigenous peoples it displaced and the immigrants it exploited," and which was of course attacked by the Right for its supposed "political correctness."²² The contemporary Westerns I will be discussing below — all released in the Nineties, except for *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, released in 1982 — must be seen as belonging to this changing cultural context, and are in particular notable for their effort to reimagine the world of the frontier as a more properly multicultural "contact zone," as well as for trying to represent the nation's westward advance from points of view hitherto largely discounted.²³ The five movies I have chosen to discuss, all place special emphasis on the role of women and ethnic

¹⁹ Just to be clear, to term "revisionist" when applied to the Western, has no relation whatsoever to the "revisionism" of Holocaust deniers. It is simply a term used to point to the endless "rewriting" of stories we inherit from the past.

²⁰ On the "bad research" on which some 70s Westerns were based see Hedy Hartman, "A Brief Review of the Native American in American Cinema," *The Indian Historian* 9, No. 3 (Summer 1976), pp. 27-29.

²¹ Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 71.

²² Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* p. 132. On the reactions to the exhibit, see Eric Foner and Jon Wiener, "Fighting for the West," *The Nation*, July 29, 1991, pp. 163-66.

²³ For a definition of the frontier as a "contact zone" see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 4.

minorities in the western historical as well as mythical/symbolic landscape.

Devoted, respectively, to the French and Indian Wars of the Colonial period (*The Last of the Mohicans*), to the Afro-American presence in the history of the West (*Posse*), to the relation between women and the frontier (*Bad Girls*), to the Chicano world of the borderlands between Texas and Mexico (*The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*), and, finally, to revisiting at once ironically and elegiacally the myth of the West and of the Western (*Unforgiven*), all these movies focus on one or more central characters who are not the standard white male hero central not only to the traditional formula, but also to many “new,” post-Sixties Westerns as well. The exception is of course *Unforgiven*, whose hero is both a white male and a quintessential Western icon like Clint Eastwood. His character, however, is largely defined in terms of the relation he entertains with his black companion, on the one side, and the figure of his deceased wife Claudia, on the other. I must say at the outset that—except for *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* and, at least in part, of Eastwood’s movie—also these more recent and more programmatically revisionist Westerns often seem to rely on a mythical, regenerative notion of violence. It would seem that, in order to join the new multicultural covenant, also blacks, women, and other traditionally marginalized figures must take part in a bloody rite of passage whereby—to quote from Robert Frost’s famous poem on the frontier—the “deed of gift” is acknowledged and celebrated as “many deeds of war.”²⁴ Women and ethnic minorities, who were for the most part the object of patriarchal, racist, and imperial violence, are rescued from their status as victims only so that they may embrace the very Western mythology that had traditionally assigned to them the role of scapegoats or, at best, marginal and servile positions. In what follows I try to explain how this happens, but I also emphasize those rare moments when the ideological framework underpinning the myth of regeneration through violence is called into question.

²⁴ I am obviously referring to “The Gift Outright,” written in 1942 and recited by Frost on John F. Kennedy’s inauguration.

The last of *The Last of the Mohicans*. Cooper's frontier according to Michael Mann

I would like to start with the movie that is most explicitly concerned with the issue of nation-building, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992; dir. Michael Mann).²⁵ Though obviously attracted to Cooper's text, director Michael Mann has stated that he always had strong reservations concerning the ideological commitments of the author of the *Leatherstocking Tales*: "I regard Cooper as Mark Twain did, which is to say not very charitably. He was a reactionary man who believed that racial groups and class were the social equivalent of the great chain of being, that people got in trouble when they tried to move out of it. In his image of the 'noble savage,' he heaped one historical crime upon another—retroactively stealing both their humanity and their history."²⁶ Given such premises, one would expect from Mann a movie showing Cooper's novel's imbrication with racism and colonialism, or else a re-writing of the text that would correct its most offensive political and cultural traits by emphasizing those parts of the narrative that are ambiguous and perhaps unexpectedly non-conformist. As a matter of fact, however, Mann does nothing of the sort and, despite his good intentions, he ends up putting together a cultural product that can be considered in several ways as even more conservative than Cooper's novel was not only for his contemporaries, but also for any current reader who would take the trouble to pay some attention to its contradictory features.²⁷

²⁵ The film, produced by Twentieth Century Fox, casts Daniel Day-Lewis as Natty Bumppo, Madeline Stowe as Cora, Wes Studi as Magua, Russell Means as Chingachgook and Eric Schweig as Uncas.

²⁶ As quoted in Elaine Dutka, "One Mann, Two Worlds," *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 1992, Home Edition, p. 3. It is ironic, to say the least, that Mann would invoke Twain's authority in order to stigmatize Cooper's views on the Indians. Twain, as any reader of his celebrated "James Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses" knows, was—regrettably—critical of Cooper not because he entertained more advanced opinions regarding Native Americans. If anything, the opposite is true. In Twain's eyes Cooper had exaggerated in attributing to the Indians—or, better, to some of his Indians—positive features.

²⁷ A sharply critical reading of the film, especially as far as its representation of Indians is concerned, may be found in M. Elise Marubbio, "Celebrating with *The Last of the Mohicans*. The Columbus Quincentenary and Neocolonialism in Hollywood

In analyzing Mann's film, we must begin by observing that it is largely based on the script written by Philippe Dunne for a United Artists 1936 film directed by George Seitz. Dunne's script anticipates some of the most significant differences between Cooper's text and Mann's own adaptation. The main one concerns the hero of the Leatherstocking series, Natty Bumppo, also known as Hawkeye. At least since the Sixties, following Leslie Fiedler's re-reading of D.H. Lawrence's essays on Cooper, this character has been seen as embodying a specific American mythology centering on freedom of movement, loose family and social relations, and an a-sexual (though perhaps secretly homoerotic) lifestyle, so that—apart from Chingachgook—the only "sweetheart" Natty can afford to have is the primordial forest.²⁸ Dunne, vice versa, moves in a completely different direction, as he evidently ruled out the possibility of producing a movie in which the love story—as is the case with the novel—would not concern the protagonist but two secondary characters like colonel Munro's daughter, Alice, and major Duncan Heyward. In a Hollywood production, Hawkeye (Randolph Scott in Seitz's film) *had to* fall in love, and in Dunne's script he became the man destined to replace Heyward as Alice's love interest. In this way, however, Dunne marginalized the Indian characters, erasing moreover the Uncas-Cora-Magua love triangle, which in the novel raises the forbidden theme of miscegenation. Mann follows the 1936 script in opting for a Natty in love though, unlike Dunne, he resuscitates the Uncas-white woman-Magua triangle, but only after substituting the more sanguine and sensual Cora with Alice, thus leaving the former free to fall in love with Natty.

Film," *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures* 25, No. 1 (March 2002), pp. 139-54. Also critical of the film is Jeffrey Walker, "Deconstructing an American Myth: *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992)", in *Hollywood's Indian. The Portrayal of Native American in Film*, eds. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1998), pp. 170-86. Walker considers, as I also do, Mann's deviations from Cooper's novel as being rather unsuccessful.

²⁸ See Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, pp. 170-212. When, in *The Deerslayer*, Natty is asked by Judith "And where, then, is your sweetheart, Deerslayer?", he answers: "She's in the forest, Judith—hanging from the boughs of the trees, in a soft rain—in the dew on the open grass—the clouds that float about in the blue heavens—the birds that sing in the woods—the sweet springs where I slake my thirst—and in all the other glorious gifts that come from God's Providence!". *The Deerslayer*, ed. and with an introduction by Donald Pease (New York, Penguin, 1987), p. 139.

Another important difference between novel and movie inherited from Dunne's script concerns the historical and cultural background of the tale, which takes place during the third year (1757) of the Seven Years' War, fought between the English and the French to secure control over the Northeastern territories. Cooper makes Natty a scout much more intelligent, resourceful, and wilderness-wise than any French or English soldier but he does not turn him into a proto-nationalist American uncomfortable with British rule over the colonies. In other words, it is hard to detect a pre-revolutionary, anti-British theme in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Cooper does not see the French and Indian Wars as a sort of prelude to, let alone an allegory of, the War of Independence. In Seitz's film, on the contrary, as Gary Edgerton has noted, "Hawkeye is far more anti-authoritarian and disparaging of British colonial policies than he ever is in the novel [...]. The national rivalry between England and France remains, but a strong undercurrent of American skepticism towards the validity and usefulness of European perceptions and customs becomes far more pronounced than ever before."²⁹ Mann follows suit, by turning Natty into an American patriot. One need only think of the scenes where he clashes with colonel Munro and major Heyward, accusing them of taking more to heart the interests of the Crown than the safety and well-being of the colonists, or of the fact that Natty is finally accused of sedition, imprisoned, and condemned to death, only to escape his hanging once Magua's Indians attack the British, after their surrender of Fort William Henry to the French. None of this can be found in Cooper's original storyline.³⁰

If I call attention to the differences between the text and the film, it is not to show the extent to which Mann may have 'betrayed' Cooper's novel. We all know by now how interesting and enlightening cinematic translations of literary materials may be, and how often, by imaginatively re-writing the source text, a film may shed new light

²⁹ Gary Edgerton, "'A Breed Apart': Hollywood, Racial Stereotyping, and the Promise of Revisionism in *The Last of the Mohicans*," *The Journal of American Culture* 172 (June 1994), p. 4.

³⁰ In the novel, while Duncan Heyward is for the most part incapable of adapting to the wilderness, Munro is to a large extent depicted as a positive, admirable figure.

on the former's main themes.³¹ The issue here is not whether Mann has taken too many liberties with the original plot, but what kind of cultural and ideological operation he has performed by rewriting the source text. As Philip Fischer has shown, Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* had some important "cultural work" to perform at the time of its appearance. The same may be said of Mann's reinvention of Cooper's tale, though, as I will try to show, the film's ideological framework is rather different from that of the novel.³²

Natty, the Indians, and America

The central theme of *The Last of the Mohicans* is that of the epic confrontation between Whites and Indians, not only on a historical and political level but, more importantly, on a cultural and symbolic one. The Leatherstocking Tales are only the most widely known of the literally hundreds of texts dealing with American Indians published during the first half of the nineteenth century, all marked by the presence of the theme of the "vanishing American." Whether noble or ignoble, the Indian was, from the Whites' point of view, inevitably destined to become either physically or at least culturally extinct.³³

³¹ An excellent example of this may be found in Jane Campion's adaptation of Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*, as shown by Donatella Izzo in "Nel segno di Isabel Archer," *Acoma. Rivista internazionale di studi nord americani* 12 (Inverno 1998), pp. 37-51.

³² Philip Fischer, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 22-86.

³³ For some important explorations of this theme see, among others, Leslie Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (New York: Stein and Day, 1968); Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982); Lucy Maddox Ford, *Removals*; Lora Romero, "Vanishing Americans: Gender, Empire, and New Historicism," *American Literature* 63, No. 3 (September 1991), pp. 385-404; Alan Trachtenberg, *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans, 1880-1930* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005). As Maddox in particular insists, even one of the most critical writers of the nineteenth century like Herman Melville—notwithstanding the vitriolic chapter on "The Metaphysics of Indian Hating" in *The Confidence-Man*—followed Hawthorne, Poe, Twain, James, and others, in never devoting any sustained attention to the Indian question. The situation would hardly change in the twentieth century. Those writers we consider as canonical have only reserved minor roles to Indian characters. Faulkner's Sam Fathers may be a

Nowadays we know, however, how wrong this gloomy and self-serving Euro-American expectation was. What over one hundred and fifty years ago was not only (to some extent, at least) Cooper's viewpoint, but a common sense shared by most American citizens, in Mann's film should be considered with some healthy ironic detachment. Yet, surprisingly enough given Mann's revisionist intentions, this is not a perspective the movie cares to develop. Even though he thoroughly refunctions Natty's character, Mann seems to have no interest whatsoever in seriously rethinking the dilemma of White America's relation to Native America. He has no desire to call attention to his country's blindness concerning the genocidal policies of the US government but, on the contrary, he seems driven by the intention of producing a new mythology destined to erase the ethical and ideological tensions that in Cooper's novel—whatever its shortcomings—remain quite visible.

Let us now turn back to Mann's movie, where not only Natty falls in love but, more importantly, his moral stature is never seriously questioned. Hawkeye's violence is made acceptable to the spectator because it is always presented as a necessary answer to Magua's vile aggressions. Moreover, in the novel Magua is killed by Natty himself in what Cooper chose to depict as almost an execution, with Magua holding on to a branch on the verge of a precipice and Hawkeye, "crouched like a beast about to take its spring," unwittingly mirroring the beastliness and thirst for revenge generally associated with Magua.³⁴ In Mann's movie, instead, Magua is killed by Chingachgook, in an act that brings to a close the self-slaughter of Indians: Magua kills Uncas, and Chingachgook kills Magua, only to finally announce his departure, thus symbolically leaving America to the white couple of

partial exception, but he too is to a large extent yet another "vanishing American." One wonders whether Cooper's sustained interest in a popular topic neglected by major, more canonical authors, has something to do with his marginal position within the US literary tradition. As James D. Wallace has noted, likening Cooper to Natty Bumppo, this great American writer remains to this day "well at the margins of his civilization—'important,' noticed, acknowledged, but never quite central to anyone's notion of what American literature is all about." "Leatherstocking and His Author," *American Literary History* 5, No. 4 (Winter 1993), pp. 700-1.

³⁴ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, ed. and with an introduction by Richard Slotkin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 338. Further references are cited parenthetically.

Cora Munro and Natty Bunppo. Cooper, though he may have to some extent endorsed the myth of the vanishing American, was at least more candid about the Whites' historical and moral responsibilities.³⁵

Hawkeye's transformation into Hollywood hero is made easier by Mann's erasure from the story of David Gamut, the bizarre "psalmodist" who, besides showing how a man of religion may be out of place in the violent world of the wilderness, raises on several occasions thorny and intractable moral dilemmas. A few chapters before Magua's killing, Natty tells Gamut that if the latter were to be scalped by the hostile Indians, his death would be avenged. Gamut, however, objects: "I am an unworthy and humble follower of one, who taught not the damnable principle of revenge" (274). Confronted with such a clear moral position, Hawkeye does not seem capable of articulating an appropriate answer.³⁶ He heaves "a heavy sigh," and declares that somehow he too wished he could live by conforming to such noble principles, so different from "the law of the woods," adding that in his heart he would really like to treat an Indian like "a fellow Christian," but that "it is not always easy" (274). "Hawkeye begins these musings with a confident assertion but soon breaks down into hesitant qualifications that reflect his vacillating between absolute and race-relative standards."³⁷ Though he obviously remains sympathetic towards Hawkeye, and though he continues to see Indians—both the "good" and the "bad" ones—as tainted with a natural predilection for the law of the woods, Cooper cannot hide the fact that, by imposing

³⁵ For a vigorous and convincing defense of Cooper that focuses on *The Deerslayer* and also refers to Cooper's friendship with George Copway, the Ojibwe Indian also known as Kah-ge-gah-bowh, author of *The Life, History and Travels of Kah-ge-gah-bowh (George Copway)* (1847), see Robert S. Levine, "Temporality, Race, and Empire in Cooper's *The Deerslayer*: The Beginning of the End," in *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, ed. Russ Castronovo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 163-78.

³⁶ The word "damnable," as John McWilliams insists, in early nineteenth-century culture "still meant 'capable of damning one to an eternity in Hell.'" Even though Hawkeye is obviously represented as a frontier hero, Cooper does not shy away from the fact that "[t]he conquering of the wilderness forces New World Christians to act like Old World pagans." *The Last of the Mohicans: Civil Savagery and Savage Civility* (New York: Twayne, 1995), pp. 119-20.

³⁷ McWilliams, *The Last of the Mohicans*, p. 119.

their own civilization, Americans must resort to bloody and savage means, thus trampling on those Christian principles which—as testified by Natty's dialogue with Gamut—are only superficially adhered to.

By completely ignoring the uneasiness that a conservative like Cooper displayed towards Natty as a prototypical practitioner of what Richard Slotkin would define as America's regenerative violence, Mann's only worry is to turn Hawkeye into a spotless, fearless hero with whom spectators may readily identify. To this end Mann depicts him more as an *ante litteram* American patriot than as the nemesis of all the "hostile" Indian tribes he is in the novel. This narrative maneuver carries implications that go beyond Natty's character, and should be seen as part of a larger strategy whose aim is to represent the clash between Indians and Whites as subordinate to the conflict between the American colonies and their motherland, thus making the "good" Indians like Uncas and Chingachgook the natural allies of the former, and the "bad" Indians like Magua the objective instruments of European imperial powers. Here the novel's original perspective is almost completely overturned. Cooper wished to underline that it was not so much the war between France and Great Britain the true historical drama of the eighteenth-century American frontier, and to this end he observed that neither imperial power would eventually rule over the territories they sought to control. In the novel *The Last of the Mohicans* the violence and the injustices of which history is full are not sublimated by a transcendent, teleological design, and therefore also the enmity between Indians and Whites cannot be altogether subsumed by terms anticipating the doctrine of Manifest destiny. The movie, on the contrary, besides reading the Indian-White conflict through Manichaeian lenses, projects on to it a triumphalist vision of American history.

The movie's Indians are ethnographically more credible than Cooper's ones, but it is worth remembering that even though Cooper draws in his novel an arbitrary line between "good" and "bad" Indians, he also emphasizes how even Uncas and his father commit ferocious acts that may be "natural" for people of the forest like them, and yet are shocking for any civilized individual. This is of course where Cooper's racist vision is most tangible. The writer was obviously determined to insist on the incompatibility between the codes of

civilized life and those of the wilderness, so that the triumph of the former over the latter would appear inevitable. Yet this is also where it is easier to see how difficult is for the narrator's voice to impose a moral on the reality he describes. It is only because Chingachgook and Uncas are on Natty's side that they appear to us as better than Magua and his Mingoes. If on the one hand Cooper polices the boundaries between savagery and civilization, on the other he involves Natty himself, as the Mohicans' close friend, in the latter's barbarous violence. In the movie, vice versa, the two Mohicans are reimagined as politically correct Indians who never strike unless provoked; who never scalp their enemies; whose behavior is courteous and chivalric. All this makes one wonder whether the reason why Uncas and his father are so civilized has something to do with the fact that they live apart from their people, and associate for most of the time with Whites like Natty Bumppo. The most "savage" part of their Indian identity is domesticated, so to speak, and that is why they can qualify as the hero's best friends.

Mann's version of the story's villain is less psychologically and culturally interesting than Cooper's. The latter does paint Magua as a veritable merciless demon, and yet he cares to explain that his thirst for revenge can be traced back to objective motivations, beginning with the humiliating whipping he was inflicted by Munro. Unlike the movie's Magua—who stands for pure racial hatred, and wishes not only to kill the colonel but to extinguish his "seed" as well—the novel's one is a much more pragmatic figure, who seeks above else a white wife to replace the Indian one he has lost once he abandoned his Huron village. While Cooper's Magua is the character who more directly evokes what Leslie Fiedler considered the novel's "secret theme"—miscegenation—Mann's Magua seems to embody the opposite principle, and to him no mixing between Indians and Whites is desirable.³⁸ However, in the end there is a surprising coincidence between the novel and the film regarding the way the racial theme is handled. Both texts eventually dispose of the potentially interracial couples. In the novel, the Magua-Cora and Uncas-Cora unions are un consummated, and all the three characters die. Similarly, in the movie the possible unions between Magua and Alice, as well as between

³⁸ Fiedler, *Love and Death*, pp. 202-6.

Uncas and Alice, never see the light of day since all three are wiped out. In the novel, Cora is the "Dark Lady," a woman of mixed blood born from the union of Munro with a Caribbean lady. Given her scandalous biological identity the attraction Magua feels for her seems both obvious and troubling. On the other hand, there is no question that Cora is a much more interesting and mature character than the "Fair Lady" Alice, an unsubstantial figure with virtually no trace of the elder sister's nobility and courage despite being Munro's legitimate daughter and Duncan's sweetheart. It is outright disconcerting that, in a movie aiming to mark its distance from Cooper's views on the undesirability of mixed unions, having decided to make Cora part of a love triangle that includes Heyward and Hawkeye, Mann eliminates altogether any trace of Cora's part-black ancestry. As Gary Edgerton has noted, "Keeping Cora a mixture of races and nationalities (instead of Madeleine Stowe's ivory cameo come to life), and then linking her romantically with the cultural hybrid Hawkeye would be a bold and revisionist move for a Hollywood filmmaker today." Mann does nothing of the sort and in his film Cora's "symbolic complexity" is completely ignored.³⁹

Red Fathers, White Sons

The differences in terms of both content and narrative/ideological strategies between the novel and the film are particularly evident if one compares their respective endings. The novel ends on a decidedly apocalyptic note. Along with the diabolical Magua, also Cora and Uncas are killed, thus prompting Cooper to stage an elegiac, epic conclusion akin to the *Iliad's* one, with its obligatory funereal rites and orations. Surrounded by "a nation of mourners" (339), Tamenund, Chingachgook, and Munro—patriarchs deprived of a male heir to whom they might bequeath their leadership—must all reckon with the terrible losses of the recent past. Only the Christian Munro seems to harbor some hope in a sort of multicultural paradise and, addressing a group of Indian women, he asks Natty to explain to them that

³⁹ Edgerton, "'A Breed Apart,'" p. 13.

"the Being we all worship, under different names, will be mindful of their charity; and that the time shall not be distant, when we may assemble around his throne, without distinction of sex, or rank, or colour!" (347). As if forgetful that it is also thanks to men like Munro that America has been turned into a bloody battleground where even noble youngsters like Uncas must meet a violent death, Cooper now turns the colonel into a religious and visionary sage. Here the author wishes to imbue the pagan context of his epic tale with a Christian spirit, to provide his readers with a consolatory closure. Yet the contradictory nature of the novel's ending can hardly be missed by anyone who has not forgotten what Cooper had earlier stated about the Europeans' responsibility in upsetting the political and cultural balance of the American Northwest.

The unsolved tensions elicited by Cooper's narrative are also visible elsewhere in the novel's final pages. Even though Natty thinks that Munro's words are utterly incomprehensible to the Indians, on hearing Chingachgook conclude his heart-rending oration for his son Uncas with the words "I am alone," the scout immediately ejaculates: "'No, no [...] no, Sagamore, not alone. The gifts of our colours may be different, but God has placed us as to journey on the same path. I have no kin, and I may also say, like you, no people. [...] Sagamore, you are not alone!' Chingachgook grasped the hand that, in the warmth of feeling, the scout had stretched across the fresh earth, and in that attitude of friendship, these two sturdy and intrepid woodsmen bowed their heads together, while scalding tears fell to their feet, watering the grave of Uncas, like drops of falling rain" (349). Alone, with no heirs and without a nation, Hawkeye and Chingachgook must face a future that may be thick with adventures and epic struggles in the wilderness but remains nevertheless rather bleak. The fraternal relation between the white hunter and the Indian warrior is a downsized version of Munro's multicultural paradise and, in terms of the novel's narrative strategy, it can only crystallize rather than solve the ideological and historical contradictions raised by Cooper throughout his novel.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ In this regard it is important to bear in mind that, as Geoffrey Rans has noted, for readers of *The Last of the Mohicans* familiar with the first published novel of the series (*The Pioneers*, 1823), the consolation of Natty's and Chingachgook's interracial

Needless to say, the lamentation over the passing of the Indians' America is a virtual textbook illustration of what Renato Rosaldo has described as "imperialist nostalgia," whereby one regrets the disappearance of the very world one has de facto contributed to destroying.⁴¹ On the other hand, we must acknowledge that Cooper registers this antinomy by embodying it in his hero Hawkeye. The latter may be perceived as a proto-nationalistic hero and yet Cooper clearly states he is "without a people." Natty's contradictory status is further emphasized by his being a quasi "Indian" who is at the same time a most ruthless anti-Indian fighter; a symbol of intercultural friendship and a staunch believer in racial purity ("I am a man without a cross!" is Natty's well-known refrain). In conclusion, though Cooper constructs destiny rather than human agency as the force shaping history, we cannot say that his novel sees fate as thoroughly just and, even though this may strike us as a touch hypocritical on the writer's part, he deprives not only Chingachgook but also Natty of the consolation of a family, a home, and a people.

Mann's film's ending is a rather different one. The slaughter exceeds that of the novel as not only Magua, Uncas, and Alice (playing Cora's part, so to speak) die, but also Munro and Duncan Heyward are killed off. However, the love story between Natty and Cora projects onto the final scene of the movie a hope in the future that is largely absent in Cooper's novel. An elegiac, nostalgic note is struck by Chingachgook's final oration, which concludes the film. However, the fact that the final close-up stages Natty in a central position, flanked on his left by the woman with whom he will be able to start a new life, and, on his right, by his vanishing Indian "father" Chingachgook, is an indication of Mann's intention to emphasize the status of Hawkeye as epic American hero. A charitable reading of this final scene may wish to underline that, despite the inexplicable elimination of Cora's mixed identity, here Mann reinvents the American hero as

friendship is pretty much undercut by having already witnessed in the previous novel not only the death of the Mohican, but his transformation into a drunkard. *Cooper's Leather-Stocking Novels: A Secular Reading* (Durham: North Carolina University Press, 1991, p. 129.

⁴¹ Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), pp. 69-87.

someone who is not only capable of harboring noble feelings towards Indians like Chingachgook, but who can even proudly claim of being his “son,” though not from a biological viewpoint. Read from this perspective, the movie would seem to encourage the US public to reclaim or reinvent for themselves a more properly multicultural identity in tune with post-Cold War America. Even if these were Mann’s intentions, however, the movie’s final scene can be interpreted in a different and, to my mind, more plausible way. US history can hardly be constructed as a narrative of tolerance and friendship between Whites and Indians. From this point of view Mann’s idealized Natty has very little to do with the Hawkeye whose “essential American soul” was famously described by D. H. Lawrence as “hard, stoic, isolate, and a killer.”⁴² If Mann wanted to reimagine the original American pioneer as a politically correct figure, his movie should have at least suggested why the multicultural, friendly nation desired by his Natty never materialized in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and most of the twentieth-century. Yet that is precisely what the film cannot do, since its narrative has associated Natty’s fortunes to those of a burgeoning republican America, and at this point in the story it is impossible to deprive Hawkeye of a national community the way Cooper does at the end of his tale. The movie’s narrative logic does not allow for delinking Hawkeye’s destiny from that of historical America.

The film’s ideological framework is unveiled in an exemplary way in Chingachgook’s final speech, a sort of “prayer” through which the Mohican chief invokes death as the only path available to him for reconnecting with his son Uncas and *his* people. In this oration—which has no counterpart in the novel and vice versa echoes almost word by word an analogous scene in Dunne’s script—Chingachgook describes himself as “the last of the Mohicans,” thereby ruling out the possibility of being part of the America-to-be. He simply steps aside, as if to bequeath the splendid uncontaminated natural landscape on which the camera indulges, to Cora and Natty. Especially at this juncture, it

⁴² D. H. Lawrence, *Studies*, p. 68. This should not lead us to conclude, however, that the relationships between Indians and Whites were only violent ones. There were several instances of intercultural dialogue as well, notwithstanding the imbalance in power relations. A beautiful, classic study on this topic is Richard White’s *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

is quite significant that in the movie Natty identifies Chingachgook as his Indian "father." Whereas in the novel the Mohican chief does not seem to be much older than Hawkeye, and their relation is a fraternal one, here Natty becomes the white son of a red father: a *homo americanus* who lovingly embraces a white woman fleeing from her European background and without a family, just like Natty. Indeed, now that his "brother" Uncas is dead and his "father" Chingachgook claims to have no future, Hawkeye seems to convey the thinly veiled fantasy of having the Indians *freely give* their land away to the Euro-Americans, thus sparing the latter from the morally embarrassing and bloody task of having to conquer it with violence.⁴³ Mann's Natty Bumppo is certainly much more open-minded when it comes to Indian-White and male-female relations than Cooper's original, and yet he is part of an ideological and narrative machinery that is ultimately more mystifying and consolatory than the novel's one. There is no question that also Copper, like Mann, wanted ultimately to show that what came to pass historically could not be helped, and yet, in the novel's final sentence, uttered by the elder Tamenund, Cooper suggests that history has not come to an end: "The pale-faces are masters of the earth, and the time of the red-men has not yet come again" (350). Unlike the movie's Chingachgook, who cannot see any future beyond that of an otherworldly Indian paradise, Tamenund formulates a prophecy that would have probably struck the contemporary reader as hopelessly pathetic, and yet, in its Utopian overtones, declares that history is not over. Tamenund's words may be enveloped in resignation, but rather than expressing the desire to vanish they are in fact a testimony to the Indians' desire to endure.⁴⁴

⁴³ The film's ending seems to me a perfect example of what Alan Trachtenberg has described as a "symbolic sacrifice" in which, "by offering themselves as founders and guardians of nationhood," the Indians grant whites "absolution of the sins of conquest." See Trachtenberg, *Shades of Hiawatha*, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

⁴⁴ Tamenund's final words, which pick up on a similar speech delivered a few chapters earlier ("I know that the pale faces are a proud and hungry race [...]. But let them not boast before the face of the Manitou too loud. They entered the land at the rising, and may yet go off at the setting sun. I have often seen the locusts strip the leaves from the trees, but the season of blossoms has always come again!" [305]) must be contextualized within a rich prophetic indigenous tradition, which developed since the early days of the invasion of the American continent, and which envisioned

The African American Frontier. Mario Van Peebles' *Posse: The Untold Story of the Wild West*

Despite its flaws, Mann's film does make an effort to reimagine the frontier not as the proverbial Turnerian line between savagery and civilization, but as a "contact zone," a "social [space] where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other".⁴⁵ Mann, however, does not break away from the convention of the frontier as an essentially "wild," bloody, primitive environment. The main ways in which White and Indian cultures seem to "meet" in his film, is by grappling at each other's throats. What is more troubling, the movie can scarcely be said to have any interest in examining from a novel perspective the violence it describes, preferring to skirt disturbing and complex questions with rather conventional narrative strategies. Similar shortcomings plague an equally ambitious revisionist project like Mario Van Peebles' *Posse: The Untold Story of the Wild West*.⁴⁶ A few older Westerns had played African Americans in significant roles, as for example Tom Gries's *100 Rifles* (1968), and especially Sidney Poitier's *Buck and the Preacher* (1971), but they made no dent in a mythical West where blacks had always played marginal roles.⁴⁷ As if anxious to imitate Mark Twain's Huck Finn, white Americans have preferred to light out for the territory leaving the blacks—and the embarrassing burden of slavery—behind. Van Peebles' *Posse* (1993) wishes to redress this situation and seems to take off more or less where *Huckleberry Finn* leaves us: at the end of the nineteenth-century when, once the Civil War was over, several former slaves, or children of former slaves, took part in the epic "conquest of the West."

Even though we would never realize this if we only paid attention to Hollywood and popular western literature, historians and social researchers have by now firmly established that there were significant

the end of white rule. This tradition has been powerfully revisited in Leslie Marmon Silko's epic novel *Almanac of the Dead* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1991).

⁴⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p. 4.

⁴⁶ A 1993 Polygram production, the movie stars Mario Van Peebles himself as Jessie Lee, his father Melvin as Papa Joe, Salli Richardson as Lana, and Richard Jordan as Sheriff Bates. The script is by Sy Richardson and Dario Scardapane.

⁴⁷ As noted by John Cawelti (*Adventure*, p. 257), these films substituted the white hero with a black one by leaving the basic Western formula untouched.

numbers of blacks in the West: black cowboys, black sheriffs, black bandits, as well as largely black towns with their canonical saloons, brothels, and churches. Even a cursory glance at the titles of some of the books on this topic published over the last decades—books like Jack Forbes' *Afro-Americans in the Far West*, William Katz's *Black Indians and The Black West*, Sherman Savage's *Blacks in the West*, Paul Stewart and Wallace Ponce *Black Cowboys*—should be enough to understand that Van Peebles' project of a black Western had plenty of historical research to draw on.⁴⁸ However, while the movie begins by underlining the importance of rediscovering the forgotten history of the black West, it quickly becomes evident that Van Peebles is more interested in finding ways in which blacks may become worthy protagonists not simply of the history, but rather of the *myth* of the West. The problem Van Peebles must face is, put simply, not so much one of content as one of *form*. Can a revisionist Western be really innovative if it rests content with switching moral labels, thereby transforming what has traditionally been perceived as "negative" into "positive," or should it be more ambitious and move towards a narrative framework capable of posing questions that go beyond a simplistic juxtaposition between Good and Evil? This kind of narrative dilemma has been lucidly analyzed some years ago by Myra Jehlen, when she observed the deadlock which several attempts at rewriting the history of the "discovery" of America run into. "Reversals of the imperial history may be more congenial than the original version—it is easier for us today to think that the Arawaks were Columbus's hapless victims than they were idiots fit only for European slavery. But from the viewpoint of reconstructing the culture of the Arawaks, the new account

⁴⁸ Jack D. Forbes, *Afro-Americans in the Far West*, Berkeley (Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 1968); William L. Katz, *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage* (New York: Athenaeum, 1986); *The Black West* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971); W. Sherman Savage, *Blacks in the West* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976); Paul M. Stewart and Wallace Y. Ponce, *Black Cowboys* (Broomfield, CO: Phillips Publications, 1986). See also James Abajian, *Blacks and Their Contributions to the American West* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1974), as well as Lenwood G. Davis, *Blacks in the American West: A Working Bibliography*, (Monticello, IL: Council of Planning Librarians, 1976).

is not much more useful than the old one.”⁴⁹ Something analogous may be said concerning Van Peebles’ attempt at re-filming the history of the West from a black viewpoint. His movie does unveil the racist ideology underpinning the project of empire-building, but it never really calls into question the narrative framework of the Myth of the Frontier, and this, as we shall see, is especially visible in the film’s representation of violence.

Van Peebles does try to avoid the easy overlap of moral and racial categories, by showing us, for example, a black sheriff so corrupt that he works for the Klan, and, on the other side, a white guy who dies fighting for Jessie Lee’s black posse. Yet the narrative features of his movie are conventional through and through. If Van Peebles should be praised for trying to politicize the West, by calling attention to the forgotten presence of African Americans, he can hardly be said to break away from the cinematic convention of the handsome, dark, and fast gunman, let alone from seeing violence as the only practical way to handle social contradictions. And in the end, we sympathize with Jessie Lee for the same reason why we are on Butch Cassidy’s or Billy the Kid’s side: because we trust Lee’s integrity, and not because the film’s political and historical lesson is a particularly convincing or well-articulated one.

The film tells the story of a group of Spanish War veterans who, after rebelling against a sadist colonel, run away to the West, towards the Utopian community of Freemanville, the birthplace of the posse’s leader, Jessie Lee. After a stop-over in New Orleans, where the character of Father Time joins the group, the runaways reach the town, and we soon learn that Jesse Lee’s intention is to avenge the death of his father, brutally killed by a gang of racist vigilantes. The movie visualizes Lee’s memories of that traumatic event and shows how Lee’s reverend father is crucified on the door of his own Church. The scene seems to be at least in part inspired by the first chapter of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*—whose title is indeed “nightmare”—in which Malcolm’s father, reverend Little, is assaulted by Ku Klux Klan members on horseback. Even though that is not the episode in which

⁴⁹ Myra Jehlen, *The Literature of Colonization*, in *The Cambridge History of American Literature. Volume I: 1590-1820*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch, (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994), p. 55.

Malcolm's father is killed, Van Peebles's attempt to combine his rethinking of the West with references to US history is quite clear. As Daniel Hoffman has noted, "This fusion of post-Civil War and post-civil rights eras makes the film's attempted historiography a bit naive, but it also gives the film a fresh, contemporary feel and implies a continuity of black experience. To the extent that this conveys a continuing spirit of black resistance, spirituality, vigor, and creativity, Van Peebles conveys a valuable message."⁵⁰

At times, however, Van Peebles proposes historical overlaps which, if on one level give the story a postmodern twist and turn it into an explicit political statement, on another seem a touch too simplistic.⁵¹ For example, in the movie several references are made to the 1992 Los Angeles riots, which took place just one year before the film's release and were caused by the scandalous verdict of the Rodney King trial. At one point in the story, while in Freemanville all hell has broken loose, someone shouts, "Can't we all just get along?", the same words uttered by King to calm down the protesters. Later, the well-known slogan shouted during the riot—"no justice, no peace"—is quoted, and Van Peebles also gives the corrupt sheriff of Freemanville a name (Bates) clearly echoing that of LAPD chief, Daryl Gates.⁵² Beyond the volatility of these references, what is perplexing is the philosophy of black history the movie seems to promote. If the struggle and the oppression of today are nothing but the exact replica of those of the past, any hope in a better future would seem to be impossible. History is not seen as an uncertain and contradictory effort to conquer

⁵⁰ Daniel Hoffman, "Whose Home on the Range? Finding Room for Native Americans, African Americans, and Latino Americans in the Revisionist Western," *Melus* 22, No. 2 (Summer 1997), p. 49.

⁵¹ For a different view, much more appreciative of the film's fusion of past and present, see Alexandra Keller, "Generic Subversion as Counterhistory: Mario Van Peebles' *Posse*", in *Westerns. Films Through History*, ed. Janet Walker (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 27-46.

⁵² On these references see both Keller, "Generic Subversion," p. 42, and the film review by Brian D. Johnson in *Maclean's Magazine*, May 17, 1993, p. 50. The movie's title, too, is a clear nod to the contemporary scene, given that a posse is not only a group of armed men, but also a rap group (indeed, some of the actors are rappers themselves). One of the best things in the movie is in fact its soundtrack, also because its anachronisms (for example twentieth-century blues and spirituals) suggest possible cultural and historical continuities without forcing them into a rigid scheme of correspondences.

larger freedoms and more rights, but as a frustrating, endless return of the Same.

In this revisioning of African American history through the lenses of the Western, as Brian D. Johnson has noted, an important part is played by the *mise-en-scène* of the two political and cultural positions traditionally associated, often rather schematically, with Martin Luther King Jr., on the one hand, and Malcolm X, on the other.⁵³ Most of the flashbacks devoted to the reverend Lee depict him as a kind of King of the West, firm in his belief that nothing good can be gained through violent means. "If you kill in the name of a dream, in the end you kill the dream," is perhaps the key phrase uttered by the reverend. Given the surrounding context, however, Lee's words are in the end destined to carry the same weight as those pronounced by Amy in *High Noon*. The reverend's non-violent option is shown to be utterly impractical, and it is only thanks to his son's and the posse's deftness with guns that a modicum of justice is achieved. In sum, rather than encouraging a radical revision of the basic ideological and narrative framework of the Western, Van Peebles' political allegory is to a large extent yet another ritual of "regenerative violence."

In a dialogue he has with the corrupt black sheriff, Jessie Lee insists that there are two laws—the white man's and the black man's law—and the film as a whole wishes to pay homage to the heroic African American attempts at building towns like *Posse's* Freemanville, too often frustrated by the legally sanctioned racism of late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. Yet all this is not enough to turn Jessie Lee into a revolutionary hero. He remains, for the most part, just another Western avenger, incapable of self-irony, and both his qualities as well as the words given to him are altogether predictable, as when he tells Bates, "when you'll get to hell, tell'em Jessie Lee sent you." The political allegory is more surface than substance, and movie critic Roger Ebert is probably right when he notes that the polemical message inscribed in the film credits on the injustices suffered by black in the US appears like a last-minute attempt to impose a moral that the story itself has trouble generating.⁵⁴

⁵³ See footnote 52 above.

⁵⁴ Roger Ebert, "Posse," May 14, 1993, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/posse-1993>. I would also add that the movie's "MTV style," which Alexandra Keller finds

Another aspect of the film leaving much to be desired concerns the relations between the black pioneers and the Indians. The African American community of Freemanville is described as eager to have its own share of the West, and thus objectively in conflict with the Indians.⁵⁵ And yet, as if to absolve the black pioneers, Van Peebles makes them express sympathy for the way the natives have been treated by the white man and, to boot, he gives Lee a half-black, half-Indian lover. This tokenism, however, seems to be just a way to skirt the issue of the complex, contradictory relations between Indians and African Americans, who have been both victims of racism but whose histories are in several ways dissimilar.⁵⁶ Luckily, the name of Freemanville's saloon—"The Promised Land"—is there to remind the spectator of the profound ambiguity of the West, and just as in Hawthorne's story "The Celestial Railroad" the journey's final destination is not heaven, but actually hell, also in *Posse* "The Promised Land" is eventually enveloped by a hellish fire undercutting all hopes of redemption. The saloon's final explosion provides a further exemplification of that "vacillation between the apocalyptic visions of America as paradise on earth and hell on earth" coming to us from the Puritan historiography of William Bradford and Cotton Mather.⁵⁷

enjoyable, strikes me as a glossy repetition of a series of commonplaces of Western cinema. I agree with Keller, instead, on the significance of *Posse*'s numerous references to classic Westerns—references that Keller reads as instrumental in establishing Van Peebles's legitimacy as a director of Western films. The most interesting reference is probably the one to Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man*, with Woody Strode playing Jack Crabb's part as narrator of everything we see in the film. Unlike Crabb, however, Woody is an eyewitness to only some of the final events of the film (he is a boy when the Freemanville shoot-out takes place).

⁵⁵ See what Slotkin has written on the "black Western," as suspended "between identification with the Indian as another oppressed people of color and the assertion of an Afro-American role in the 'heroic' actions that won the West—and dispossessed the Indians" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 632).

⁵⁶ This is not to deny that, at times, these histories have merged in significant and complex ways. Over the last few decades several important studies on Indian-Black relations have been published. See, for example, Jack Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans: the Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), and James F. Brooks, *Confounding the Color Line: the Indian-Black Experience in North America* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

⁵⁷ Lois Parkinson Zamora, "The Myth of Apocalypse in the American Literary Imagination", in *The Apocalyptic Vision in America: Interdisciplinary Essays on Myth and*

Unfortunately, unlike *Unforgiven*—where, as we shall see below, both in terms of content and style the spectator is provided with an angle from which a critique of violence is possible—*Posse*'s relation to the theme of revenge is totally uncritical. Moreover, if the reinscription of the antagonism between "Martin Luther King"—whose philosophy is represented not only by reverend Lee but also, albeit in a more limited way, by the population of Freemanville and, most importantly, by Jessie's girlfriend, Lana—and "Malcolm X"—whose position is obviously embodied by Jessie Lee—has the objective of underscoring the movie as a thoroughly *black* western, the way this allegorical operation is carried out on both the narrative and ideological level shows that *Posse* is mainly a black *Western*. In the end Van Peebles seems to employ the Western paradigm of the revenge drama in order to disqualify as nothing but a dream the non-violent philosophy of Jesse's King-like father. This does not seem to me much of a culturally progressive maneuver, first because it suggests a stark, irreconcilable opposition between King and Malcolm X that the most recent historiography has called into question, and, second, because it projects an idea of non-violence as a position tied to fear of your opponent and thus inherently reactionary.⁵⁸ In fact, if one wishes to read *Posse*'s story allegorically, one must also notice that it often offers a caricatural view of history and, in particular, of those political positions Van Peebles evidently dislikes.

As far as the key issue of violence is concerned, *Posse* operates as a most conventional Western, and therefore as a narrative interested in showing that violence is necessary. The lines given to reverend Lee, first, and Lana, later—who, as a thousand Western heroines before her, tries unsuccessfully to convince her male partner to choose love and peace over revenge—have the classic function of granting some space to those moral imperatives that society claims as foundational, only to insist finally that when faced with cruel enemies, love and non-violence amount only to cowardly submission. Van Peebles does not rest content with subjecting Lana to Jessie's masculine will but,

Culture, ed. and with an introduction by L. P. Zamora (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1982), p. 103.

⁵⁸ For a critique of the traditional juxtaposition between King and Malcolm X, see James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

once the treacherous Bates has kidnapped her father, turns her (exactly like Fred Zinnemann had done with Amy in *High Noon*) into a woman with a rifle in her hand. The same happens with many a "peace-loving" citizen of Freemanville, who are convinced by Jessie Lee that if they really wish to defend his father's dream, they must shoulder their guns. At this point the film's ideological turnaround is complete: while reverend Lee naively argued that if you kill to realize a dream, you will kill the dream as well, the son insists that the dream can live on only thanks to the power of arms. The movie is eager to show that it is the son who is right. Jessie Lee wipes out his enemies and, with the gold that he and his posse have taken with them all the way from Cuba, they can help build a better and bigger Freemanville. Yet, not only does Lee's conduct violate his father's ethical ideals, but the stolen treasure with which Freemanville can be built anew is the objective correlative of such betrayal. The gold was in fact taken from the Spaniards, in the course of an imperialist war, and is therefore blood-stained as the young Lee's dream. Moreover, on a historical plane, the sad condition of many African American communities, to which the movie's credits calls attention, seems to confine Freemanville to a virtual space, thereby upsetting the movies' 'happy ending.' In sum, had he investigated in greater depth the contradictory nexus between the Frontier and Utopia, by showing the friction rather than the overlap between the two terms, Van Peebles might have seen more clearly the intellectual risks involved in a hasty black appropriation of the Myth of the West.

"No fue mi culpa." Robert Young's *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*

If the traditional Western by and large ignored blacks and cast Indians as either noble or ignoble savages, it also subjected Mexicans to an extraordinary degree of abuse. The stereotypical Mexican or Mexican American of the Western is ugly, dirty, and bad. He is often a coward, a horse thief, and a ruthless assassin. The origins of this negative image can be traced back to the 1830s and 1840s, when American literature and propaganda worked hard to fashion the myth of Mexican atrocities in Texas, in order to influence a public opinion hesitant

at the idea of waging war on the foreign state that was obstructing US westward expansion. Whatever degree of sympathy Hollywood has shown towards Mexicans is probably to be found in the paternalistic interventionism of those movies Richard Slotkin identifies as “Mexico Westerns”—films shot during the peak of the Cold War and devoted to the theme of the Mexican Revolution, in which a group of US “specialists” intervene to save the “democratic” character of the popular uprising, thus preventing the country from sliding towards a dictatorial regime.⁵⁹ To the extent that, as Slotkin argues, they construct Mexico as an allegorical Third World space that needs to see its commitment to liberal and “American” values protected from the threat of Communism, such films cannot but confirm the culturally and politically backward condition of Hispanic America. Unlike Van Peebles’s movie, however, Robert Young’s *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* has no intention of claiming an important role for the Chicano community in the epic tale of the West.⁶⁰ Even though it shares with *Posse* the goal of providing a more factually accurate version of a significant slice of frontier life, *The Ballad* resists the temptation to mythicize its historical content. The legendary dimension of the tale is in fact constructed in the movie as a form of popular response to injustice. The movie’s title signals its continuity with the *corrido* that for years has kept alive the memory of the Cortez story, as if to suggest that the film is simply the continuation of an oral history that has long resisted the

⁵⁹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, pp. 405–40. As noted by Hoffman, “Whose Home on the Range?”, p. 52, an especially vile treatment has been reserved to Mexican women, exemplified in the image of the *puta mejicana*, the unscrupulous seductress made famous by Linda Darnell in *My Darling Clementine* (1946; dir. John Ford). An important exception to this rule is to be found where one would least expect it—in *The Alamo* (1960), directed and interpreted by John Wayne, a film which, as Rodney Farnsworth has shown, does not throw a negative light on Mexicans (both male and female). Even the character of general Santa Anna gets a fair treatment. See “John Wayne’s Epic of Contradictions. The Aesthetic and Rhetoric of War and Diversity in *The Alamo*,” *Film Quarterly* 52 No. 2 (Winter 1998–99), pp. 24–34.

⁶⁰ Based on Américo Paredes’s “*With His Pistol in His Hand*.” *A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1958) and on the script by Victor Villaseñor, the movie—released in 1982 by Embassy Pictures—casts Edward James Olmos as Gregorio Cortez, James Gammon as Sheriff Frank Fly, Tom Bower as Boon Choate, and Bruce McGill as Reporter Blakely.

official versions, and brought us closer to the truth.⁶¹ Young does by no means hide the fact that there are several versions of Cortez's story. The film, therefore, acknowledges that absolute objectivity is not possible but, even though it takes Cortez's side, it does not fail to register the adversary position. Moreover, by choosing to begin *in medias res*, with Gregorio Cortez's escape, the gunfight that sets the story in motion is explicitly presented as an event whose reality can be re-suscitated only through memory and a process of historical research. It is only when the *San Antonio Express* reporter, who has joined the posse chasing Cortez, asks Choate to give his version of the facts that, in a flashback, we begin to get a glimpse of why Gregorio is on the run.

As compared to both Van Peebles' and Mann's movies, Young's has the advantage of being based on a true, and much written-about story, and in particular on Américo Paredes's "*With His Pistol in His Hand*," explicitly acknowledged as the film's main source. Paredes's study is precious not only for its careful historical reconstruction of the basic facts of the case, but for the care he takes in recreating the complex social and cultural mosaic in which the events unfolded. As in the book by Paredes, the early twentieth-century Texas represented in *The Ballad* stands out as a veritable "contact zone" in which not only two different communities and cultures meet, but also—as we shall see in a moment—two *languages* of unequal power come into conflict. By privileging the anthropological/cultural level of the clash between Chicanos and Anglo-Mexicans, Young prevents such division from sliding towards a mythical juxtaposition. Also—and this is a crucial detail considering the theme we are interested in highlighting—in the story he has chosen to tell, the gunfight is placed at the beginning rather than at the end of the story. This obviously prevents the confrontation between the hero and its antagonist from taking on any cathartic resonance. On the contrary, the film can be seen as an inquiry into both the causes and the consequences of a violent act not reducible to a duel among gunslingers but with ramifications in the judicial

⁶¹ The Spanish word *corrido* refers to the popular form of the Mexican ballad, or "borderland ballad," dating back to the middle of the nineteenth century. As Américo Paredes explains, the "century of the *corrido*" goes roughly from 1836 to the 1930s, a time when the area between Texas and Mexico was affected by deep historical and social changes. See Paredes, "*With His Pistol*," pp. 129-150.

system, a set of cultural prejudices, and the different “authority” conferred by the historical-political context on the English language in comparison to the Spanish one.

While showing the injustices endured by the Chicano population, by staying close to the historical facts Young demonstrates that a non-violent opposition to power, based on popular mobilization and capable of seizing the opportunities provided by the judiciary, can succeed in obtaining at least a modicum of justice. *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* is therefore one of those rare Westerns in which the recourse to violence is seen not as a solution to the problem of social conflicts, but as part of the problem. From this point of view it is surely significant that Young has chosen to replace the typically Western title of Paredes’s book (“with his pistol in his hand”), with one that rather than putting emphasis on Cortez’s weapon, highlights the therapeutic as well as political power of the word. Even though the ballad constructs Gregorio as a popular hero facing his enemies “con su pistola en la mano,” it is the *corrido*, not the gun, that gives back to Cortez his dignity. In this sense, Young’s film is different from the ballad, which makes of Cortez a more traditional Western hero than the one presented in the movie. The *corrido*, in most of its variants, describes a Cortez who insists on his right to self-defense (“No siento haberlo matado” he tells of the sheriff he killed, “Lo que siento es a mi hermano” — “I do not regret having killed him. What I regret is the death of my brother”). On the contrary, in the movie Cortez defends himself with rather different words (“No fue mi culpa” — “It wasn’t my fault”), which mark a difference with the *corrido*’s Cortez, who stands firm in not giving up his gun until he’s jailed.⁶²

The story’s key event takes place in Gonzalez, in the Texan county of Karnes, where Cortez shares a small farm with his brother Romaldo. On the afternoon of June 12, 1901, sheriff Morris, in pursuit of a horse thief, reaches the Cortez home taking along the so-called “interpreter” Boone Choate. Morris wishes to question Cortez regarding an exchange of horses that has taken place a few days earlier. Choate tells Romaldo they wish to speak with Gregorio Cortez and this is

⁶² The texts of the ballad’s various versions can be found in Paredes, “*With His Pistol*”, pp. 151-74.

the point where a number of mistranslations begin to take place, thus setting the stage for a tragic outcome that a better knowledge of Spanish on the "interpreter"'s part would have most likely avoided. Romaldo addresses his brother by saying, *Te quieren*, which in Spanish means, "they are looking for you," but Choate wrongly interprets the phrase as a warning Romaldo is giving his brother regarding his status as *wanted*. As soon as Cortez comes forth, Choate asks him whether he has recently exchanged a horse. Cortez replies that no, he has not, and he tells the truth: a few days earlier he has in fact exchanged a mare (in Spanish *yegua*), whereas Choate, who ignores this term, has used the word *caballo*. A bilingual spectator (the film does not provide subtitles whenever the characters speak Spanish) is perfectly capable of grasping the tragic misunderstanding that is taking place. Cortez, accused of lying by his two Anglo interlocutors, replies in utter sincerity that *No estamos mentiendo. No cambiamos un caballo. Era una yegua*—"We are not lying. We did not exchange a horse. It was a mare." In this way the film endows a bilingual spectator with a deciphering power that stands opposed to the despotism of a law oblivious to the language and customs of the "other." *The Ballad* thematizes therefore, in this crucial scene, two rather different ways of dealing with that "state of tension" between two communities and two cultures mentioned in the movies' title sequence. On one level we have a virtual space—identified with a spectator who is supposed to know well both English and Spanish—where mutual understanding is possible. On a different level, on the screen, a historical space is evoked in which one language rules over the other and Spanish is denied the power to represent reality.⁶³

The "translation" carried out by the representatives of the law betrays the latter's intolerance and is ultimately responsible for the explosion of violence. Violence is thus presented as the outcome of a communicative short-circuit that does not simply concern a technical term like *yegua* but extends to another part of the dialogue preceding the gunfight. Sheriff Morris asks Choate to inform Cortez that he is

⁶³ On the theme of translation, besides Hoffman's observations in "Whose Home on the Range?", pp. 53-54, see also Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, "Legislating Languages: *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* and the English Language Amendment," in *Chicanos and Film: Essays on Chicano Representation and Resistance*, ed. Chon A. Noriega, (New York, Garland: 1992), pp. 219-31.

under arrest. Cortez replies he does not understand why he should be arrested, given that *no hemos hecho nada*, a phrase that Choate translates, confusing *nada* with *nadie*, as “no one can arrest me.” Irked by what, in Choate’s translation, appears to be a defiance of his authority, the sheriff draws his gun and gets off his horse. Romaldo tries to stop him, shielding his brother. Morris shoots, injuring Romaldo. At this point Gregorio Cortez responds with three shots aimed at the sheriff, who will die shortly, before he can be taken to a doctor. It is important to notice that the shoot-out scene—and this is especially true of the second time we see it, when the film privileges Cortez’s rather than Choate’s point of view—is filmed in a sober and rigorously realistic way, so as to avoid those ‘heroizing’ effects that are standard fare in Western movies gunfights. There is nothing athletic in the way the three characters move. On the contrary, they seem anything but professional gunslingers. The visual language underscores the tragic fortuity of this bloody event. Cortez clearly acts—as eventually even the Courts will acknowledge—in self-defense, but there is no complacency in the representation of his ability to fire a gun. Utterly unlike Van Peebles’ Jessie Lee, Cortez acts more in a panic and a fit of rage than with any of the coolness typical of the Western hero. Morris, on his part, is presented as a perhaps impulsive sheriff, but mainly as a family man, himself the victim of a situation in which words could, and should, have prevented the use of arms. The blame, however, does not fall only on the ignorance of a single interpreter. As Paredes makes clear in his book, in the social and cultural context of the times a great number of legal actions undertaken to deprive the Chicano populations of its property and its rights were based as a rule on the opinion of “experts” on Mexican matters who, for the most part, had little or no knowledge of the Spanish language.⁶⁴

The film stages a series of binary oppositions—between Anglo and Chicano culture; the English and the Spanish language; the representatives of the law and the outlaw Cortez—that are flexible rather than

⁶⁴ The mistranslations scenes must be juxtaposed to the ones taking place in jail, where a female interpreter, sympathetic with Cortez (tears run down her eyes when she hears his story) and truly competent in both Spanish and English, provides an accurate translation of Cortez’s words.

rigid, and therefore all open to reversal. When Cortez is on the run, for example, he meets an American cowboy who gives him water and food. Even though the two do not speak the same language, they are tied by a sort of spontaneous class solidarity and the hunting knife that Cortez gives the cowboy in return for his kindness becomes a symbol of how, when there is a true willingness to communicate, even the absence of a lingua franca may be overcome and a potential weapon can turn into a gift. The meeting between the cowboy and Cortez performs a critique of the violence and misunderstandings marking the event that has forced Gregorio to become a runaway. Analogously, the movie avoids depicting the escape of Cortez as that of a quintessentially good man, hunted by a horde of villains, though Young is careful to point out the latter's racist views and behavior. What sets the posse apart from Cortez, beyond ideology, is their being able to rely on a tremendous technological superiority, since they communicate by telegraph and by telephone, and, most importantly, they rely on the railway both for transportation and for a constant supply of well-rested horses. The contrast between the superior means of the law enforcers and the naked determination of the runaway is introduced quite effectively in the opening scenes of the movie, which alternate shots of a menacing, steaming locomotive to frames of Cortez galloping away. The opposition underscored by Young is neither, as Donald Hoffman has noted, the standard one between civilization and the wilderness, central also to a revisionist Western like *Posse*, nor the classically American one between the machine and the garden.⁶⁵ The locomotive is not so much a symbol of the advent of a dehumanizing technology that will wipe out the romantic figure of the lonely horse rider (Cortez is repeatedly filmed as an isolated shadow against the background of the sierra) as a reminder of the connection between technology and history. It is surely no accident that the locomotive has the number 48 on its front, an obvious throw-away to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that authorized the transfer of a vast quantity of Spanish territories to the US. The story of Cortez must therefore be placed in a wider context, one in which the freedom and the rights of the individual are threatened by a technological

⁶⁵ I am of course referring to Leo Marx's classic *The Machine in the Garden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

superiority taking the shape of Manifest Destiny. This is not to say that the man on horseback is to be idealized. Cortez's cavalcade is not romanticized—the surrounding natural scenery is at times beautiful but neither sublime nor endless. On the contrary, space is often shrunk because of the closeness between the pursuers and the pursued. There is no visionary possession of the landscape on Cortez's part, nor is the Western space idealized as a possible haven away from civilization. It is thus hard to feel any nostalgia for a pristine, uncontaminated West, prior to the arrival of the railway. That number 48 is there to remind us that also the past was marked by conflicts and injustice.⁶⁶

After describing the capture of Cortez, the film's final section shows the trial in which he is sentenced to fifty years of imprisonment for the murder of sheriff Morris. The film ends with Cortez dragged away in shackles by the same menacing locomotive number 48, but the closing credits tell us that, in a subsequent trial, the verdict was overturned. Cortez underwent six more trials and was eventually acquitted for the homicide of Morris, which was indeed considered an act of self-defense, though he was condemned to life imprisonment for the murder of sheriff Glover, killed in the wild gunfight triggered by the Texas Rangers' attack on the Robledo farm, where Cortez had initially sought refuge. After twelve years of jail, however, Cortez was pardoned by the governor of Texas, following a long popular campaign in his favor, joined also by many Anglo-Texans, who realized the injustice of the case. Cortez died—probably of a stroke—three years after his release. The credits' final message is bitter-sweet: Cortez is condemned for the murder of Glover, but regarding that of Morris, as Parédes notes, "the people who had fought with him had won a significant victory."⁶⁷ At any rate, Young makes the clever choice of

⁶⁶ For a different view on this, see Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993), pp. 70-82. Fregoso believes that the film depicts "Cortez's animal-like closeness to nature" (81) as superior to the technology of Western civilization. She also objects to the fact that Cortez speaks so little in the movie, and that he is reduced "to the status of a mute-silent Other" (70), though she also acknowledges that the film is not so much about Cortez, as about "the problem of representation or more precisely about the problem of 'translation'" (71).

⁶⁷ Parédes, "With His Pistol", p. 94.

inserting what is imagined to be the earliest representation of the *Corrido de Gregorio Cortez*, right after the reading of the first court sentence. On an improvised stage the exploits of Cortez are mimicked and sung, while the public is asked to chip in money to provide the hero of the ballad with adequate legal assistance. In this way, Young underlines the political function of a storytelling that does not amount to narration for its own sake but wishes to raise the audience's consciousness. In other words, as Carl Gutiérrez-Jones has put it, "the corrido consequently gains a political, oppositional association."⁶⁸

Perhaps the main reason why Young's film is, in my view, one of the most intelligent and successful attempts at revisiting the Western genre, lies with the symbiotic relation it creates between itself and a popular oppositional cultural form like that of the *corrido*, which the movie tries to translate on a visual plane without betraying its political and cultural rationale. The film's style is in fact an appropriately "documentary" and "neo-realist" one.⁶⁹ Though it wishes to be a visual development of the *corrido*, *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* constructs the Tex-Mex cultural space as a rather fluid one, where conflicts exist but are not reducible to simple, ready-made formulas. Young's filming technique is sober—he likes to indulge over children's faces and asks of his actors a rather dry, down-to-earth performance. In short, Young seems uninterested in the West as a mythological space and some of the movie's scenes look—at least to my Italian eyes—as scenes from a Western as Roberto Rossellini or Pier Paolo Pasolini would have filmed it. Within this context, it is easier to represent violence in a critical light. It is of course true that both in the first trial, as well as in subsequent ones, the defense strategy insists that Cortez acted in self-defense, and yet it would be quite hard to see this as an endorsement of the gun lobby's fanatical support of the Second Amendment. By connecting—as was factually the case—the gunfight to the problem of translation, and thus by constructing the recourse to arms as the perverse result of communicational break down, *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* looks at Western violence in a new way, by encouraging viewers to imagine a world where people sort out their differences not with a gun, but with words.

⁶⁸ Gutiérrez-Jones, "Legislating Languages," p. 224.

⁶⁹ Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen*, p. 72.

Gunslinging Feminism. Jonathan Kaplan's *Bad Girls*

Let me return for a moment to the final pages of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, just to remind readers that Huck's escape to the Western territory is described as motivated by a desire to resist aunt Sally's intention to "sivilize" him. Here Twain plays on a motif recurrent in many of those American literary texts that—at least up to some decades ago—were considered as unquestionably canonical. This motif—around which Leslie Fiedler constructed his classic study *Love and Death in the American Novel*—is developed in stories whose male protagonists explore alternative spaces and lifestyles by turning their back on conformism and a sentimentalism closely associated with the female sphere. Classic examples of this framework are to be found in the adventurous voyages of Poe's and Melville's narratives, in Thoreau's isolation at Walden Pond, in Ike Mc Caslin's "renunciation" of the temptations of sex and money in William Faulkner's "The Bear." As feminist critics have insisted, behind this American literary *topos*—or at least behind the critical interpretation that has traditionally been given of this *topos*—lies a rhetorical and ideological perspective that probably took shape as early as the first explorers ventured into the unknown regions of the New World, and may be summarized in the myth of America as a "virgin land." In Annette Kolodny's words, "By the time European women began to arrive on the Atlantic shores of what is now the United States, the New World had long been given over to the fantasies of men [...]. From the beginning of exploration [...] sailors' reports of a 'delicate garden abounding with all kinds of odoriferous flowers' became inextricably associated with investors' visions of a 'country that hath yet her maidenhead.'"⁷⁰

Since its origins, the American frontier was conceived according to a "psycho-sexual dynamics": as the female counterpart of an

⁷⁰ Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontier: 1630-1860*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 3. For a brilliant critique of the gender-bias of traditional view of the US literary canon, see Nina Baym, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Female Authors," in *Feminism and American Literary Theory* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), pp. 3-18. The essay had originally appeared in *American Quarterly* 33, No. 2 (Summer 1981), pp. 123-39.

aggressive masculine subject setting out to subjugate it. Hence the secondary, subaltern, and vicarious role the mythology of the frontier has traditionally assigned to women. The Eden of the West—from Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett to Kit Carson and Buffalo Bill—is ruled by an American Adam whose female alter ego is first and foremost the land itself—a gorgeous, wild nature that needs to be subdued, fertilized, and cleansed of the Indian menace. In the incessantly expansive project of this archetypal *homo americanus*, women in flesh and blood are by and large a hindrance—the most they can do is take care of the domestic space, an activity antithetical to hunting, Indian fighting, trailblazing.

To quote Kolodny again, "Thus denied a place beside the abiding myth of an American Adam, American women were understandably reluctant to proclaim themselves the rightful Eves of the New World." There is no "classic" American novel with a heroine capable of handling a rifle like Natty Bumppo, of going on a whale hunt like Ishmael, of facing dangers and terrors like Arthur Gordon Pym.⁷¹ In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, some dime novels began to feature characters like Hurricane Nell and Calamity Jane, heroines who were excellent shots, superb riders, and skillful "lazo" throwers. The cowgirl heroine was born. These figures—like their male counterparts—were of course larger than life, but it is worth pointing out that their appearance in the world of popular culture takes place at a time when the social and cultural context of the nation was quite different from the early American one described by Kolodny in the passage I have just quoted. If we look at the historical record, we will find that in the course of the country's westward movement several women did indeed become cowgirls, displaying the courage and skills usually associated with the sturdy cowboy.

With the advent of the so-called "cattle frontier," many women shared with their fathers, brothers, and husbands, jobs that had at one time been considered utterly unsuitable for women. Knowing how to ride a horse over very long distances, how to keep the cattle together, how to fend off thieves, became a vital necessity and many women lived up to the task. As Shelley Armitage has written, "to some degree these cowgirls shared in the violence, various activities, and values of

⁷¹ Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, p. 5.

the range and, in proportion to the independence this life allowed, were able to shape their lives." The sudden appearance of Amazon figures in popular texts must therefore be seen as a response to the "availability of real models--women [...] who were at home with horses, guns, and even violence."⁷² The fact that both in Buffalo Bill's circus (his famous *Wild West Show*) and in the early silent Western movies there is no lack of cowgirls, is a further proof that there was a phase in which—both in fiction and in actual fact—the world of the frontier casted women in roles that were perhaps not primary ones, but were neither marginal nor demeaning. In Armitage's opinion, it was only in the 1940s and the 1950s that, with the coming on the scene of masters of the genre like John Ford, women were pushed into the stereotypical roles of "good gal" or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, sensual temptress to be resisted.

The film I discuss here—Jonathan Kaplan's *Bad Girls*—is an attempt at picking up this interrupted cowgirl narrative.⁷³ Like Van Peebles's in *Posse*, also Kaplan's movie wishes to represent an often overlooked or misrepresented facet of western history. Beginning with the story's setting—more or less the one of the cattle frontier extending from Texas to New Mexico and Arizona, and northward, all the way to Montana and Wyoming—the film is animated by a desire to provide a realistic background to the adventures of the four "bad girls" of the movie's title, even though it makes no mystery of the fact that its outlook is largely inspired by current feminist preoccupations.⁷⁴ The early scenes portray the standard frontier town, with the

⁷² Shelley Armitage, "Rawhide Heroines: The Evolution of the Cowgirl and the Myth of America," in *The American Self: Myth, Ideology, and Popular Culture*, ed. Sam B. Girgus (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), pp. 170-71. See also Joyce Gibson Roach, *The Cowgirls* (Denton, TX: North Texas UP 1990).

⁷³ Released in 1994 by 20th Century Fox, the movie stars Madeline Stowe as Cody Zamora, Andie McDowell as Eileen Spenser, Mary Stuart Masterson as Anita Crown, and Drew Barrymore as Lily Laronette.

⁷⁴ In one of the movie's opening scenes, we see one of the four "girls" reading a paper with a first-page title on the legendary accomplishments of Nellie Bly (the pseudonym of Elizabeth C. Seaman), a journalist who became famous for touring the world in seventy-two days. This detail, besides situating the story in a specific time (1889, the year of Seaman's voyage), underscores the film's point of view. A great part of Seaman's work was in fact devoted to investigating burning social issues of the day like the exploitation of women's domestic work, the appalling condition of US jails, the problem of divorce, etc. Moreover, like *Posse*, also the title of Kaplan's

obligatory brothel-saloon, where the four girls are currently employed. Even though it looks as if prostitution is an activity they have freely chosen, and they run their own business with no male supervision, the movie's early attempt at genre and gender reversal seem all too mechanical and predictable. Yet, later in the movie, one gets the feeling that perhaps this initial stiffness is intended. The town where the girls live is in fact called "Echo City," as if to suggest that within its precinct they cannot develop any creative alternative to patriarchal authority, and they must therefore content themselves with a fake independence, which echoes a centuries-old oppression. The film thus calls attention to its intention of resisting the standard Western narrative and, mainly through a series of symbolic references, it makes way for a transition towards a more properly alternative space.

Forced to leave Echo City after killing an out-of-control, violent customer, the four girls are shown galloping away as their horses' hoofs trample upon a Bible. Subsequently they cross a river and, once on the other side, the first thing they do is kill a snake and eat it. The Edenic/counter-Edenic paradigm is further underlined by a nude bathing that highlights not only the emotional and sensual complicity among them, but also represents a sort of baptismal cleansing that prepares their arrival in the aptly named town of Agua Dulce—Sweet Water.⁷⁵ Yet, notwithstanding their efforts to leave behind a society where religious morals and gender oppression are two sides of the same patriarchal culture, the four Eves are still quite distant from having truly gained access to the Garden of Eden. Pursued by the Pinkertons recruited by the wife of the slain man, they are also threatened by a gang of outlaws to which the "worst" of the "bad girls" had once belonged. Finally, they are eventually deprived of the land left by a deceased husband to one of them, due to a law that discriminates female heirs. In short, the four heroines are practically forced to turn

film is a way to imbue the Western with a contemporary flavor. A "bad girl" is, in today's language, a socially and/or sexually transgressive woman.

⁷⁵ Water is of course traditionally associated with the feminine sphere and is a fundamental component of baptismal and spiritual-renewal rites. An analogous scene, with an even more explicit homoerotic content, also takes place in *Posse*. In both cases, it is obvious that, beyond their symbolic function, the scenes have a more prosaic, commercial rationale, as they provide an opportunity for displaying a bit of nudity.

outlaws in order to seek justice. Here the movie revisits in a feminist key the theme of the social bandit—the Jessie James figure who fights the hypocritical law in order to vindicate his rights. At the same time, the Hispanic last name of the girls' leader—Zamora—evokes another classic figure of Western cinema, that of the Mexican revolutionary in the era of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. The struggle undertaken by the four girls thus takes on a more explicit political dimension, with not only gender, but also class and ethnic overtones.⁷⁶

The film displays some interesting and stimulating features, yet it is hard to decide the extent to which it may be dubbed a “feminist Western.” It largely depends, of course, on what kind of feminism one is referring to. My impression is that the movie exemplifies a certain type of mainstream American feminism that can be seen at work also in other contemporary Hollywood films. Two of Ridley Scott's productions come to mind, whose “feminist” nature has been much debated: *Thelma and Louise* (1990) and the vastly inferior *G. I. Jane* (1996). From the first movie *Bad Girls* inherits the idea of overturning what Nina Baym has called “the melodrama of beset manhood,” thereby featuring women who are on the run from an oppressively patriarchal society.⁷⁷ Of the latter movie's, Kaplan's film anticipates the insistence it places on the notion that a woman can be as tough as the toughest marine. But while *G. I. Jane* glories in a woman's dexterity with weapons, in *Thelma and Louise* the gun enjoys a much more ambiguous

⁷⁶ It is worth noting that Zamora's first name—Cody—links her ambiguously to the famous William Cody, aka Buffalo Bill. The ambiguity of the reference lies in its being on the one hand a way to pay homage to this woman's dexterity and courage, and, on the other, a reminder that a frontier woman's quality must always be measured against a masculine model. As for the issue of the representation of ethnically marked figures, one must at least note that the positive Hispanic connotation of Cody Zamora is offset by the stereotypically negative traits of the Mexican bandits wiped out by the four “girls” in the final scenes. Besides not being able to do without an ethnic Other to be scapegoated, the movie is also silent on the issue of the expropriation of Indian lands. Yet, if the four women had been able to get their hands on the land left to one of them by her husband in Oregon, they would have objectively partaken in the White evacuation of Indian land. Here patriarchal law provides a way to sidestep this problem and it is perhaps no accident that the movie ends with three of the women galloping away towards Klondike, as if to leap over—both literally and metaphorically—the political question of the conquest of the West.

⁷⁷ See above, note 70.

status because if on the one hand it prevents the violation of a woman's body, on the other it sets in motion the process that will lead to the protagonists' demise. In *Bad Girls*, vice versa, it is eventually only thanks to their ability to use pistols and rifles that the women will achieve their victory; their combat skills anticipate the ones displayed by US marine Demi Moore.

Bad Girls ends with the canonical shootout because the tensions of the filmic narrative can finally be eased only through violent means. Having penetrated the bandits' headquarters in order to take back what is rightfully theirs and free a male hostage—a further sign of the film's revisionism—the four heroines wipe out the gang. The gunfight is carried without any infringement of the classic Western code of honor, as shown especially in the scene where Cody Zamora, instead of taking advantage of the fact that the gang leader has run out of ammunition, throws a bullet at him and blows him away only after having given him the time to recharge and having reminded him of his duty to "Die like a man!"⁷⁸ This is the exemplary moment in which all the ideological tensions of the movie culminate. Women can win, but in order to do so they must go through blood and violence. One could of course debate whether violence has a gender, or not, but there can be no doubt that, at least in the Western, violence is a male prerogative. To embrace it thus means to occupy inevitably a male position. Zamora's lines are a clear exemplification of this. "Die like a man!"—with these words a woman does not simply become a mouthpiece for a masculinist conception of honor, thereby upholding the very hierarchical values the film seemed eager to undermine, but she also implicitly acknowledges the necessity of becoming herself a man,

⁷⁸ One may be skeptical about Kaplan's depiction of the girls' gunmanship, but if women gunslingers were not the norm in the historical West, historians have documented cases such as that of Cassie Redwine, a widow who, in order to defend her cattle from a gang of thieves, led her cowboys to the capture of the entire outlaw group. Cassie herself killed their leader. On the opposite side of the spectrum, one may mention the case of seventeen-year old Annie McDoulet and sixteen-year old Jennie Stevens, young criminals affiliated with the famous Doolin gang. (On these and many other episodes, see Joyce Gibson Roach, *The Cowgirls*, pp. 41, 69). The skills of the "bad girls" are obviously exaggerated, in keeping with the Western tradition.

so to speak, in order to defeat a male opponent.⁷⁹ For her opponent to die like a man, he must be killed by a man-woman. If he were killed by a woman, his masculinity—which Zamora prompts him to vindicate—would evaporate. Zamora's mercy should thus be read as an acceptance of the iron laws of the Western. Women may win only if they are willing to become as violent as men. However, as this scene indicates, it is open to debate whether through the ritual of killing women emerge victorious *as women*, or not. My suspicion is that, paraphrasing what has been argued concerning the role of female cops or investigators in women's detective fiction, if a gunslinger is either man or woman is in the end irrelevant. Whether a genre's ideology is upheld by a cowboy or a cowgirl doesn't really make much of a difference.⁸⁰ One could even argue that, to the extent that *Bad Girls* entices a female spectatorship to believe that women may inhabit the traditional space of the Western without calling into question its fundamental values, the film reinforces the subaltern position of women within the Western socio-cultural framework. Perhaps that would be to judge too harshly a film that does have its moments, and yet there is no question in my view that *Bad Girls'* gunslinging feminism is thoroughly inconsistent.⁸¹

⁷⁹ A somewhat similar scene occurs in another recent "feminist" Western: Sam Raimi's *The Quick and the Dead* (1996), with Gene Hackman playing Herod, the bad guy, and Sharon Stone as Ellen, the good bad girl. Herod takes her out to dinner, and she carries with her a small gun tucked away in her garter. She could easily kill her opponent, but instead of employing such a devious, "female" strategy, she prefers to blow away Herod in a regular duel on main street.

⁸⁰ See Catherine Nickerson, "Murder as Social Criticism," *American Literary History* 9, No. 4 (Winter 1997), pp. 744-57.

⁸¹ Further evidence of how complicated is to revisit the legendary, mythological dimension of the Western from a woman's viewpoint, can be found in *Bandidas* (2006). Though this is an avowedly Western "action comedy," featuring two mega female stars like Salma Hayek and Penélope Cruz (dir. Joachim Rønning and Espen Sandberg, 20th Century Fox), and produced and written by Luc Besson, it is neither funny nor convincing in its effort to combine comedy and action. Born with the inordinate ambition of being a female version of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969; dir. George Roy Hill), it tells the story of two young women who turn outlaws to fight against a local US land baron.

"The worst, meaning the best." Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*

Unlike the movies I have so far analyzed, even though it assigns key roles to its female protagonists and it provides the hero with an African American partner (Ned, played by a great Morgan Freeman), *Unforgiven* does not seem particularly interested in revisiting the Western myth in order to valorize groups or subjectivities traditionally marginalized by the genre.⁸² If one adds to this that Eastwood's film's is built around a revenge plot that is standard fare in literally hundreds of Westerns, a few words of explanation as to why I have chosen to conclude this chapter with a discussion of *Unforgiven* may be in order. The reason is that *Unforgiven* is indeed in several ways a (beautiful) classic Western but is also regarded by many as one of the most successful critical revisitations of the genre. It is no accident that, unlike the movies we have so far discussed—which, with Mann's partial exception, have elicited little critical commentary beyond the usual movie reviews—Eastwood's movie has been the object of a variety of important studies appearing not only in prestigious literary-cultural journals such as *Poetics Today* and *Arizona Quarterly*, but also in academic publications focusing on religious and theological themes (*Christianity and Literature*) or psychological ones (*Journal of Evolutionary Psychology*), not to mention of course specialized cinema journals like *Literature/Film Quarterly* and several others.⁸³ An assessment of

⁸² A Malpas production released in 1992, the movie casts Clint Eastwood as William Munny, Gene Hackman as Little Bill Daggett, Morgan Freeman as Ned Logan, Richard Harris as English Bob, Jaimz Woolvet as The Schofield Kid, Saul Rubinek as W. W. Beauchamp, and Frances Fisher as Strawberry Alice.

⁸³ See Blundell and Ormand, "Western Values," pp. 533-69; Simon Petch and Roslyn Jolly, "Law and Politics in *Unforgiven*," *Arizona Quarterly* 59, No. 4 (Spring 2004), pp. 125-45; Robert Jewett, "The Gospel of Violent Zeal in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*," *Christianity and Literature* 47, No. 4 (Summer 1998), pp. 427-42; Sara Anson Vaux, "Unforgiven: The Sentence of Death and Radical Forgiveness," *Christianity and Literature* 47, No. 4 (Summer 1998), pp. 443-58; Edward A. Kearns, "Deserve's got nothing to do with it: Clint Eastwood's Challenge to the Self-Righteous," *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 16, No. 3-4 (1995), pp. 221-27; Douglas J. McReynolds, "Alive and Well: Western Myth in Western Movies," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 26, No. 1 (1998), pp. 46-51; Catherine Ingrassia, "Writing the West: Iconic and Literal truth in *Unforgiven*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 26, No. 1 (1998), pp. 53-59.

the rather sophisticated interpretations to which the movie has been subjected is beyond the scope of my discussion. I would simply like to suggest that most of these discussions are concerned in one way or another with the central theme of this chapter—with the question, that is, of how a narrative form traditionally devoted to endorsing a certain kind of violence tries to rewrite what may be described as its genetic code. In other words, what I am interested in highlighting—beyond the merits of each individual reading—are the terms of the debate rather than the conclusions, given also that I personally find *Unforgiven* so radically contradictory a film as to undermine any attempt to read it in a totalizing framework. The movie's contradictoriness, however, should not be read only in terms of its director/protagonist's personality but must rather be thought of as embodying an ideological impasse extending beyond the confines of the US Western culture.

A few words about the movie's plot. Former bounty killer William Munny lives with his two sons on a God-forsaken farm in Kansas, where he tries to make ends meet after having been changed in his evil ways by the influence of his wife Claudia Feathers, who died of smallpox three years before. His fame as a ruthless killer takes to the farm The Schofield Kid, a young would-be bounty killer, anxious to liquidate two wanted cowboys and thus reap the \$ 1,000 reward. The sum has been raised by the prostitutes of Big Whiskey, Wyoming, where one of them had her face cut for having innocently laughed at the sight of one of the cowboy's "teensy little pecker." Will is initially reluctant to accept. He keeps repeating that he is no longer the man he used to be. As film director, an older Eastwood seems to enjoy poking fun at both the myth of the merciless Western bounty killer and his own film career as the quintessential tough guy in classic Westerns like those of Sergio Leone. Munny not only has trouble getting on horseback; he can't even "ride" his farm pigs, falling time after time flat in the mud. When he tries to exercise with his gun, he misses a tin can only a few meters away. In brief, he seems to have turned into a caricature of himself, but he desperately needs the money (as implied by his name, perhaps also a reference to the "fistful of dollars" of his youth) and he finally capitulates, convincing also his old partner Ned Logan to join the punitive expedition. The three manage in one way or another to accomplish their mission, but they also end up

provoking the ire of the bloody and despotic Big Whiskey sheriff, Little Bill, who does not tolerate any intrusion in the territory under his jurisdiction. First, Bill beats Munny to a pulp for having ignored the warning placed at the town's entrance, calling for all visitors to hand in their guns, and, to boot, for having lied about it. Later, after the killing of the first cowboy, Bill and his men capture Ned, torture him to death, and display his body in front of Skinny's brothel-saloon. At this point, however, we witness the resurrection of the old Will/Clint, who, after a canonical three-day agony, gains back his strength and, setting aside the memory of Claudia, sets out to consummate his revenge, this time not for money, but to punish the killers of his friend. In a very dark and rainy night, Will shows up alone in Skinny's saloon, where first he kills in cold blood the owner and then, in rapid succession, five more cowboys, including sheriff Little Bill. Munny then mounts on his horse and vanishes into the night after launching terrible threats against anyone who may be tempted to run after him or assault the women again. The movie's closing credits tell us that, years later, when Ansonia Feathers, Claudia's mother, finally decides to visit the daughter's grave in Kansas, Will and his children are long gone. Rumor has it that Munny has moved to San Francisco where the former alcoholic became rich as a dry-goods merchant.

Among the critics who have written about the movie there is a substantial agreement on its revisionist intentions. All underline how many scenes are constructed to highlight the brutal and immoral nature of the violence that dominates the Western genre. Eastwood is clearly aiming at demythicizing a series of classic moment of this great American narrative. One need only think of the circumstances in which the two wanted cowboys are eliminated, beginning with the rather significant detail that only one of them is guilty. The second one not only was in another lady's room when the prostitute Delilah was disfigured, but he also tried to compensate the victim by offering her his most beautiful pony. Well, this cowboy is shot by Ned as he is riding unawares with his companions, and then finished off by Munny (since Ned cannot bring himself to give him the coup de grace), as he is desperately trying to find repair. As for the second cowboy, he is killed while crapping in an outhouse. His executioner is The Schofield Kid, who is so shocked by what he has done that he decides to abandon his plans of becoming a professional bounty

killer. *Unforgiven* is thick with similar scenes, extending from the comic to the tragic, and underscored by excellent dialogues that prevent the acts of violence we see on the screen from taking on any heroic coloring. Moreover, by including in the film the dime-novel writer W. W. Beauchamp, Eastwood and his excellent scriptwriter David Webb Peoples, introduce an explicitly metanarrative dimension in the story whose scope is, obviously, to call the audience's attention to the discrepancy between a brutal and un-romantic actuality, on the one hand, and its mythical/legendary rewriting, on the other.

No one seems to dispute *Unforgiven*'s critical agenda. Critics, however, part ways regarding the film's ironic consistency. Some argue that the movie's supposed hero is portrayed in a negative light and the values that the film wishes to promote are those embodied by Claudia Feathers and especially Delilah, who, notwithstanding her victimization, has little or no interest in pursuing a bloody revenge (it is her colleague Strawberry Alice who gathers the money for the bounty). Other critics maintain that *Unforgiven* turns eventually into a most classic Western, with Munny bent on wiping out all the corrupt and hypocritical characters, and therefore granting the audience those obligatory cathartic moments that are one of the genre's primary features. Douglas Mc Reynolds, for example, notes that the "mythic" stature of Eastwood himself stands in the way of any genuine revisionist intention. In his opinion, the viewer knows that sooner or later the old lion will roar again—that his "conversion" and the irony over his decline as a gunslinger are only narrative devices meant to delay a predictable ending. In sum, no matter how the Eastwood character may be different from other standard Western heroes, "[w]e know William Munny is a hero because the language of the camera tells us so."⁸⁴ An analogous conclusion is reached by classics scholars Mary Whitlock Blundell and Kirk Ormand, who see interesting parallels between the film's structure and the *Iliad*. Though the movie tries—as perhaps no other major Western had done before—to enlighten the spectator concerning the ideological and narrative manipulations through which the genre confers a culturally acceptable meaning to acts of savage violence, in the end, "[w]hen Munny finally turns to violence he is replaying not just his own 'legendary' past but also the

⁸⁴ McReynolds, "Alive and Well," p. 51.

glory days of Clint Eastwood's Western career."⁸⁵ In short, notwithstanding its effort to reject the foundational value of violence, *Unforgiven* ends up reproducing the very narrative and ideological conventions it set out to dispute.

Personally, as indicated above, I too find the movie contradictory but, unlike those who see such contradictoriness evaporating as the advent of Munny in the guise of exterminating angel draws closer, I believe there is virtually nothing in *Unforgiven* untouched by ambivalence. There is no gesture, sign, or line that is not marked by an ambiguity affecting the entire film from the first to the last scene. If it is practically impossible to disagree with those who argue that in the end *Unforgiven* expels violence through violent means, in a textbook illustration of what René Girard has identified as the mechanism of "regenerative scapegoating," it is equally impossible to ignore the semantic context in which the film's violent mechanism is deployed. Will is explicitly and insistently portrayed as Little Bill's double. Not only they are both called William—as the most famous double in American literature, Edgar Allan Poe's William Wilson—but both cultivate hopes of starting a new life, away from the violence of their respective past lives. The two are further linked by the signifier "whiskey," as Little Bill represents the "law" in the town of Big Whiskey, and Munny often mentions his criminal past as a constant state of inebriation. It is no accident that he will start drinking again—thus breaking a promise he made to his deceased wife—as soon as he becomes once again a ruthless killer. One may note that, no matter how much the movie wants us to understand that Munny is no better than his antagonist—that, in other words, both Little Bill and Munny cannot find a way to ward off violence that is not in its own turn violent—we continue for obvious reasons to identify with the Eastwood character, thus falling prey to the ideological mechanism the film wishes to call into question.

It is however also true, at least to my mind, that *Unforgiven* is consistent in providing support for a different reading of the terrible final scenes. The pouring rain, the muddy streets, the darkness barely broken by the torches' light, the nightmarish shots of Ned's ravaged body exposed as a human sacrifice outside the saloon: all these elements

⁸⁵ Blundell and Ormand, "Western Values," p. 563.

lend credibility to Edward Kearns's argument that Eastwood's aim is to show us the "heart of darkness" of the Western's form and ideology. In my view this observation is substantially correct, and could be further supported by noticing that *Unforgiven*'s final sequence seems inspired by another celebrated cinematic descent into the "heart of darkness" — Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*.⁸⁶ The endings of both movies are drenched in an identical "pagan" atmosphere of blood and obscurity in which people's faces are barely visible, and marked by red and black reverberations that turn them into infernal creatures worthy of being compared to the satanic face haunting the first night in town of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Roger Molineux. The hallucinatory scenario is further emphasized not only by Munny's merciless violence, but what may well be the most "anti-Western" line ever uttered in a Western movie. Little Bill lies mortally wounded on the saloon's floor and, addressing Munny, tells him, "I don't deserve to die like this." Munny drily replies, "Deserve's got nothing to do with it." To think that Bill "deserves" to die, thus seeing Munny's violence as an act of justice, would mean becoming the victim of a lie as old as the Western genre. Munny's act is unequivocally constructed as a classic case of overkill that has little or nothing to do with justice. His violence is completely out of proportion to the offense he has received, and it ends up replicating on a bloody plane the analogous disproportion between the crime (Delilah's disfigurement) and the punishment (the horses offered by the cowboy to repay the brothel's *owner*) with which the movie began.⁸⁷ It is therefore not surprising that Munny emerges from the final scene as a sort of replica of Little Bill. His terrifying threats addressed to the population of Big Whiskey are an obvious echo of the sheriff's former "reign of terror." From this perspective the film leaves no hope. The cycle of violence seems to be destined to repeat itself endlessly, and it would be foolish and contrary to what Munny himself indicates, to attribute any moral or regenerative value

⁸⁶ Kearns, "Deserve's got nothing to do with it," p. 222.

⁸⁷ Of course, in the meantime Munny's black friend has been killed and this classic narrative maneuver confers a veneer of legitimacy to his desire for revenge. The disproportion nevertheless remains, and it is no accident that Little Bill is killed by Munny when he is lying on the floor and incapable of defending himself. His killing is an execution.

to the killings with which the narrative ends. "Deserve's got nothing to do with it."

When The Schofield Kid meets Munny for the first time, he tells him that he came looking for him because "you're the worst, meaning the best." The worst, the most ruthless killer, is obviously the best companion for the murderous business the young would-be killer wishes to engage in. The line not only suggests how hard it is to tell good from evil within the context of the story, but it also sums up the semantic ambivalence dominating *Unforgiven* as a whole. Depending on how you look at him, Munny is the best or the worst, just as, for example, the gun of English Bob is described by his owner as a "peacemaker," but is perceived by Little Bill as its opposite—as a fire-arm threatening the "peace" of Big Whiskey. Analogously, the notice that his torturers hang from Ned's devastated body, identifying him as an "assassin," is both true and false. Ned in the past led the life of a "bad man," as he himself notices on more than one occasion, but in the current situation he refuses to kill the cowboy he injured, and he is in some sense innocent. At the same time, the notice hanging from his body reading "this is what happens to assassins around here" is an excellent example of a self-deconstructive statement of the "it is forbidden to forbid" type. Whoever killed Ned is himself an assassin and should therefore be subjected to the same kind of treatment. That Ned's killers will perish by Munny's gun is a further confirmation of the extent to which his act belongs to the same compensatory logic of Big Whiskey. Other examples could be made, but the point should be clear enough. Depending on the perspective that the viewer takes, every single detail can be read as both a reproduction and a contestation of the motifs and values of Western narratives. As Catherine Ingrassia has argued, the film brings forth the ways in which the genre depends on the complicity of the viewers, to whom it nevertheless gives plenty of signs to resist a traditional and cathartic reading of the story even though, finally, the Western may well be "a genre we can never fully revise."⁸⁸

The narrative impasse on which most critical interpretations of *Unforgiven* focus may perhaps be summarized with a simple-enough formula. The film pulls apart some of the foundational myths of the

⁸⁸ Ingrassia, cit. p. 58.

genre, beginning with the myth of a just and regenerative violence. In the end, however, the story proves incapable of providing any alternative to the values it criticizes, which are thereby willy-nilly reinstated as the central ones of the Western, and indeed of US culture as a whole. In this sense, even though it precedes the 9/11 events by a decade, *Unforgiven* faces a political and cultural situation like the one in which not only the US, but the whole “Western world” would precipitate. In the aftermath of the attacks, public opinion seemed resigned to accept a large-scale version of the William Munny contradiction. The thousands of deaths that followed the invasion of both Afghanistan and Iraq by “coalition” forces were seen as the inevitable “balancing act” required by the three thousand lives lost in the 9/11 attacks on New York City and Washington. This of course provided the “enemy combatants” with the moral justification for their own killings, bombings, kidnappings, beheadings, and so forth. From a moral viewpoint, this perennially explosive condition translates into a generalized state of “unforgiveness”—in the spreading of a culture of violence and of sentiments opposed to reason and forbearance. It is on this tragic deadlock that the movie insists since its very title. The impossibility of forgiving both ourselves and others is identified in *Unforgiven* as the deepest moral and psychological flaw of the world of the Western. Munny often mentions that he is obsessed by visions of the people he killed, and yet this is not enough to make him change his ways once his wife is no longer watching over him. The ghosts of his victims haunt him because Munny feels “unforgiven” and this has the effect of intensifying his desperation. Similarly, it is the impossibility of forgiving the violence of the cowboys that sets the revenge mechanism in motion. The problem, of course, is that all seem to have valid reasons for refusing to forgive. Why should the prostitutes accept, as Alice says, to be not only ridden like horses but also marked like cows? Why should Little Bill tolerate that the “solution” to the social crisis opened by Delilah’s disfigurement—no matter how arbitrary that solution may appear to us—should be undermined by two bounty killers? Though biting, the critique advanced by Eastwood’s film is incapable of evoking a world not dominated by terror and the thirst for revenge. It is as if on the one hand the movie states that violence can only be stopped by forgiveness, and on the other it insists

that any hope of forgiving your enemy is nothing but a pious, romantic delusion.

At this point, however, we must go back to the crucial role played in the movie by Claudia Feathers, a character truly made conspicuous by her absence. In its juxtaposition of male and female roles *Unforgiven* may seem a hyper canonical Western. Claudia heals Munny's inclination to alcoholism and violence, and she is repeatedly associated with the feminine virtues of peace and generosity. Ned's Indian wife also belongs with Claudia's semantic field. Claudia has a last name (Feathers) linking her with Indians and she dies of the same disease that afflicted thousands of Native Americans. Moreover, both Claudia and Ned's wife are mute presences. When Ned decides to leave with Munny, his wife just looks at him, just as Claudia silently "looks" at Munny from a photograph he holds in his hand before joining The Schofield Kid. Delilah, too, belongs in many respects with this feminine sphere of non-violence and domesticity. She shares Claudia's "angelic" face, she attends to Munny after he has been beaten by Little Bill, and, most importantly, as Simon Petch and Roslyn Jolly have convincingly argued, Delilah does not seek revenge. On the contrary, the victim of the cowboy's knife, "represents the virtues of forgiveness and generosity, which are as alien to the positivist legal culture of Big Whiskey as they are at odds with the natural law of revenge."⁸⁹ To the extent that the narrative follows the "hero" as moving away from Claudia's benign influence, and therefore from the values she represents, in order to test his newly-found courage, *Unforgiven* stages once again the subjection of the "Evangelical" feminine spirit to a martial masculine imperative described by Jane Tompkins as one of the genre's distinguishing features. And yet, in my opinion, even this point is altogether ambivalent. Claudia's silence, as well as the silence of Sally Two Trees (Ned's wife) and Delilah, is much stronger and inflexible than all the words that implore men to restrain from violence pronounced by canonical Western heroines, from Owen Wister's Molly onwards. The women's silence in *Unforgiven* is Bartleby-like—it can never be appropriated as a form of consent and acceptance by the status quo.

⁸⁹ Petch and Jolly, "Law and Politics," p. 135.

Claudia is dead and Munny can hardly convince her that he had no choice but to do what he did. It is therefore impossible to enact that subordination of the "soft" feminine values to the sturdier masculine ones that traditionally seals the ideological universe of the Western. The close-up of Delilah's face after the massacre at Skinny's saloon does not suggest any approval of Munny's behavior. On the contrary, the mystery of her mute expression is an anticipation of the analogous "mystery" which Claudia's mother hopes to decipher by visiting her daughter's grave. By extending the notion introduced in the movie's title sequence, which points out that Claudia's mother could never fathom what led her daughter to marry a notorious thief and assassin like William Munny, the closing credits inform us that, when she visited Claudia's grave, Mrs. Feathers could not find anything on the inscription that would help her understand her daughter's choice. According to Petch and Jolly, the mystery of Claudia's act is the mystery of grace—a grace which, to invoke the terms with which Munny implicitly acknowledges how disproportionate his revenge is, the husband does not "deserve," and moves in a cultural and moral direction that is opposite to Munny's. The excess embraced by the latter is the excess of violence and revenge. Claudia's excess, vice versa, is that of love and forgiveness, but this excess seems to have no place in the social and cultural universe where Munny and his double Little Bill confront each other. I am not sure whether, as Petch and Jolly argue, the image of a disfigured but live Delilah may be read as a sign of hope or, as Sara Anson Vaux believes, *Unforgiven* may be read as a film that overturns the Western formula by making of forgiveness its hidden *raison d'être*. Perhaps these readings are a touch too optimistic if one keeps in mind that the values embodied in the absent figure of Claudia, no matter how they may be implicitly praised for being radically alternative to the ones expressed by the male characters' behavior, are in the end defeated. It is probably no accident that, whatever his moral substance may be, Munny in the end moves to California (the westernmost West) and becomes a rich merchant. Claudia's protest remains confined to silence and defeat. Yet, I continue to believe that *Unforgiven* is one of the most intelligent and sophisticated "anti-Westerns" ever realized. If it cannot renounce the violence that is one of the key features of the genre, at least it goes a long way in making us think critically about guilt, revenge, and forgiveness. Perhaps it is

silly to expect that a Western may convey a "pacifist" message, though, curiously enough, many believe that war movies can promote pacifist feelings and a principled rejection of violence. Maybe the laws of the Western genre are less malleable than those of other filmic and literary genres. At any rate, my goal in this essay was to insist that, at least to an extent, a different, alternative use of Western conventions *is* possible. Films like *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* and *Unforgiven*, though so different from one another, are eloquent examples that creative rewritings of traditions can be both aesthetically and morally innovative.

4. Negotiating Violence and Identity in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*

Sherman Alexie is certainly one of the most commercially and critically successful among contemporary American Indian writers. His fame has spread well outside the US and his books have been translated into several languages. Alexie, however, has also earned a reputation as a somewhat controversial author. In particular, his 1996 novel *Indian Killer* has been described by some reviewers and critics as a surprising departure from the humorous and compassionate attitude displayed in most of his previous poetry and fiction. More specifically, the novel has been subjected to a detailed and decidedly unfavorable critique by Arnold Krupat, one of the most respected and influential scholars of American Indian literature. Krupat is baffled by what he considers the novel's espousal of a kind of militant and aggressive "Red Nationalism." What he finds especially troubling and "frightening" is that the novel's thesis seems to be that "anger, rage, and a desire for murderous revenge must be expressed, not repressed or channeled into other possible action."¹ In short, *Indian Killer* is a disturbing book because it advocates a kind of "red" terrorism (my definition, not Krupat's) fueled by an "anti-racist racism" analogous to the one Jean-Paul Sartre described, and praised, in his well-known essay "Black Orpheus."² The argument of this essay is that *Indian Killer* is a more contradictory text than Krupat and others have acknowledged. Even though it is not a perfectly realized aesthetic and cultural object, what makes this novel an important one, are precisely

¹ Arnold Krupat, *Red Matters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), p. 103.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, "Black Orpheus," trans. John MacCombie, in *"What is Literature?" and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 291-330.

its ideological ambiguities and structural flaws. In particular, I would like to show that if on the one hand the novel seems indeed to encourage the violent expression of pent-up Indian rage, on the other it constantly and unequivocally calls into question the "nationalist" as well as the ethical rationale of the very violence it seems to advocate. This becomes especially clear when one compares—along transcultural and transnational, rather than nationalist lines—the novel to John Ford's classic Western *The Searchers* (1956), a film that not only *Indian Killer* refers to, but in several ways ends up mirroring.³ *The Searchers* is in fact a movie that, from the opposite point of view of the White settlers, interrogates the foundational violence of America and tries—in a contradictory way strikingly similar to that of Alexie's narrative—to both justify and repudiate violence as a creative force.

Like so many other American Indian writers, Alexie grew up struggling against what scholars have variously described as the "pretend" or "white man's" Indian.⁴ As he writes in an early and perceptive autobiographical sketch, "On the reservation, when we played Indians and cowboys, all of us little Skins fought on the same side against the cowboys in our minds. We never lost."⁵ Here Alexie underlines his rejection of the role of "extra" which the "Great Western Film" of US history has forced Indians to play. However, Alexie's emphatic declaration of victory—"we never lost"—is tinged with

³ The relevance of transnationalism to Native American Studies has been called into question by some critics. Robert Warrior, for example, argues that "many Native people, including Native scholars, rely on the language of nationalism, the language in which the political struggle for their actual social world is being waged" and thus remain wary towards an idea like transnationality, whose critical use, however, Warrior does not discount. See Robert Warrior, "Native American Critical Responses to Transnational Discourse," *PMLA* 122, No. 3 (May 2007), p. 807. On the other hand, Shari Huhndorf has explicitly argued in favor of a transnational perspective, noting, among other things, that "[a]lthough nationalism is an essential anti-colonial strategy in indigenous setting, nationalist scholarship neglects the historical forces (such as imperialism) that increasingly draw indigenous communities into global contexts." Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 3.

⁴ See, among others, *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*, eds. Gretchen M. Bataille and Charles L. P. Silet (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1980); Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

⁵ Sherman Alexie, "My Heroes Have Never Been Cow-boys," in *First Indian on the Moon* (New York: Hanging Loose Press, 1993), p. 102.

more irony than one may at first realize. In fact, when in *Indian Killer* Alexie returns to the vexed question of how Indians relate to the Western culture industry, he seems much less optimistic about the possibility of beating the cowboy eternally haunting the Indian's mind. In chapter 6 of the novel's third section, Reggie—a youngster whose mother is Spokane and whose father is white—is watching on TV with his Indian friends Ty and Harley (who is deaf-mute) John Ford's *The Searchers*. The movie stars John Wayne as Ethan Edwards, an unreconstructed Southern Civil War veteran who spends many years searching for his niece Debbie (played by Natalie Wood). The girl is kidnapped by a group of Comanches following an attack on Ethan's brother's farm in which the rest of the family is brutally slaughtered. As Alexie reminds his readers, however, if initially Ethan hopes to bring young Debbie back home, as time rolls on the objective of his search changes dramatically. "He planned on killing her if he ever found her, because she'd been soiled by the Indians."⁶

The three young Indians enter a heated discussion concerning not only the plot of the movie but, implicitly, also their own attitudes towards the largely white urban world in which they live, and the tragic events unfolding therein.

"What would you do if some Indians took your niece or your child?" Harley signed the question to Ty.

"I'd wonder which powwow they were going to," signed Ty.

"Seriously."

"Seriously. I don't have a child. I don't know."

"I'd kill her," signed Reggie. "I understand what John Wayne is feeling. How would you feel if some white people kidnapped an Indian kid? I'd cut them all into pieces." (320)

What immediately strikes the reader is that Reggie, rather than sympathizing with the Indians, totally identifies with the Wayne character. He even goes so far as to argue that he would not only punish the kidnappers, but the kidnapped herself, presumably because he, too, like Ethan Edwards, believes she has been "polluted" by her

⁶ Sherman Alexie, *Indian Killer* (New York: Atlantic, 1996, p. 319). Further references are included parenthetically.

prolonged contact with the enemy. Now, Reggie's response has its own logic, and it would seem to exemplify the splitting of the self experienced by many an Indian spectator of a Western movie. As Jennifer Gillan has incisively put it, "while the western narrative encourages them to identify with the hero, [the Indian spectators] also recognize themselves in the Indian villains."⁷ Reggie identifies with the white hero even though, as anyone who has carefully watched the movie knows, he is more of a negative rather than a positive hero. Then, as if to compensate for his identification with a man who viscerally hates Indians, he overturns the filmic situation by conjuring up an inverted scenario in which the kidnappers are white, and the stolen child is Indian.

This scene, however, is also important in terms of *Indian Killer*'s plot. Reggie is a mixed-blood who feels Indian and not white, but who can hardly forget a childhood marked by the beatings and the psychological tortures of "that brutal stranger who pretended to be Reggie's father" and who wanted to make of him a "non hostile Indian" (320). It is no accident that immediately after stating that he would have killed both kidnappers and kidnapped, "Reggie wondered if he'd been stolen away from his real family" (320). This cannot strike the reader as anything but an unlikely possibility. His mixed-blood status is emphasized by the blue eyes he shares with the movie star he sympathizes with. But his reflections are significant because they unveil a specific psychological and cultural problem. To the extent that Reggie identifies with both the ruthless avenger and the kidnapped child, the violence that should provide him with a solution to his impasse finally turns against himself. By fantasizing that he, too, would kill Debbie, while all along thinking of himself as a child stolen from a full-blood Indian family, Reggie stands out as an exasperated version of the Indian who looks at himself through the eyes of the colonizer. He is a victim of what W. E. B. Du Bois famously described as "double consciousness."⁸ The violence that Reggie imagines would heal his soul has absolutely nothing emancipatory about it. On the contrary, his violent fantasy is ultimately not only homicidal, but *sui-cidal*. Reggie is described as the agent as well as the target of his own

⁷ Jennifer Gillan, "Reservation Home Movies: Sherman Alexie's Poetry," *American Literature* 68, No. 1 (March 1996), p. 102.

⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* ([1903] New York: Penguin, 1989), p. 5.

violent impulses.

Even though Reggie is not a major character in the novel, his social and psychological situation reverberates in important ways in the plot of *Indian Killer*. One of the narrative archetypes behind Alexie's novel as well as John Ford's *The Searchers* is obviously the captivity narrative. In Alexie's case, as in some other recent American Indian novels, this archetype is overturned as the main protagonist is not a white abducted by the Indians but, vice versa, an Indian abducted by whites.⁹ In *Indian Killer* the abducted Indian is John Smith, adopted at childbirth by a liberal, well-meaning but in several ways pathetic white couple. As in *The Searchers*, the dividing line between kidnapping and adoption is extremely thin. In the movie, Debbie is first kidnapped but later adopted and perfectly integrated within the Comanche tribe. This circumstance reflects a historical fact: since the first "Indian wars" of colonial times, in a great number of cases Whites (both male and female) taken prisoners by the Indians refused to go back to "civilization" when they were given the opportunity to do so.¹⁰ It is thus not surprising that, in a cultural context marked—at least since the late nineteenth-century—by the white fantasy of "going Indian," several white Americans would desire to be adopted by an Indian tribe.¹¹ This very peculiar "American dream" is mercilessly attacked by Alexie at several points in his novel, and nowhere more explicitly than in his vitriolic portraits of Native American Studies professor Clarence Mather—a man who flaunts his having been adopted into a Lakota family—and of detective-story writer as well as former cop Jack Wilson, who insists he is a descendant of the (fictional) Shilshomish tribe.

⁹ See, for example, Leslie Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999) and James Welch's *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (New York: Doubleday, 2000). For some observations on Welch's novel, see Giorgio Mariani, "Rewriting the Captivity Narrative: James Welch's *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*," in *Ambassadors. American Studies in a Changing World*, eds. Massimo Bacigalupo and Gregory Dowling, Proceedings of the XVI Biennial A.I.S.N.A. Conference (Rapallo: Busco Edizioni, 2006), pp. 214-19.

¹⁰ Cfr. James Axtell, "The White Indians of Colonial America," in *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 168-206.

¹¹ On this white fantasy see the excellent studies by Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), and Philip Joseph Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

However, while Ford—notwithstanding his film's many contradictions—imagines that a white woman may become perfectly assimilated into Comanche society—Alexie would seem to suggest that no successful social and cultural hybridization between Whites and Indians can take place.¹² Alexie has been in general celebrated as an author who cultivates no hope of ever recuperating some kind of pristine and pure Indianness, and who sees the Indians' identity as inescapably intertwined with a larger American identity. One would be inclined to conclude that, with *Indian Killer*, he has repudiated his previous convictions. Moreover, the book's narrative is punctuated by the two brutal murders committed by the titular "Indian killer" and his novel ends with the killer (whose identity is never disclosed) dancing in an Indian cemetery, soon joined by other unidentified Indians (or ghosts of Indians). It should then come as no surprise that many readers are perplexed or outright shocked by the novel. In particular, as I have already noted, Arnold Krupat is deeply disturbed by what he sees as *Indian Killer's* support of a violent and indiscriminate anti-white sentiment.

I would like to tackle this problem by first returning to the novel's passage with which I started. Though in some ways logical, there is something uncanny in the fact that Reggie's rage leads him to "understand" the behavior of one of the most ferocious Indian haters of classic Western cinema. If Alexie wanted to grant some sort of legitimacy to the killer's "homicidal fury," it is rather strange that in *The Searchers* scene he equates the anti-Indian hatred of Ethan Edwards with the anti-white one of Reggie Polatkin. If his intent is to provide emotional and ideological support for an American Indian version of Fanon's and Sartre's "anti-racist racism," here Alexie would appear to

¹² Ford's movie is commonly considered one of the greatest American movies ever made and has been the object of numerous critical studies. For some recent contributions see *The Searchers: Essays and Reflections on John Ford's Classic Western*, eds. Arthur M. Eckstein and Peter Lehman (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004); Robert B. Pippin, "What Is a Western? Politics and Self-Knowledge in John Ford's *The Searchers*," *Critical Inquiry* 35, No. 2 (Winter 2009), pp. 223-53; Christopher Sharrett, "Through a Door Darkly: A Reappraisal of John Ford's *The Searchers*," *Cineaste* 31, No. 4 (Fall 2006), pp. 4-8. In the present essay I have chosen not to analyze in detail Ford's movie, which I instead discuss in Giorgio Mariani, "Il cinema western visto dagli indiani. Vendetta e violenza in *Sentieri selvaggi* di John Ford e *Indian Killer* di Sherman Alexie," in *Le frontiere del West*, ed. Stefano Rosso (Milano: Shake, 2008), pp. 57-77.

undermine his own narrative project.¹³ If anything, the insistence on the equivalence of racially opposite violent impulses mirrors Ford's filmic plot, before the latter more or less falls apart in the movie's final fifteen minutes. Just as Ford constructs the Comanche chief Scar as Ethan's double, Alexie suggests that Reggie's hatred, besides being self-destructive, ends up making him idealize a racist figure he should in fact detest. Moreover, in order to avenge the assaults on some urban Indians organized by a white gang led by yet another double of Reggie's—Aaron Rogers, whose brother is killed on an Indian reservation by two white delinquents—Reggie sets up with Ty and Harley his own American Indian counter-gang. The outcome is that just like Aaron and his buddies savagely attack some innocent homeless Indians, Reggie and his friends beat, torture, and nearly blind a poor white vagrant.

The symmetrical construction of these episodes is surely significant, and it is also analogous to the symmetry pursued by Ford for most of his movie. Each act of violence on the part of one of the two groups, or which is imagined as caused by one of the two groups, is inexorably matched by an equivalent violence perpetrated by the enemy, and so on in an endless cycle. Even though Alexie, unlike Ford, is not ambiguous regarding which group is historically responsible for the greater violence, there can be no doubt that—in a way that exactly parallels Ford's—Alexie foregrounds the mimetic nature of violence and revenge. Even though he always describes the reasons behind the rage of his characters (whether Indian, or not), thus constantly widening the number of candidates for the role of the mysterious killer, Alexie also insists that there is no violence which is not always the mirror of a previous violence.¹⁴ Finally, if on his part Ford makes of Ethan a character with whom, notwithstanding John Wayne's charisma, the spectator has trouble identifying, Alexie makes it simply impossible for his readers to identify with the killer since the latter's identity is never disclosed. Of his (or her?) personal history, what he or she believes in, what reasons he or she has for

¹³ Krupat (*Red Matters*, p. 115) suggests that the violence evoked by Alexie in his novel may be considered as a sort of American Indian version of the politics of *négritude*: a politics of *rougetude* whose resistant anti-white "racism" is meant to contrast the dominant anti-Indian racism.

¹⁴ For a reading of *Indian Killer* as an "anti-detective" novel, see below.

murdering people at random, we know virtually nothing. Yes, of course we know he or she hates Whites for what they have done to Indians, but unlike the avengers with whom so often literature or cinema ask us to sympathize, the killer does not choose as his/her targets evil individuals who are responsible for heinous crimes. In his depiction of the killer's murders, Alexie carefully avoids the narrative strategies usually employed to make violence, if not palatable, at least justifiable. If the goal of the novel is to provide a rationale for, or indeed to promote, American Indian terrorism, then one must conclude that Alexie goes about his task in an eminently contradictory and awkward way.

Krupat supports his critical reading of the novel by quoting the views of various characters, and especially those of the young Spokane woman Marie, as if they were a direct expression of the author's own thoughts. Others, however, have noted—rightly, to my mind—that not even one of the novel's characters is constructed in such a way as to elicit the reader's unconditional sympathy. Though there may be a few similarities between views Alexie has expressed either in interviews or in other works, and *some* of the ideas that Marie entertains, that is by no means enough to conclude that everything she says reflects Alexie's own views.¹⁵

Consistently with a narrative project pivoting around the idea that many of the novel's protagonists would have a motive for turning to violence, but no one can be conclusively identified as the killer, Alexie draws up a gallery of characters all marked by more or less serious flaws, without making any one of them the perspectival or moral center of the novel. Marie herself is constructed as a deeply ambivalent character. In the novel's ending she defends John Smith from the charge of being the killer, but at the same time she tries to morally justify his deeds ("if some Indian is killing white guys, then it's a credit to us that it took over five hundred years for it to happen" [418]). Moreover, earlier on she had argued that the killer could very well not be an Indian, but someone who "is just trying to make people think an Indian guy did it" (333)—an idea that not only is inconsistent with any moral condoning of the killer's behavior, but one which realizes the *political* danger the killer objectively poses to the Indian

¹⁵ Tina Chen, "Towards an Ethics of Knowledge," *MELUS* Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer 2005), p.164.

cause. Marie's contradictory reasoning is further underlined by the words with which she confronts the detestable professor Mather: "I mean, calling him the Indian killer doesn't make any sense, does it? If it was an Indian doing the killing, then wouldn't he be called the Killer Indian? I mean, Custer was an Indian killer, not a killer Indian" (247). Whether consciously or not, here Marie anticipates the point highlighted later in the novel, when Reggie identifies with John Wayne. Hatred is hatred, and in the end, it is difficult to trace a moral line between a celebrated Indian killer like Ford's Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* and a (presumably) aspiring "killer Indian" like Reggie.

A further proof that, like Ford's movie, Alexie's novel resists what appears to be its surface meaning, lies with the key confrontation between the character of John Smith and that of "wannabe Indian" Jack Wilson. At a first glance the novel would seem to encourage readers to sympathize with Smith, the adopted/abducted Indian whose familial and cultural roots have been violently cut, and who has no concrete hope of finding the communitarian and tribal identity he so desperately longs for. Implicitly and explicitly contrasted with John, Jack Wilson, who profits as a writer from his invented identity, stands out as the fake Indian the reader is asked to dislike. That would seem to be even more the case since he is described by Alexie as the author of a novel in progress entitled *Indian Killer*. Even though Alexie does not go into detail concerning the nature of this text-within-the-text, we do know that its worldview is strikingly different from Alexie's own *Indian Killer* (more on this in my concluding remarks). It does not take long, however, to realize that Wilson is nothing but Smith's white *doppelgänger*.¹⁶ Both are de facto orphans who never manage to be happy in the families that have adopted them. Both wish to be not only biologically but also culturally Indian and they end up inventing a tribal identity (Navajo for Smith, Shilshomish for Wilson). For different reasons, both hang out with the homeless without ever managing to truly belong to this "urban tribe." Both also have a name that ironically underlines their inescapably hybrid nature. Smith is named after the famous English explorer who was the first white made captive by the

¹⁶ Alexie has resorted to the use of doubles also elsewhere in his fiction. See Karen Jorgensen, "White Shadows: The Use of Doppelgängers in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* Vol. 9, No. 4 (Winter 1997), pp. 19-25.

Indians, only to be rescued by the legendary "princess" Pocahontas. Jack Wilson, instead, is the Anglo name taken by Wovoka, the Piute Messiah leader of the Ghost Dance, the late nineteenth-century religious-political movement repeatedly mentioned in the novel. Finally, both Wilson and Smith are afflicted with a kind of monomania. The former believes to be writing "*the* book that would finally reveal to the world what it truly meant to be Indian" (338, my emphasis), while the latter is convinced that it is possible to identify the *one* individual responsible for his sufferings, whom he first identifies with the "overall man" who took him away from his mother at birth, and later with Jack Wilson himself: "You're the one who's responsible!" (404).¹⁷

From what I have said so far, it would be possible to draw the conclusion that, even though he looks at the world from an Indian point of view, like Ford in *The Searchers*, Alexie insists on the perverse and mutually destructive nature of any violent confrontation between Indians and Whites. The hatred gleaming from Reggies' blue eyes is mirrored by Ethan Edwards' blue eyes just as the latter are in turn mirrored by those of Ford's (presumably mixed) Comanche chief Scar. Similarly, the radio conductor Truck Schultz is animated by a racism that finds its counterpart in John Smith's desire to see "fear in blue eyes" (25)—a wish that evidently ignores how contemporary Indians too may have blue eyes. It is thus not surprising that Jack Wilson and John Smith, no matter how different they may at first appear to be, are in fact constructed as two halves of one whole. Let me be clear here. Alexie is obviously careful to distinguish between oppressors and oppressed, the colonizer and the colonized, and he is far from arguing that those who have profited and those who have suffered from the invasion of the Americas should be put on the same plane. As far as this historical question is concerned, Alexie completely overturns the outlook of a John Ford who was finally incapable of letting go of the desire to celebrate the "winning of the West." And yet it is to my mind impossible to deny that, however contradictorily and perhaps reluctantly, both Alexie and Ford de facto undermine the possibility of pitting Indians and Whites against each other in a

¹⁷ The connection between the two characters is further emphasized by a dream Wilson has, in which first he sees Smith knifing his victims, and later *he* is the one who is brandishing the knife and stabbing one White after another. It may also be worth recalling that the name Wilson cannot but recall one of the most famous "doubles" of American literature: Edgar Allan Poe's William Wilson.

Manichaeian way. Both Alexie and Ford show that violence always generates a dynamic in which, ultimately, the two enemy camps behave in more or less the same way, no matter how different the reasons that sustain their cause.

It is no sheer coincidence, therefore, that Alexie must face in the final pages of his novel a narrative problem not unlike the one Ford confronted in the final section of *The Searchers*. The mysterious Indian killer is in fact rather like Ford's Ethan Edwards. His violence is sustained by a racial hatred equal and opposite to Ethan's and, like the latter, the killer shies away from all social connections in order to pursue his insatiable desire for revenge. Unlike Ethan, however, the killer does not have a specific mission, nor does he finally perform as generous a gesture as Ethan's, who in the end cannot bring himself to kill Debbie. It is no accident that in the novel the killer's humanitarian act of returning unharmed to the Jones family the child he has kidnapped, is soon followed by another gratuitous murder. As the narrative draws to a close, the killer's homicidal fury is not spent, and the novel does little or nothing to make the reader if not sympathize, at least understand, the killer's reasons. If therefore Ford must find a way to exorcise the specter of racial violence he has conjured up, also Alexie must struggle with the problem of finding a narrative slot for the killer's homicidal impulses that would be consistent with the novel as a whole.

I think one must admit that the ending of *Indian Killer* is unsatisfactory but, as is the case with *The Searchers*, what does not work on a narrative level is simply the symptom of a deeper and insoluble historical and political contradiction.¹⁸ In the novel's last chapter, entitled "A Creation Story," the killer is not represented as an isolated and pathological figure. Whether the one we see in the final pages of the book is the killer, or his/her ghost, the figure dancing among the graves of an Indian cemetery is joined by other Indian dancers, as a nearby tree "grows heavy with owls" (420). What is evoked on the last page is no longer an individual, but a collective, indeed trans- or pan-tribal American Indian subject that would seem to finally rule out any ambiguity concerning the killer's ethnic identity. Marie twice

¹⁸ Here I am echoing the well-known formula for ideological critique illustrated at length by Fredric Jameson in several of his works. See especially Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

suggests that the killer may well not be an Indian. The last chapter appears to deny this possibility. Moreover, being linked to a collectivity, the killer is no longer presented as a crazy terrorist. Indeed, as Krupat laments, it would seem that Alexie is suggesting that the killer's violence, or more generally, American Indian violence, must be considered as a "creative" tool—perhaps the tool necessary to forge a truly independent pan-Indian "nation" capable of confronting head-on the racism of white America. Krupat himself admits that, to the extent that the book's final chapter has mostly a "ceremonial" rather than historical-realistic function, it may be more charitably interpreted as fantasy in which ultimately the image of the owls as "birds of prey" is transcended by that of the owls as "birds of prayer."¹⁹ Yet, there is no denying that the novel's last chapter does not offer any explicit repudiation of violence, nor expresses any regret for the two innocent and scalped white victims.

This political and moral problem is made manifest in the novel first and foremost as an *aesthetic* failure, given that the ambivalent attitude displayed in the novel's ending objectively clashes with the narrative strategy Alexie adopts for the rest of his novel. As I have insisted, very much like Ford's *The Searchers*, Alexie's *Indian Killer* emphasizes how violence, whatever its reasons and justifications, has a perverse logic of its own that ends up undermining the very objectives it claims to pursue. Alexie does not simply show how every act of violence may always be reconstructed as an answer to a previous real or imagined aggression. *Indian Killer* also makes any identification with the killer problematic not only on an individual but on a symbolical level as well. A metaphorical reading of the killer as an embodiment of a century-old Indian resentment would seem all-too-obvious, and yet in the novel, albeit from different viewpoints, this interpretation is advanced by two unsympathetic characters like Truck and Mather. The former argues that "The Indian Killer is merely the distillation of their rage" (346), whereas the latter explains in one of his lessons that the Indian killer is a "revolutionary construct [...] Indian people have had their culture, their children, metaphorically stolen by European-American colonization. And now, this Indian Killer has physically and metaphorically stolen a European-American child" (246). Even the idea that the final dance in the

¹⁹ Krupat, *Red Matters*, p. 121.

cemetery—a sort of fusion between the Ghost Dance and the Owl Dance—must be seen as a prelude to the return of the vanquished Indians on the American continent and the disappearance of the Whites, stands opposed to the episode in which Smith meets an old Indian woman. This woman tells Smith she has a “time machine” capable of taking him back to the moment in which Columbus landed on that fateful Caribbean beach. Smith’s task at that point would be to hide among the vegetation and, as the opportunity arises, stab Columbus with his knife and thus change the course of world history. It is certainly no accident that the woman is called Carlotta Lott—like the wife of the Biblical Lott, who changes into a pillar of salt as she turns back to look at the past, Carlotta is the ironic symbol of the impossible desire of going back to the past. The episode underscores the untenability of any millenarian perspective akin to that of the Ghost Dance, which is nonetheless ambiguously evoked in the novel’s final chapter.

One can therefore legitimately argue that the ending of *Indian Killer* is unsatisfactory from both a structural and an aesthetic point of view. Structurally, the ending is scarcely consistent with much of what goes on elsewhere in the novel, and especially with the novel’s insistence on the fearful symmetries of racial violence. Aesthetically, the text seems to lack a clear moral outlook, as it both critiques and condones the killer’s murderous rage. But if we must call attention to the antinomies of Alexie’s imagination, we need also stress that its flaws mediate and translate an insoluble historical and political tension that can by no means be imputed to Alexie himself. What Krupat calls “the rage stage” embodied in this novel cannot be understood, as Krupat suggests, as the expression of a “Red Nationalism” in some way comparable to the Black Nationalism of the 1960’s. Nationalisms of all stripes always have always resorted to a lesser or greater degree to the use of violence, but they have done so to promote specific political objectives, not simply out of frustration. Anticolonialist intellectuals like Frantz Fanon and others supported and argued for the use of revolutionary violence on the part of colonized peoples, just as Malcolm X and the Black Panthers believed in the right to armed self-defense. Even terrorism—as Gillo Pontecorvo showed in his classic film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966)—played a role in anti-colonial struggles, and yet, for all its morally and ethically disturbing implications, it usually grew out of a specific national space whose control was

claimed and, ultimately, gained. Violence for violence's sake was never the goal of national liberation movements.

Alexie's "Indian killer" can hardly be described as a supporter of any "nationalism," either "red" or of some other kind. As Shari Huhndorf has argued, nationalist criticism is not always relevant to today's Indian Country because "it neglects indigenous communities that fall outside the legal category of 'nation'—those without treaties, for example, or urban communities whose histories render 'restoration' and political autonomy irrelevant."²⁰ Now, the Indian community represented in *Indian Killer* is precisely an "urban tribe" made of individual Indians who are "outcasts from their tribes" (38), and who are inescapably caught up in "global social dynamics" that exceed any nationalist paradigm. The city of Seattle, where the novel takes place, is a transnational site where older nationalist narratives have little intellectual or political purchase. It is certainly no accident that, in what I think is one of the novel's crucial passages (220), Alexie makes it a point, to reimagine the protagonists of three important American Indians novels (Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* [1968], Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* [1977], James Welch's *The Death of Jim Loney* [1979]) as homeless Natives who have ended up joining Seattle's urban tribe. The three novels in question are usually considered as "return narratives" in which the main characters manage, after overcoming a number of obstacles, to regain at least some sense of their tribal identity.²¹ Correctly identified by Krupat as "realist legitimations of nationalism," these narratives are allegorically singled out by Alexie as no longer adequate in an urban context where the social, cultural, and political problems faced by American Indians cannot be solved at any simple "nationalist" or tribal level.²² To the extent that the Indian killer's rage may be indeed be seen as an expression or a metaphor of something larger than an individual's pathological condition, it seems

²⁰ Huhndorf, *Mapping*, p. 11.

²¹ On return narratives see William Bevis, "Native American Novels: Homing In," in *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literatures*, eds. A. Krupat and B. Swann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 580-620, as well as Louis Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992). I have tried to show the limits of this undoubtedly important narrative paradigm in my *Post-Tribal Epics: The Native American Novel Between Tradition and Modernity* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1996).

²² Krupat as quoted in Huhndorf, *Mapping*, p. 9.

to embody more the desperation, frustration, and lack of direction of an uprooted and alienated urban community with no "national" space to win back or liberate, than any "politics" proper, nationalist or otherwise.

Perhaps we can begin to unpack the moral as well as aesthetic contradictions of the novel's ending if we recall that, by referring to Jack Wilson's novel by the same title, Alexie is explicitly setting his "anti-detective novel" against the genre of the murder mystery, and in particular against its so-called "American Indian" subgenre.²³ Yet Alexie appears not only eager to satirize the work of Tony Hillerman and his numerous followers.²⁴ The hero of Wilson's novels is *Aristotle* Little Hawk (my emphasis). Alexie wishes to call attention to the crucial *ca-thartic* feature of the "classic" detective novel. The literary scholar William Spanos sees in fact the detective novel as a quintessential embodiment of the "Aristotelianism" of western narrative ideology, with its privileging of a "linear and temporal plot" meant to safeguard logical causality.²⁵ In Wilson's *Indian Killer* the murderer turns out to be John Smith, and the revelation comes with a sort of reassuring and politically correct moral: "Wilson says that Indian children shouldn't be adopted by white parents. He says that those kids commit suicide

²³ In this paragraph I summarize a reading of Alexie's novel that I have developed at greater length in my "Tra universo mitico e frammentazione postmoderna: sui paradigmi temporali della narrativa indianoamericana contemporanea," in *La penna e il tamburo. Gli indiani d'America e la letteratura degli Stati Uniti* (Verona: ombre corte, 2003), pp. 130-54.

²⁴ I put the words "American Indian" in quotation marks because, with a few exceptions, most of these mysteries are written by non-Native writers like Tony Hillerman, Margaret Coel, Thomas Perry, Jack Page, Laura Baker, etc. This is not to say that these novels are ipso facto to be condemned, but the ethical issue of culture appropriation (or, as some would put it, exploitation) cannot be outright discounted. For a good overview of this subgenre see Ray B. Browne, *Murder on the Reservation: American Indian Crime Fiction*. (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 2004).

²⁵ See William Spanos, "The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination," in *Early Postmodernism: Foundational Essays*, ed. Paul Bové (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 17-39. On the "anti-detective story" see also Stefano Tani, *The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984). In Tani's words, the anti-detective novel "frustrates the expectations of the reader [...] and substitutes for the detective as central and ordering character the decentering and chaotic admission of mystery, of nonsolution" (40).

way too often" (415). Alexie's *Indian Killer* belongs to an entirely different tradition. Instead of providing its readers with a comforting solution, the novel promotes what Spanos identifies as "anti-Aristotelianism", and it does so by literally "evoking rather than purging pity and terror."²⁶ Having chosen to write against the grain of the detective novel, Alexie cannot contain the violence he has conjured up within a ready-made narrative strategy. His simultaneous rejection of the aesthetics as well as the politics of the traditional murder mystery prevents him from linking the killer to a specific ideological discourse like that of nationalism.

If anything, the Indian killer's random attacks may be seen as looking forward to 2001 and its aftermath—to a "global" terror whose aims are hopelessly muddled and, to the extent that they are declared, patently absurd (think of Al Qaida's evocation of a new caliphate). What I think is truly dark and depressing about the novel's ending is not so much its apparent endorsement of a "rage stage" whose pointlessness and ineffectuality are duly highlighted by the overarching narrative, as its pessimistic outlook on the fate of the Indians in the age of transnationalism. Unlike Leslie Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, the mammoth novel that "departs from nationalist novels by positioning transnational alliances as the most powerful of anticolonial endeavors," *Indian Killer* shows very little faith in Silko's "tribal internationalism."²⁷ Though at some very general level both novels would seem to be ultimately committed to showing that "The Indian Wars have never ended in the Americas" and that Native peoples demand "nothing less than the return of all tribal lands"—as we read in the inside cover of *Almanac*—Silko's novel envisions the actual retaking of ancestral lands by a revolutionary pan-tribal and transnational indigenous army, while Alexie's offers the reader no hopeful vistas. Silko too shows that there are "Indians flung across the world forever separated from their tribes and from their ancestral lands," but *Almanac* imagines that such diasporic condition can be eventually remedied.²⁸ In other words, she sees return narratives as compatible with a globalized, transnational context. To put it somewhat schematically, we

²⁶ Spanos, "The Detective and the Boundary," p. 39.

²⁷ Huhndorf, *Mapping*, p. 171.

²⁸ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), p. 88.

might conclude that whereas her novel projects the Utopian potential of transnationalism as a historical juncture in which the violence and injustice of capitalism and imperialism can be finally confronted by a united and international indigenous front, Alexie—at least in *Indian Killer*—looks at the same period as one where rage and politics have become tragically disconnected. The novel's ending may indeed be seen as dystopian in that the ghostly figures gathering in the cemetery are utterly unlike the ancestral spirit guiding Silko's army. The latter have a real world and actual lands to reclaim, the former only a century-old thirst for revenge. And yet, paradoxically, one may well argue that Silko's novel does not engage the thorny issue of the moral nature of revolutionary violence. There is some hope in *Almanac* that the revolution might be bloodless, but overall that does not appear as a likely possibility. Indeed, the notion of violence as an indispensable "creative" force is by no means ruled out by Silko's novel.²⁹

In *Indian Killer*, instead, while it is true that—as Krupat maintains—the killer's murderous rage is not transcended or channeled into something less destructive, the brutality of violence, revolutionary or not, is frankly displayed. In fact, it is precisely because there is no politics proper to screen it or claim its necessity that we can see it for what it is: the brutal injuring of another human being's body. In my reading, Alexie's novel is an important one not in spite, but *because* of its inconsistencies. While the narrative suggests time and again that violence is not a tool through which the world can be changed for the better, it also insists in making the reader aware of the rage many indigenous people undoubtedly feel. Alexie is obviously aware that violence ignites violence, though he also knows that, however morally objectionable, the temptation to resort to violent means on the part of a people who has been oppressed, colonized, and decimated should be hardly surprising. This is what ultimately makes Alexie's novel different from Ford's film. *The Searchers* tries with its ending to hide the violence which the rest of the movie highlights—and to an extent—critiques, as if it were enough to exile Ethan in order to save the ethics of American civilization. *Indian Killer*, instead, does not hide the fact that, even though the impulse to embrace violence may be deeply unethical and politically self-defeating, it is in a sense at least emotionally justifiable given what Indian peoples have had to endure for

²⁹ See, for instance, Silko, *Almanac*, p. 739.

centuries. However, to me there can be no doubt that while the final chapter flirts with the notion of violence as a "creative" force, the narrative as a whole moves in an opposite direction by emphasizing the essentially *destructive* and morally indefensible nature of violence. Unlike John Ford, who tries to sublimate the violence of colonization, Alexie prefers to be inconsistent and to contradict himself (like his favorite American poet, Walt Whitman) by reminding us that the temptation to embrace violence is always there and if we wish to overcome it, we surely cannot pretend it does not exist. Of course, it was not too difficult for Ford to get rid of his Indian hater—after all, once Scar, the object of his hatred, has disappeared, Ethan's presence is no longer necessary to the community. Alexie, on his part, may only dream of seeing white America go away. The scar left by white imperialism on the Indians is one that cannot heal easily. And yet, *Indian Killer* shows that if they were to resort to murderous violence—or, to use the novel's language, if they were to pursue the dream of seeing fear in blue eyes—American Indians would seriously run the risk of seeing the world through the icy eyes of America's super "cowboy" John Wayne.

5. Fabulations of the Exception: Law, Justice, and Violence in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*

As David Carlson writes on the first page of his *Imagining Sovereignty*, "'Sovereignty' is perhaps the most ubiquitous term in American Indian writing today—but its meaning and function are anything but universally understood."¹ As his study shows, American Indian literatures have had an important role in shaping debates about this vexed concept, and in interrogating how a legal concept of Western origin like sovereignty may be adapted and "indigenized" to assert and support the struggles of tribal people for self-determination. While the term "justice" often comes up in Carlson's discussion of American Indian sovereignty, the problematic interrelationship between the two concepts remains relatively unexplored in his book. That is not the case with the most recent work by Anishinaabe writer Louise Erdrich, whose "justice trilogy"—published between 2008 and 2016—interrogates in provocative ways how justice may function within a historical and political context in which the tribes' right to self-government continues to be severely limited.² This situation is to a considerable extent

¹ David J. Carlson, *Imagining Sovereignty: Self-Determination in American Indian Law and Literature* (Norman, OK: Oklahoma University Press, 2016), p. 3. Earlier versions of this essay were delivered as plenary lectures at the 26th AISNA conference at the University of l'Aquila (Sept. 23-25, 2021), and at the "Theories and Aesthetics of Transition" conference in honor of Ulfried Reichardt at the University of Mannheim (October 7-8, 2022). I am grateful to the organizers of these events for the invitation to participate.

² The three novels are *The Plague of Doves* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008); *The Round House* (New York: Harper, 2012); *LaRose* (New York: Harper, 2016).

due to the legacy of what we may wish to call the "injustice trilogy," better known as the "Marshall Trilogy," a set of three Supreme Court decisions that if on the one hand recognized some limited sovereignty to Indian tribes (they were described as "nations," after all), it also clearly stated that the relationship between tribes and the US was that of "a ward to its guardian," and that only the federal government had authority to deal with Indian nations.³ This legal framework was of course contested by Indian tribes since its inception, but in one way or another it still provides the foundations for the political and juridical relations between the tribes and the US government and, as Erdrich insists, along with other Supreme Court decisions, seriously limits the right of indigenous peoples to administer justice within what is supposedly "their" territory. This problematic receives particular attention in the second of the three novels, *The Round House*, winner of the National Book Award, and the object of the present essay.

Part of the reason for this book's largely positive reception lies with the urgency of its social and political content. The narrative revolves around the rape of an Indian woman by a white man and focuses especially on the impossibility of prosecuting the perpetrator of the crime, due to what the novel itself describes as the "toothless sovereignty" of the Anishinaabe tribe. As Erdrich writes in her Afterword, "1 in every 3 Native women will be raped in her lifetime (and that figure is certainly higher as Native women often do not report rape); 86 percent of rapes and sexual assaults upon Native women are perpetrated by non-Native men; few are prosecuted."⁴ Elaborating on this horrific situation, in an op-ed piece published in *The New York Times* on February 27, 2013, Erdrich calls attention to the fact that "federal prosecutors decline to prosecute 67 percent of sexual abuse cases" — and if they don't do so, nobody can because "non-Indian men [...] are immune to prosecution by tribal courts."⁵ As set by the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Oliphant v. Suquamish* (1978) non-Indians cannot

³ The three Supreme Court pronouncements are, *Johnson v. M'Intosh* (1823); *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831); *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832). For an excellent recent discussion of the trilogy see Frank Pommersheim, "The Marshall Trilogy: Foundational but Not Fully Constitutional?", in *Broken Landscape: Indians, Indian Tribes, and the Constitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 87-124.

⁴ Erdrich, *The Round House*, p. 336. Further references are inserted parenthetically.

⁵ Louise Erdrich, "Rape on the Reservation," *The New York Times*, February 27, 2013, A25.

be tried by tribal courts because the majority of the Court found that this would be “inconsistent with the [Indian tribes’] status” as “domestic dependent nations” (*Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe*).⁶

The event at the center of the plot is the rape of Geraldine Coutts, a tribal enrollment official, wife of tribal Judge Bazil Coutts and mother of thirteen-year old Joe, who is also the story’s only (uncharacteristically, for an Erdrich novel) narrator. Geraldine is so shaken by the incident that she is initially unable to speak about it, and the identity of the rapist remains undisclosed. Later, however, she explains that on the day she was raped, she had agreed to meet with an Ojibwa woman named Mayla, who was being stalked by Linden Lark, a white man who also happens to hold a personal grudge against Geraldine’s husband for ruling twice against his family’s attempts to swindle the tribe. Linden first rapes and then tries to burn Geraldine, who luckily manages to escape. The crime, however, has been committed in the proximity of the sacred Round House, a ceremonial ground where tribal, state, and federal lands meet, making it impossible to understand which legal authority has jurisdiction. In short, there’s no doubt that Linden is the rapist, but he can’t be brought to trial.

However, as Laura Miller has noted in her *Guardian* review of the novel, “rape isn’t really the subject of *The Round House*. Rather, this is the story of a teenage boy whose world and self are pulled apart in the course of a year.”⁷ More specifically, the story explores the mind of a boy who cannot fully understand his mother’s ordeal but is nevertheless traumatized by the event and who wants, like his father, to see the

⁶ *Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe*, 435 U.S. 191. (1978). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/435/191/>. That this was an outright attack on Indian sovereignty is clearly acknowledged by Justice Thurgood Marshall’s dissenting opinion: “I am of the view that Indian tribes enjoy, as a necessary aspect of their retained sovereignty, the right to try and punish all persons who commit offenses against tribal law within the reservation” (*Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe*, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oliphant_v._Suquamish_Indian_Tribe). The 6-2 Supreme Court decision was indeed a way to render the tribes’ sovereignty “toothless.” The 2013 and 2022 Reauthorizations of the Violence Against Women Act have in part corrected this decision, though serious challenges to tribal sovereignty are far from over.

⁷ Laura Miller, “Review of *The Round House* by Louise Erdrich,” *The Guardian*, May 18, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/18/round-house-louise-erdrich-review>.

criminal punished. When he understands that there is no legal way to obtain some form of justice, he embarks on a revenge mission, aided by his three closest friends, Angus, Zack, and especially Cappy, whose father has taught him to hunt and who, in turn, tries to teach Joe how to use a gun.

The decision to kill Linden is not taken by Joe lightly. If he concludes that he must kill a man, that is because there seems to be no other way for the family to regain some peace and for his mother to feel safe once again. To be fair, it can be argued that Joe's decision is conditioned to no small extent by a conversation he has with Geraldine. Joe first tells her, "Mom, listen. I'm going to find him and I'm going to burn him. I'm going to kill him for you". Her answer is "No. Not you. Don't you" (94). And later she adds, even more explicitly, "I will be the one to stop him" (262). At this point Joe realizes he must act "quickly, before my mother figured out her version of *stopping him*. There was no one else who could do it. I saw that. I was only thirteen and if I got caught I would only be subject to juvenile justice laws, not to mention there were clearly extenuating circumstances" (276).

What emerges here is the key question posed by the novel: how are we meant to respond to and understand Joe's choice of killing a man? Or, better, to what extent is Joe's killing readable as an act of justice? How does this act complicate or contribute to the discourse of tribal sovereignty? One would expect that both reviews and especially scholarly essays on the novel would have explored in some depth these issues. That, I submit, is not really the case. While critics have usefully clarified the juridical and historical ramifications of what takes place in the novel, and provided important observations on the novel's gender politics and its relation to traditional Anishinaabe culture, the answers they have provided to the political and ethical questions posed by the novel are often somewhat vague and evasive. Joe's choice is often described as "ambiguous," and caught "between light and darkness, hope and despair" —in short, as an act precariously balanced between an understandable desire for "restorative justice", on the one hand, and, on the other, a more questionable embrace of revengeful violence.⁸ There are, however, some exceptions. A few critics have

⁸ See Mary P. Carden, "'The Unkillable Mother': Sovereignty and Survivance in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 30, No. 1 (Spring 2018), pp. 94-116, and James Kidd, "Review of *The Round House* by Louise

openly confronted the question of how the story intends the reader to respond to Joe's execution of Lark, and they have done so in two divergent though ultimately similar ways. According to Maria Russo, reviewing the novel in *The New York Times*, Erdrich essentially "manipulates" the reader into accepting as justifiable (if not outright just) an act of vigilantism.⁹ Taking issue with Russo's view, in a lengthy scholarly piece published in *American Indian Quarterly*, Jacob Bender and Lydia Maunz-Breese argue that the novel explicitly construes the killing as an act of redemptive scapegoating, and one, to boot, with roots in Anishinaabe cultural traditions.¹⁰ A somewhat similar understanding animates an essay by Eric Cheyfitz and Shari Hundhorf, who,

Erdrich," *The Independent*, May 11, 2013, reprinted in: "*The Round House*. Louise Erdrich," *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 437 (2019), pp. 6-7. In general, unlike the essays by Bender and Maunz-Breese, and by Cheyfitz and Hundhorf, which I discuss, and critique, at some length below, most critical interventions seem to refuse to pass an unambiguous judgment on Joe's (and Cappy's) murder of Lark Linden. See, for example Carden, "'The Unkillable Mother'"; Thomas Matchie, "Law versus Love in *The Round House*," *The Midwest Quarterly* 56, No. 4 (2015), pp. 353-64; Julie Tharp, "Erdrich's Crusade: Sexual Violence in *The Round House*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 26, No. 3 (Fall 2014), pp. 25-40. Tereza M. Szeghi, is more resolute in charging Joe with having become, at least for a time, "the same type of destructive sociopathic person" that Lark is. See Szeghi, "Literary Didacticism and Collective Human Rights in US Borderlands: Ana Castillo's *The Guardians* and Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*," *Western American Literature* 52, No. 4 (Winter 2018), pp. 403-433. In what strikes me as the best critical discussion of the novel so far, Laura Castor notes instead that "Joe can take unconventional initiatives because he is young and not as steeped in knowledge of all the legal and historical obstacles to real justice of which his parents are aware. He is thus able to take seriously the evidence he finds in dreams and ghosts, and act on it. However, the risks Joe takes also lead him down a path of vigilante 'best-we-can-do' justice that ultimately haunts him and his family, even as he narrates the story as an adult [...]. At the end of the novel, revenge does not lead to long-term justice for women in the community, nor restore a sense of emotional and physical safety to their family's lives." See Castor, "Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*: Restorative Justice in a Coming of Age Thriller," *Nordlit* 40 (2018) pp. 31-49. Quotation from p. 46. Even though, as we shall see, there's at least one crucial instance in which Joe does *not* take seriously dream evidence, I agree with the gist of Castor's argument. However, it seems to me that to the extent that Joe's "unconventionality" turns him into a vigilante, one should harbor some serious reservations about it, no matter how emotionally and psychologically close to Joe the reader may feel.

⁹ Maria Russo, "Disturbing the Spirits," *New York Times*, October 12, 2012.

¹⁰ Jacob L. Bender and Lydia Maunz-Breese, "Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*, the Wiindigoo, and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*," *American Indian Quarterly* 42, No. 2 (2018), pp. 141-61.

on more specifically juridical grounds, argue that Joe's act must be understood against the background of traditional Anishinaabe "wiindigoo law," and as such is justifiable.¹¹

The argument I wish to develop here, is that these readings of the novel are not only wrong (on more than one count), but ultimately misconceived as they seek to force a sense of closure on a narrative that simply refuses to be contained within a neat interpretive framework. So, let me briefly outline how I have structured this essay. First, I wish to comment on the juridical and political contours of Joe's act, when seen through the category of sovereignty. Second, I will try to explain why, while it is true that the story raises the possibility that Joe's act may be interpreted as an implementation of "wiindigoo law," both contextual and textual evidence point in a different direction, by actually calling attention to the ways in which what Joe does, *cannot* be considered an act of traditional atonement. Finally, I will insist that *The Round House*, far from offering us a clear moral lesson, forces us to confront a nearly intractable political and cultural problem, so that—contrary to what would happen in a traditional crime novel—the various pieces of the puzzle come together *only to some extent*. Indeed, one should approach Erdrich's novel with the proviso Herman Melville included in his own last work of fiction, *Billy Budd*: "Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial."¹² Let me stress that the problem is not merely an aesthetic one. If there is a lack of aesthetic resolution in the novel, that is because there is no "finished," ready-made political solution to the antinomies at the heart of this story.

¹¹ Eric Cheyfitz and Shari M. Huhndorf S. M., "Genocide by Other Means: US Federal Indian Law and Violence against Native Women in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*," in *New Directions in Law and Literature*, eds. E. S. Anker and B. Meyler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 264-78.

¹² Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, in *Pierre; Israel Potter; the Piazza Tales; the Confidence-Man; Uncollected Prose; and Billy Budd, Sailor* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), p. 1431.

State of exception, or, killing a man

It's a hell of a thing killing a man

—William Munny (Clint Eastwood) in
Unforgiven (1992; dir. Clint Eastwood)

In the post 9/11 era, to no small extent due to the influence of the book on this topic by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, the “state of exception” has been the object of several political as well as cultural analyses.¹³ More specifically, Agamben has been instrumental in popularizing the relation between sovereignty and the state of exception at the heart of Carl Schmitt’s 1922 *Political Theology*: “the sovereign is he who decides on the exception.”¹⁴ As Lotte List explains, “By force of his authority to declare a state of emergency or exception, the sovereign simultaneously places himself inside and outside of law in that he constitutes the order of law by reference to its suspension, which Agamben summarizes as an ‘inclusive exclusion’.”¹⁵ Based on this definition, Joe Coutts’ decision to kill his mother’s rapist may well be considered as an attempt to remedy what the novel describes as the “toothless sovereignty” of his tribe. Joe declares, in his own way, a state of emergency that requires standing above the maze of laws preventing the tribe from bringing Linden Lark to justice. As Joe himself puts it, the killing of Linden Lark is “Murder, for justice maybe. Murder just the same” (297). Even though Joe of course wishes to convince himself that he is doing the right thing, he is honest enough to highlight the fact that violence is what first and foremost defines his act. So, in what sense is Joe simultaneously inside and outside the law? Well, he is obviously outside existing laws, both tribal and US ones, which do not contemplate the right to revenge, but to the extent that his scope is to protect his family and the community at large from the threat that

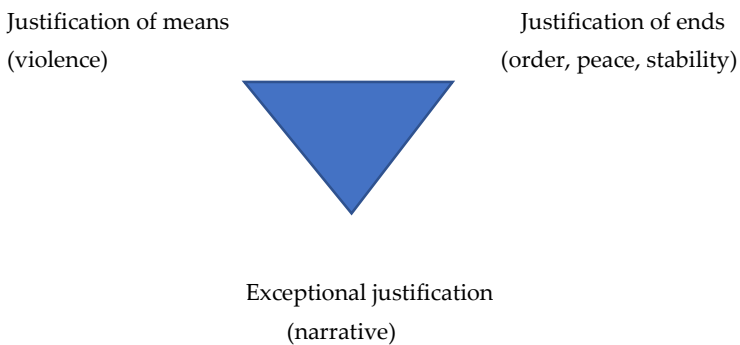
¹³ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, tr. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, tr. G. Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 5.

¹⁵ Lotte List, “Political Theology and Historical Materialism: Reading Benjamin against Agamben,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 8, No. 3 (2021), p. 120.

Linden continues to pose, it could be argued that he acts to further the scope of the law, that is, to secure the keeping of the peace.

Joe's words are of interest to me also for another reason. His candid admission that he is not sure whether the execution of Linden is an act of justice or not, resonates with the thesis developed in *Sovereignty and Its Other* by Dimitris Vardoulakis, whose insights have considerably shaped my understanding of Erdrich's novel.¹⁶ The "axiom" of Vardoulakis's inquiry is that "the operation of sovereign power consists in the justification of violence."¹⁷ Justification—which Vardoulakis understands "in terms of a means-and-ends relation" (3)—is of course not the same as justice. Joe doubts the justness of what he has decided to do, though of course he entertains no doubts about the fact that he has a *justification* for acting the way he does. Therefore, if we agree that "sovereignty consists in different modalities of the justification of violence" (1) we must also agree that Joe's act is his way of reclaiming the sovereignty that the US government has taken away from his tribe—in the novel's language, to make sure that Anishinaabe sovereignty can have enough teeth to bite. Joe is also in this sense both inside and outside the law, because by way of force he creates the law where previously there was only a juridical void that prevented the prosecution of Geraldine's rapist. But to have a better grasp of what is at stake here, I'll need first to illustrate what Vardoulakis describes as "the trinity of justification":



¹⁶ Dimitris Vardoulakis, *Sovereignty and Its Other: Toward the Dejustification of Violence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Vardoulakis, *Sovereignty and Its Other*, p. 1. Further references are cited parenthetically.

As Vardoulakis explains, whatever escapes the borders of this triangle causes "a sovereign discomfort" (18). For "comfort" to be restored, violence becomes necessary. Take, for example, the 9/11 attacks. The sovereign discomfort they created was remedied by a recourse to the violence of the "war on terror," whose justification was the defense of Western-style democracy and its spread to the Middle East, and whose rhetorical grounding was provided by a set of exceptional narratives (the enemy can be everywhere, it is less than human, the state of emergency requires exceptional legal measures such as the Patriot Act, Guantánamo, etc.). This framework, as we shall see in a moment, remains intact even when the political and moral substance of sovereign discomfort may be miles afar from the context of the Bush years. In Vardoulakis's own words, "The particularity of violence and the universality of order, peace, and stability are united by that which can never be codified—an unpredictable narrative, the fabrications of the exception" (24).

Joe's "Murder, for justice maybe. Murder just the same" is an admirably compressed voicing of the conflict between law and justice—a conflict that sovereignty is meant to mask through the justifications provided by exceptional narratives, by "the fabrications of the exception". *The Round House* can thus be read as an exploration of such fabrications—at least, that is what I intend to do here, by looking simultaneously at the extent to which the novel itself creates these narratives, and at the ways in which criticism has interpreted them, thus adding its own fabrications to those of the primary text. First, though, let me emphasize that, Basil Coutts being a tribal judge of great integrity, all legal means to have Linden Lark brought to justice are pursued. Linden is arrested, but since it is impossible to determine which authority has jurisdiction over his crime, he is eventually released. In creating his own exceptional narrative, Joe of course reasons the way a thirteen-year would, and this notwithstanding the fact that the story is narrated several years after the fact, by a now-adult-Joe who has followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a judge who, presumably, tries to carry on Basil's strategy of "press[ing] past the boundaries of what we are allowed, walk[ing] a step past the edge" (243). As a boy, though, Joe has no patience with this step-by-step reformist strategy; he does not reason in terms of ideal justice: he only, naively, wishes to go back to the family and the life he had before his mother was raped. The

motives behind his act—his anger and his desire for revenge—are also his justifications. He confesses this much when he admits that "I was dedicated to a purpose which I'd named in my mind not vengeance but justice" (275). Nevertheless, Joe does seek for narrative sources that might rhetorically appease his action. "What are Sins Crying Out to Heaven for Vengeance?" he asks the reservation catholic priest. Father Travis, after looking it up in his catechism book points out that "The sins that cried out for vengeance were murder, sodomy, defrauding a laborer, oppressing the poor." This is comforting news to Joe: "I thought I knew what sodomy was and believed it included rape. So my thoughts were covered by church doctrine [...]" (265).

A more substantial fabulation of the exception is provided by season 1 of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, a tv series Joe, Cappy, and the others are great fans of. Bender and Maunz-Breese correctly argue that the *Star Trek* episode titled "Skin of Evil," along with other allusions to the series, may be read as a "pop-culture analogue" to the novel's plot, with Linden mirroring *Star Trek's* Armus, the humanoid form that in the episode kills Tasha Yar for no reason. However, while to me the notion that an adolescent may be drawing inspiration for his murder plans from a tv series should lead readers to question the soundness of the whole enterprise, Bender and Maunz-Breese, on the contrary, argue that the parallel with the "Skin of Evil" episode "provides a key by which to frame the shooting less as an act of vengeance and more as a *sacral* act, one rooted in what Girard refers to as the sacrifice of the *pharmakos*."¹⁸

The critics' invocation of René Girard's scapegoat theory is meant in their view to rebut Maria Russo's proposition that Erdrich "cleverly" manipulates its reader into accepting vigilantism as a viable response to a situation in which the law offers American Indians no protection. And yet, paradoxically, Bender and Maunz-Breese concur with Russo that readers are meant to consider the killing of Linden as an acceptable act of justice, with the difference that what to Russo is vigilante behavior to them is "a *ceremonial* act, even a *religious* one, the necessary killing of the scapegoat, which has absorbed the threat of continued violence that he personifies."¹⁹ This reading of events is simply wrong, beginning of course with Bender and Maunz-Breese's

¹⁸ Bender and Maunz-Breese, "Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*," p. 143.

¹⁹ Bender and Maunz-Breese, "Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*," p. 156.

serious misrepresentation of Girard's thinking. Reading their essay, one would conclude that Girard recommends the expulsion of scapegoats as a viable way to maintain communal harmony in contemporary societies, but that is of course by no stretch of the imagination what his theory propounds. In book after book, and essay after essay, Girard has stressed that the scapegoat mechanism is a way to control violence through violence characteristic of a pre-Scriptural era. In his view, at first the Old Testament, and then more clearly the Gospels, unmask the *lie* of the scapegoat mechanism, by revealing the structuring power of victimage.²⁰ If we want to approach the novel from a Girardian perspective, rather than construing Linden as a scapegoat figure, we should turn—as Girard in fact does—to one of the key questions raised by Jesus in the Gospels, “How can Satan cast out Satan?” (Mark 3:23). If we take Satan as another term for the violence of the mimetic crisis, to expel Satan through Satan means to expel violence through violence by returning to the very sacrificial mechanism which, in Girard's view, Jesus stood on its head.²¹ In fact, Girard strongly opposes any definition of the Christian passion as a form of sacrifice. That this would be a more appropriate Girardian approach to the novel is corroborated by Joe's own words, when, after killing Linden, he wonders whether to destroy the evil the latter embodied, he has himself absorbed his evil spirit.²²

To argue that we may come to accept the rightness of Joe's behavior by reconceiving it as a sacrificial act is in fact equivalent to promoting a primitivist understanding of the Anishinaabe tribe as a juridically dysfunctional polity—a polity that to maintain its order must resort to pre-juridical practices like scapegoating, which are both morally and politically indefensible. Moreover, one must add that there is no sign

²⁰ See especially René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. P. Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); id., *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, tr. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); id., *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, tr. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

²¹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, p. 44.

²² “I was not exactly safe from Lark. Neither was Cappy. Every night he came after us in dreams. We are back at the golf course in the moment I locked eyes with Lark. That terrible contact. Then the gunshot. At that moment, *we exchange selves. Lark is in my body, watching. I am in his body, dying*” (341, my italics).

in *The Round House* of anything remotely resembling a Girardian "sacrificial crisis." The community is not being rent apart—there is no intestine violence that the tribe needs to project on to a scapegoat. Moreover, there is nothing communal about the killing of Linden.²³ The decision to kill Linden is not arrived at through a process of collective deliberation, as in traditional scapegoating rituals. The members of the community who, post factum, help in covering up the traces that may connect Joe to the murder, far from securing a ceremonial quality to the killing, seem to be participating in what in *La Rose*, the last volume of her "justice trilogy," Erdrich refers to as "rez omertà."²⁴ Finally, while there is no question that Linden is a horribly racist and violent figure, he is not in any meaningful sense a scapegoat on whose back the collectivity has heaped its sins and tensions. The evil he embodies is only his own and he is simply too much of an outsider to be a scapegoat proper, especially within a Girardian framework. If anything, an argument could be made that Linden ends up being turned into what Giorgio Agamben would describe as a *homo sacer*.²⁵ Once we understand Joe's decision to stand above the law as an implicit proclamation of a state of exception, we must add that such sovereign decision depends on turning—literally—Linden into a killable person. Joe's sovereign power to take Linden's life is directly linked to Linden's *sacertas*, to his having become a person anyone on the reservation could kill with impunity—a notion corroborated by the murder's tacit approval by the tribal community.

²³ Indeed, Joe insists on taking personal responsibility for the killing and exonerates Cappy—who fires the "one clean head shot" after Joe "made a mess of [Linden] like a kid shooting at a hay bale" (304)—by insisting that "He would have died though [...]. You didn't kill him. This is not on you" (303).

²⁴ Erdrich, *La Rose*, p. 37.

²⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

Crying Wiindigoo

literature was born on the day
when a boy came crying 'wolf, wolf'
and there was no wolf behind him.

—Vladimir Nabokov

The connection that Bender and Maunz-Breese establish between the windigo and the scapegoat is also misconceived. First suggested by Geraldine herself, and later in the novel developed more explicitly by Judge Bazil, the windigo-Linden analogy does *not* support the notion that Geraldine's attacker may be understood as a scapegoat figure. Here I cannot discuss in detail the important ethnographic debate that over the years has developed around the theme of "windigo ideology."²⁶ Suffice to say that the scholars who see windigos as scapegoats in an environment marked, especially in the harsh boreal winters, by lack of food and recurring famines, are those who *do not believe* in their existence, and see them as nothing but "hallucinations or fabrications of the executioners, credulously taken at face value by naive ethnologists."²⁷ On the other hand, those who see "windigo psychosis" as real, consider it as "an Algonquian-specific psychiatric disorder whose sufferers experienced and acted upon obsessional cannibalistic urges."²⁸ In this view, which strives to be emic rather than etic, windigos are not scapegoats but people who actually suffer from a mental disease, and in traditional Anishinaabe or Cree cultures, they are treated, for the most part, not as figures to be eliminated but as people to be *cured*.

There are, to be sure, cases in which windigos must be understood against a background of "witch hunting typical of societies under stress."²⁹ "In this process, as in all witch hunts, the victims of the aggression are socially redefined as the aggressors," and as we shall see in a moment, the novel's most extensive treatment of windigos,

²⁶ For a good overview, see Robert A. Brightman, "The Windigo in the Material World," *Ethnohistory* 35, No. 4 (Autumn 1988), pp. 337-379.

²⁷ Brightman, "The Windigo," p. 346.

²⁸ Brightman, "The Windigo," p. 337.

²⁹ Lou Marano, "Windigo Psychosis: The Anatomy of an Emic-Etic Confusion," *Current Anthropology* 23, No. 4 (August 1982), p. 385.

interestingly enough, begins precisely with what René Girard would describe as a "text of persecution," that is with a case of someone who is unjustly accused of being a windigo.³⁰ However, to the extent that the windigo is to be considered not only an expression of Anishinaabe culture, but also, more specifically, as a figure of Anishinaabe *law*, it should be obvious that windigos cannot be construed as scapegoats. Before turning to the windigo story featured in *The Round House*, I need to explain that, unlike Bender and Maunz-Breese, who build their interpretation around the pre-judicial figure of the scapegoat, Cheyfitz and Huhndorf take up Bazil Coutts's lead on the windigo being a category of Anishinaabe jurisprudence. This proposition is in some way supported by Erdrich herself, who in her afterword gives credit to law professors Hadley Louise Friedland and John Borrows for helping her understand "the process of wiindigoo law" (337). Cheyfitz and Huhndorf argue, convincingly to my mind, that we should understand Geraldine's rape as being "not merely a *consequence* of historical assaults on land, culture and political power but rather the very paradigm of ongoing colonial power enacted through violence." However, after stating that "the killing exposes the impossibility of justice under colonial law" (a notion I agree with), they also wish to argue that the killing "falls within the system of traditional Indigenous law that federal Indian law seeks to displace," and they end up concluding that the execution "not only brings justice but also draws together Joe's family and community, who conspire to protect him from unfair legal consequences."³¹ This is in fact an implicit defense of capital punishment without due process (and while I concede that Cheyfitz and Huhndorf are probably unaware of this, the slip remains to my mind a serious one). Most importantly, it is simply incorrect—*pace* Bazil Coutts' readiness to argue a "traditional precedent", in a hypothetical legal case—to argue that Linden can be seriously considered a windigo. I say this not because I dispute the right of Indigenous epistemologies and juridical categories to be heard in a western court of law, but because, after having read what both Friedland and Borrows have to say about "windigo law," I do not believe a convincing argument can be made to justify the killing of Linden as a windigo. In other words, also

³⁰ Marano, "Windigo Psychosis," p. 385; Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, pp. 127ff.

³¹ Cheyfitz and Huhndorf, "Genocide by Other Means," pp. 272, 274, 275.

Cheyfitz and Huhndorf ultimately produce a fabulation of the exception, which needs to be unveiled.

The windigo features prominently in a story that Joes' grandfather—like Tashtego in *Moby-Dick*—tells in his sleep. The narrative begins with a man called Mirage (*in nomen omen!*) accusing unfairly his wife Akii of being a windigo. Mirage "was tired of Akii so he pretended he could see it happen. Some people in these hungry times became possessed. A wiindigoo could cast its spirit inside of a person [...]. That's what was happening, her husband decided" (191). This part of the story may be read as lending support to those ethnographers who, like Lou Marano, think windigos are nothing but self-serving fabrications.³² Here traditional cultural beliefs are invoked to justify violence against an innocent victim. Mirage manages to convince other male members of the band that Akii is turning into a cannibal monster. Since "[t]he only person who could kill a wiindigoo was someone in the blood family" (192)—if Mirage were to kill her, Akii's people might wish to take revenge—their son Nanapush is asked to cut her neck. Nanapush refuses but eventually the men throw her into a lake. Akii manages to escape and sends Nanapush in search of the last surviving buffalo. The boy finds Old Buffalo Woman, ceremoniously kills her, and keeps himself warm by crawling into her carcass. The story ends with Akii bringing meat back to the tribe, saving from starvation also the men who tried to kill her. She takes back her children but does not go back to her husband. As Nanapush grows older, he can always count on Old Buffalo Woman's comforting words. "This buffalo knew what had happened to Nanapush's mother. She said wiindigoo justice must be pursued with great care" (199). It would be hard to read this story as providing an illustration of "windigo justice". Old Buffalo's final cautionary words, if anything, are more about "windigo injustice" and, taken as a whole, Mooshun's tale is not a tale of revenge but a story about forgiveness. Let me be clear. I am not proposing that the narrative advocates forgiveness rather than punishment under all circumstances. I am not, that is, imagining this story as a *mise en abyme* of the novel, meant to exonerate in some tortuous way Linden Lark from his criminal actions. What I am arguing, instead, is that the tale calls attention to the fact that crying windigo may be a convenient way to mask one's murderous desire, whether the latter be

³² See above, note 29.

in some way justifiable or not. Akii is not only, as the story says, "the unkillable mother"—an ancestor of all the unkillable mothers of the Anishinaabe people—but a woman who chooses not to return on her executioners the same accusation they leveled at her.

Once Bazil learns of Linden's murder, he suspects that Joe may have something to do with it, but the Coutts never discuss this issue openly. At any rate, Bazil has made up his mind that, even though he is "sworn to uphold the law in every case," if asked about the case by the police, he "would do nothing" (323). He has experienced too keenly Vardoulakis's "sovereign discomfort" not to fall back on his own set of fabrications of the exception.

Lark's killing is a wrong thing which serves an ideal justice. It settles a legal enigma. It threads that unfair maze of land title law by which Lark could not be prosecuted [...]. That person who killed Lark will live with the human consequences of having taken a life. As I did not kill Lark, but wanted to, I must at least protect the person who took on that task. And I would, even to the extent of attempting to argue a legal precedent [...] a traditional precedent. It could be argued that Lark met the definition of a wiindigoo, and that with no other recourse, his killing fulfilled the requirements of a very old law. (323)

Here Bazil offers his own fabrication, imagining that the killing of Lark fulfills "the requirements of a very old law." As readers we cannot help but sympathize with Bazil's feelings but, I submit, we should also question the notion that Joe can be excused by invoking an old Anishinaabe law. Both in *Drawing out the Law*—the text referenced by Erdrich in her afterword—and elsewhere, John Borrows, building in part on the work of his colleague Hadley Louise Friedland, explains that Anishinaabe law developed its own ways of dealing with "monsters," a term that doesn't refer only to what from a non-Indian perspective would be conceived as supernatural creatures but covers a larger set of aberrant behaviors.³³ "Historically, when Anishinaabe diets were very precarious, windigos were known to cannibalize human flesh. In present terms, windigos are more likely to feed their appetites

³³ John Borrows, *Drawing Out the Law: A Spirit's Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010); id., *Law's Indigenous Ethics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), pp. 176-215.

through murder, sexual violence, and predation on vulnerable people."³⁴

However, Borrows clarifies that, traditionally, the Anishinaabe way of confronting windigos was, first and foremost, to try to *cure* them. There are a series of steps that the community would take to deal with a person who had turned, or was about to turn, into a windigo, running from "kindness, care, questioning, healing, separation, supervision, banishment, and death."³⁵ So, yes, a windigo could, in some extreme cases, be killed, but only when all other methods of curing the sick person had failed. In any event, what motivated the decision to kill the windigo "was not retribution and anger, but defence and compassion."³⁶ Moreover, "the method of making judgment was collective, not individualized," and the windigo suspect had also rights, including "(1) the windigo's right to be heard; (2) the right to have its closest family members involved in deciding its treatment; (3) the preservation of the windigo's life, liberty, and safety; (4) the right to be helped; and (5) the right to ongoing support."³⁷ It can be argued, of course, that there would be no way to apply all these provisos to Linden. But that *is* the point. "Windigo law" was meant to be applied to sick people in the community and all its complex features show that—contra Basil Coutts—there is no way that Linden may be *juridically* conceived as a windigo. Borrows' legal reasoning in no way supports the "traditional precedent" Basil invokes (and Cheyfitz and Huhndorf endorse). Borrows makes clear that Anishinaabe culture and jurisprudence have over time changed and the Anishinaabeg would not, today, deal with an incurable windigo the way they would have done a century ago. "[I]f the person does not respond to help and becomes an imminent threat to individuals or the community, he or she can be removed so that he or she does not harm others (though, to re-emphasize, *the act does not involve what the common law has labelled capital punishment*)."³⁸ The words of John Borrows, Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Law at the University of Victoria, and an Anishinaabe himself, do not provide an ounce of support to the notion that windigo law

³⁴ Borrows, *Law's Indigenous Ethics*, p. 207.

³⁵ Borrows, *Law's Indigenous Ethics*, p. 208.

³⁶ Borrows, *Drawing Out the Law*, p. 226.

³⁷ Borrows, *Law's Indigenous Ethics*, p. 208.

³⁸ Borrows, *Law's Indigenous Ethics*, p. 209, my italics.

was applied in the case of Linden Lark. And I, for one, am relieved to hear that. If Indigenous laws were used today to justify capital punishment, in whatever form, this would be bad news for all people, indigenous or not, anywhere in the world.

This is not to say that the "sovereign discomfort" experienced by American Indians should be downplayed in any way. All readers of *The Round House* will of course detest the bad guy and sympathize with the victim, but if that were all that Erdrich's novel has to offer us, it wouldn't be the important novel I think it is. The novel shows, as Cheyfitz and Huhndorf correctly state, "the impossibility of justice under colonial law," but the inescapable corollary of this statement is that any framework manufactured to justify Joe's act will always be just another fabrication of the exception.³⁹ The novel can offer no comforting resolution to the tension between a desire for justice, on the one hand, and an array of historical and political circumstances that prevent that desire from being realized in a just and humane way. Given the situation, violence provides the only way to deal with foreign discomfort, but the novel makes clear beyond any shadow of doubt that violence is *not* the answer. The interpretations I have called into question, unfortunately encourage readers to fall into the trap of justification, while I would argue that Erdrich's text tries to pull us towards what Vardoulakis calls "dejustification," the resistance to the deadly relation that is the inescapable foreground of justification. I hope that my final point will help us to move further in that direction.

Dreams matter

Earthboy calls me from my dream:

Dirt is where the dreams must end.

—James Welch, "Riding the Earthboy 40"

Not long before Joe and Cappy kill Linden, Joe is having lunch at a local soup and salad bar when Bugger Pourier, "a skinny sorrowful

³⁹ Cheyfitz and Huhndorf, "Genocide by Other Means," p. 274.

man, with the fat purple clown nose of a longtime drinker" (265), takes his bike. Joe runs after the guy and asks him where he intends to go. Bugger replies that he needs to check if something he has seen "was just a dream" (284). Since Bugger is heading out of town, rather than second Bugger's intentions, Joe convinces him to turn back. After the killing, however, Joe's own dreams become troubled and he realizes he needs medicine, "meaning Ojibwe medicine." And at this point, "Bugger Pourier, of all people, stepped into my thoughts" (325). Joe frantically tries to locate him, and he finally finds him in the hospital, where he is in a cast, recovering from a foot injury. With some difficulty, Joe manages to get Bugger talking and he discovers that, while living in the bush on a construction site not far from the Round House, Bugger had seen the dead body of the woman Linden was obsessed with. "I stood up, jolted. I knew, down to the core of me, that he had seen Mayla Wolfskin. He had seen her dead body. If we hadn't killed Lark, he'd have gone to jail for life anyway. I spun around thinking I should go to the police, then stopped. I could not let the police know I was even thinking this way [...]. Even I didn't want to know what I knew. The best thing for me to do was forget. And then for the rest of my life to try not to think how different things would have gone if, in the first place, I'd just followed Bugger's dream" (327). It is not only Joe who chooses to forget the episode. This plot twist, which can in no way be considered as anything but crucial, is nowhere mentioned in any of the several scholarly essays on the novel I have managed to read. Bugger Pourier is simply erased from accounts of the novel, even though his "dream" could have changed the whole narrative, preventing Joe from becoming a murderer. This is all the more surprising considering that Mooshum narrates his story in a dream, and in his tale, it is through dreams that Aikii and Nanapush are instructed on how to survive. Bugger's "dream" not only testifies to the continuity between "the world-as-lived and the world-as-dreamed" that is a feature of traditional American Indian cultures and spiritual beliefs.⁴⁰ It is also, on a rational-secular level, a reminder that a more thorough investigation would have rendered the killing of Linden unnecessary.

The novel's conclusion is consistent with this sense of failure. While Joe and his friends are driving to Montana to look for Zelia, Cappy's

⁴⁰ Lee Irwin, "Dreams, Theory, and Culture: The Plains Vision Quest Paradigm," *American Indian Quarterly* 18, No. 2 (Spring 1994), p. 236.

girlfriend, they have a car accident, and Cappy dies. After this tragic event, as the Coutts drive home together in utter silence, they realize they have all become "old." Rather than stopping, as was customary in their homebound journeys, at the roadside café before the reservation line, "we passed over in a sweep of sorrow that would persist into our small forever. We just kept going" (335). The novel does not end with a newly found peace. Killing Linden may have been an answer to "sovereign discomfort," but one that has brought little human comfort to the afflicted. This is not to say American Indian tribes should not fight for sovereignty, first and foremost because no polity proper is possible without reference to sovereignty. Since—as Vardoulakis puts it— "sovereignty comes into play every time one utters the first-person pronoun—an 'I' or a 'we'," it is indeed "infantile" to imagine a politics without sovereignty.⁴¹ However, if we accept Vardoulakis's notion that the Other of sovereignty is democracy, our task "is not to try to imagine a way that democracy abolishes sovereignty, but rather to describe the ways in which the relation between the two can unfold."⁴² All this, I believe, is relevant to any serious discussion of *The Round House*. The novel offers us an illustration of the dire consequences of a "toothless sovereignty" but also a cautionary tale on the justification of violence that is an inescapable feature of sovereignty. This should in no way lead us to forget that the American Indian tribes' struggle for self-determination is conducted against the imperial sovereignty of the United States. From this point of view—to echo Walter Benjamin's Thesis VIII in "On the Concept of History"—the "state of emergency" in which American Indians live is not the exception but the rule. Hence, Benjamin goes on to argue, the task of the "oppressed" is "to bring about a real state of emergency," which Vardoulakis understands as "a reversal of the exception"—that is, as a process of dejustification of sovereign violence.⁴³ In *The Round House*, however, Erdrich

⁴¹ Vardoulakis, *Sovereignty and Its Other*, p. 37.

⁴² Vardoulakis, *Sovereignty and Its Other*, p. 39.

⁴³ Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings*, ed. M. W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 392; Vardoulakis, *Sovereignty and Its Other*, p. 160.

⁴² Vardoulakis, *Sovereignty and Its Other*, p. 198.

⁴³ Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings*, ed. M. W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 392; Vardoulakis, *Sovereignty and Its Other*, p. 160.

has chosen to focus not only on the violence of US laws that raise exceptions to the trying of white criminals by American Indian courts, but also on the moral, existential, and indeed political complications that arise when the oppressed seek recognition through violent means. While Erdrich offers the reader a number of justifications for Joe's choice of killing a man, if carefully read the novel does not fall on the side of justification, but on the side of what Vardoulakis calls "judgment" : "the decision to act in such a way that privileges life over the thanatopolitics of sovereignty."⁴⁴ It is disappointing, I think, that some readings of Erdrich's novel have ignored the way it interrogates violence, by forcing on the text a justificatory pattern that runs against its grain. Reading should not be a way to smooth the "ragged edges" of a text but a strategy to allow its truth to emerge, uncompromisingly.

⁴⁴ Vardoulakis, *Sovereignty and Its Other*, p. 198.

6. Two Anishinaabeg in the Great War: History, Art, and Missed Opportunities in Gerald Vizenor's *Blue Ravens*

War and contemporary American Indian literature

The war story—especially its classic version, that of the combat novel—does not seem to be a genre particularly dear to American Indian authors. Not that there is a shortage of exceptions. Think, for example, of *Code Talker: A Book About the Navajo Marines of World War Two* by Joseph Bruchac, a children's book dedicated to a theme also covered some years ago in the film *Windtalkers* by John Woo: that of the cipher languages created by using Indian languages (Navajo in particular) and employed during the Second World War.¹ Another exception is represented by memoirs such as those by Vincent Mendoza (*A Son of Two Bloods*, 1996) and Leroy TeCube (*Year in Nam*, 1999), in which the authors narrate their involvement in the infamous “dirty war,” an experience also discussed in the poetry of Simon Ortiz, Ray A. Young Bear, and others.² But if you consider that tens of thousands of

¹ Joseph Bruchac, *Code Talker: A Book About the Navajo Marines of World War Two* (Penguin: New York 2006); *Windtalkers*, dir. J. Woo, Saturn Films, 2002. But see also the novel *Three Day Road* (Penguin, New York, 2005) by Canadian writer Joseph Boyden, devoted to the adventures of two Cree Indians who join the army as volunteers in World War One. Like Vizenor's novel, discussed in the present essay, also Boyden's text is based on historical fact. The book has been generally well received, but the author's Indian identity has been called into question.

² Vincent Mendoza, *A Son of Two Bloods* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996); Leroy TeCube, *Year in Nam: A Native American Soldier's Story* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); Samuel Ortiz, *from Sand Creek*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1981); Ray A. Young Bear, *The Invisible Musician* (Duluth, MN: Holy Cow!

American Indians have fought in the United States army, from the founding of the republic onwards and that, even before the American nation took shape, many Indians were enlisted as scouts or auxiliary troops in the colonial militias, often to fight against other Indians (a central theme in the Leatherstocking novels of James Fenimore Cooper), one would be led to conclude that the war experience, although it has affected the history and lives of so many American Indians, has remained at the margins of American Indian storytellers' concerns.

This statement, however, must be immediately corrected as soon as we take a closer look at the themes, contents, and characters of contemporary American Indian fiction. Although it is rarely described in a direct way, war is often overing as a ghostly presence on the margins of several contemporary novels. The protagonists of two of the most important novels of recent decades—considered by many as the two key novels of the "Native American Renaissance" of the Sixties and Seventies—are both World War Two veterans. In Scott N. Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968), Abel cannot forget his experience on the Western Front, when a German tank rolled past him as he played dead, while in Leslie M. Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), Tayo's trauma—caused by his participation in the Pacific War, and in particular in the Bataan Death March—merges with the planetary upheaval sanctioned by the manufacturing of the atomic bomb, tested on Indian territories and built with uranium extracted from Pueblo land.³ Once you start digging, you soon discover that the shadow of war (or rather, of different wars) stretches over many American Indian novels, beginning with John Joseph Matthews' *Sundown* (1934), whose protagonist, Challenge Windzer, trains as an air pilot in the hope of fighting in the First World War, though eventually he is never sent to Europe.⁴

But to return to the Native American Renaissance, it must be observed that also James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974) features a

Press, 1990). Ortiz and Young Bear, though, while writing about the Vietnam War, were never in Vietnam. More generally on the American Indian participation in the war, see Tom Holms, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

³ Scott N. Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Harper, 1968); Leslie M. Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking, 1977).

⁴ John Joseph Matthews, *Sundown* (1934; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).

protagonist-narrator whose maturation hangs to no small extent on the "rememory" of a tragic event from the past in which the Blackfeet tribe risked total annihilation due to the diseases and deportations caused by the war waged by the United States government, once the Civil War ended, against the Great Plains Indian nations.⁵ It is only by rediscovering that tragic story that the protagonist begins to see some hope in his life.⁶ The example of James Welch suggests a possible explanation for this sometimes hidden but no less obsessive presence of war in twentieth-century American Indian fiction. Contemporary Native American history cannot be narrated except starting from that historical catastrophe, and it is therefore unsurprising that this "post-war" condition is made palpable not only in the aforementioned novels by Momaday, Welch, and Silko, but also in the work of Louise Erdrich, and especially in *Tracks*. Indeed, once you start looking for them, you can find that the experience of war has left a significant mark in numerous contemporary American Indian novels, from Erdrich's *Love Medicine* to Louis Owens's *The Sharpest Sight* and *Dark River*, to Adrian C. Louis's *Skins*, where Vietnam War veterans play important roles.⁷

Keeping in mind this cultural and literary background, I will now turn to a discussion of Gerald Vizenor's novel, *Blue Ravens*.⁸ Described in its subtitle as a "historical novel," the text adds to a production that has no equal among contemporary American Indian writers, except for Louise Erdrich. Vizenor, from the very start of his career, has been identified by critics as a genuinely postmodern writer not only due to his style, but also because he has been drawing on ideas and keywords derived from what in the United States is usually defined as the "post-structuralist" theoretical-cultural galaxy. As a practitioner of "trickster discourse," Vizenor is convinced that the most serious political-cultural damage done to Indians has been caused by the spread of Enlightenment, romantic, and neo-romantic ideas which, introduced by

⁵ The concept of "rememory" comes of course from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

⁶ James Welch, *Winter in the Blood* (New York: Penguin, 1974).

⁷ Louise Erdrich, *Tracks* (New York: Holt, 1988) and *Love Medicine* (New York: Harper, 1993); Louis Owens, *The Sharpest Sight* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992) and *Dark River* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), Adrian C. Louis, *Skins* (New York: Random House, 1995).

⁸ Gerald Vizenor, *Blue Ravens* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 2014). Page references will be included parenthetically.

the white invaders, were then to a certain extent accepted by the indigenous peoples themselves. As Vizenor explains in *Manifest Manners*, today's Indians can only be *post*-Indians, peoples and individuals irremediably marked by the cultural, political, and existential reshuffling induced by the dynamics of conquest.⁹ The question of identity must therefore be projected above all towards the future, and Indians must free themselves from all those stereotypes in which Euro-American culture has tried to cage them, and whose aim is to mummify Indian nations in a mythical and inevitably dehumanizing past. Vizenor certainly deserves credit for having posed this problem with inflexible coherence, insistence, and probably also with a higher degree of theoretical complexity than any other American Indian writer. This intellectual position of his is not only brilliantly defended—even if sometimes in a somewhat obsessive and repetitive way—in his non-fictional writings, but it also informs to a great extent his narrative production.

Vizenor's work has been favorably discussed by important critics (starting with an eminent scholar like Arnold Krupat, though we must not forget the essays dedicated to Vizenor by other accomplished scholars such as Kimberly Blaeser, also Anishinaabe, and Deborah Madsen) and his often provocative and irreverent narratives certainly occupy a significant place in contemporary American Indian literature.¹⁰ This however, at least in my opinion, does not mean that Vizenor's work is free of some problematic features—features that I already had a chance to discuss many years ago, in a chapter of my book *Post-Tribal Epics*, dedicated to a close analysis of his first novel, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978; later republished in a slightly different version in 1990 as *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*).¹¹ In a

⁹ Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994).

¹⁰ See, for example, Krupat's essay on Vizenor's novel *The Heirs of Columbus*, in *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), as well as his discussion of Vizenor's postmodernism in *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History and Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 182ff. See also Kimberly M. Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor. Writing in the Oral Tradition* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), and Deborah L. Madsen, *Understanding Gerald Vizenor*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009).

¹¹ Gerald Vizenor, *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); Giorgio Mariani, *Post-Tribal Epics: The Native American Novel Between Tradition and Modernity* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1996), pp. 149-186.

nutshell, the question I was trying to raise in my book concerned the logical-narrative short circuit of Vizenor's story, fractured between, on the one hand, a desire to demolish all the so-called "terminal creeds" that stereotype Indians and, on the other hand, a search for a cultural and narrative basis which, without being tainted by "terminal" (and therefore absolutist) prerogatives, might guarantee the survival but also the necessary renewal of tribal cultures. In other words, my impression was (and still is) that Vizenor is committed (commendably) to breaking down images, ideas, and languages that imprison Indians in inadequate and suffocating models, but that this cultural criticism is based on theoretical and political principles that are never fully clarified, as if any effort to elucidate them would inevitably result in a much-feared ideological ossification. Moreover, sooner or later his characters are necessarily forced to make concrete choices and, paradoxically, their way of acting often turns out to be not dissimilar from those *modi operandi* that Vizenor claims to oppose.

Blue crows of peace

I will return to this point later. For now, let us focus on *Blue Ravens*. In this novel, Vizenor addresses the war experience of two young Anishinaabe men who enlist in the American Expeditionary Force when the United States enters World War One. Unlike Vizenor's other texts, *Blue Ravens* is connected, right from its cover, to a very specific genre: that of the historical novel. There is of course nothing strange in seeing a postmodern writer attracted (obviously with the intention of revisiting and deconstructing it) to a romantic genre such as that of the historical novel. What is striking is that, if from its very first pages the novel makes more than one concession to some classically postmodern stylistic features (quotationism, meta-literary self-awareness, pastiche), as a whole the text seems scarcely interested in placing itself in the line of what Linda Hutcheon defines as "historiographic metafiction."¹² If the atmosphere of the novel is sometimes imbued with magic and madness, Vizenor is not interested (as was the case, for example,

¹² Linda Hutcheon, "Historiographic metafiction: 'the pastime of past time,'" *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 105-123.

in a novel like *The Heirs of Columbus*) to focus on the status of historical discourse, or on its reliability. This is probably because one of the objectives of the novel is not so much to raise questions on the Great War in general, but to remind its readers of the American Indian, and in particular the Anishinaabe, contribution to the US military effort (the novel is in fact dedicated to the four Anishinaabeg from the White Earth Reservation who lost their lives in the conflict). For Vizenor, as we will see, World War One is important mostly for the ways it affects the lives of the two protagonists of the story. More specifically, Vizenor intends to show how the "globality" of the war experience represents an opportunity—although obviously a tragic and traumatizing one—to enrich Anishinaabe culture with a markedly cosmopolitan dimension. Because if it is true that *Blue Ravens* is (in part) a historical novel that revolves around the Great War and that includes chapters belonging in the combat novel genre, it is certainly also a novel about art, and especially about painting.

In *Blue Ravens*, Vizenor adds an American Indian presence to the celebrated Parisian expatriate culture of the immediate post-war period, populated by famous figures of international modernism from Joyce to Gertrude Stein, from Picasso to Modigliani, from Marc and Bella Chagall to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. Many of these make their appearance in the novel, and if Stein and Joyce, for example, are on stage only for a few pages, Marie Vassilieff, the well-known painter, narrator, and cultural animator of Russian origin, plays a more significant role as she becomes the narrator's love interest. In addition to these well-known protagonists of the modernist season, the novel evokes lesser known but equally interesting historical figures, such as that of the Jewish merchant Julius Meyer (1839-1909), a legendary polyglot at ease among a multiplicity of Indian nations. Meyer is probably the inspiration for the character (in this case invented by Vizenor) of Odysseus, the African American travelling salesman who visits every year on the White Earth Reservation, with his merchandise but above all with his amazing stories of adventures across the western territories.¹³

¹³ This character's periodic arrival on the reservation creates an almost magical atmosphere, which in some ways recalls the one evoked by the gypsies' visits to Macondo, in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

The plot unfolds for the most part in a straight chronological line, lacking the complex prolepses and analepses that characterize so much contemporary fiction. Narrated in the first person by Basile Beaulieu but largely dedicated to the artistic activity of his adoptive brother Aloysius, who from a very young age distinguishes himself as an extraordinary self-taught painter of the titular “blue crows,” the text follows the classic tripartite structure of war memoirs as identified by Paul Fussell in his classic study of the literature of the Great War. This structure includes a description of the “before” the war, with attention to the experience of military enlistment and training, followed by the trial by fire of combat and, finally, the difficult period of readjustment to civilian life thanks to which the veteran tries to “go home” not only physically but above all mentally. This narrative scheme follows the character’s development from innocence to death, and from death to rebirth.¹⁴ In the case of *Blue Ravens*, the pre-war phase is expanded to allow the narrator to describe the reality of the reservation and its inhabitants, caught between a desire to break free from white subjugation, on the one hand, and, on the other, the assimilationist policies promoted by the central government through the heavy intrusions of federal agents. In this complex reality, the two boys cultivate their artistic inclinations: towards painting, in the case of Aloysius, and towards writing, in that of Basile, who therefore casts himself not only as the narrator but also as the fictitious author of the novel.

From the very beginning of the story, the emphasis falls on the transformative capacity of art, and in particular on the “blue crows” that Aloysius paints at every opportunity (often first in his visionary imagination and later on paper or canvas), and that help to re-imagine the world in a different light, by transcending its pettiness and violence. The color blue immediately brings to mind Wallace Stevens’s famous blue guitar (“things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar”). As Robert Lee writes, “Gerald Vizenor and Wallace Stevens might not be a pairing that immediately jumps into mind. Given this Vizenor’s [...] novel, with its early twentieth-century setting [...] and emphasis upon how the painter’s coloring or storyteller’s flight gives new possession to ground-zero reality, it would be far from out of order. If *Blue Ravens* can be said to have one overall end in view, and

¹⁴ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 128.

'view' is the operative word, it has to be that visionary powers of creativity are always best called upon to unsettle, and so outflank and transcend, quite all static or either-or prescriptions of 'things as they are'."¹⁵

The power of art will prove particularly important when, in the second and third part of the text, the "ground-zero reality" which the two Beaulieu will have to confront will be the shocking one of war, first, and of trauma and the memory of horror, later. The blue crows, in particular, will be deployed as therapeutic tools to overcome the existential and psychological fracture caused by the immense violence of the conflict but, more ambiguously, they will also be the main tool—both as cultural capital and as actual financial resource—that will make possible the inclusion and success of the two artists in the post-war Parisian artistic community. What follows is an example of what is both a pictorial and narrative strategy, because if the novel constantly evokes the blue ravens of Aloysius' canvases, their "vision" is accessible to the reader only through the ekphrastic mediation of the brother's prose. Here Basile describes one of the paintings dedicated to war amputees, in which, faithful to his visionary and anti-mimetic inspiration, Aloysius lingers on the wounds of the Great War not to spectacularize them, but with the intention of soothing and transcending them.

In one portrayal, *Blue Ravens and Fractured Peace*, my brother painted four enormous blue ravens, and with huge elaborate beaks, crowded close together in a row across the center of the wide paper, wings askew, and each raven wore a great oval blue peace pendant. The images painted on each pendant were the fractured, broken faces of the *mutilés de guerre*. Crushed cheeks, jaws, bony eye sockets, noses sheared, caved frontal bones, cracked smiles, huge circular scars, nasal cavities covered with thick globs of grafted flesh, and grotesque angles of teeth, lips, and tongues. The peace medals or pendant scenes were painted for the exhibition on a full sheet of wove finish watercolor paper. (267)

Before saying something about the effectiveness of this painting of peace, which seems to acknowledge—as is also made explicit elsewhere in the text—the tremendous irony of an irenic inspiration that

¹⁵ Robert Lee, "Flight Times in Gerald Vizenor's *Blue Ravens*," in *Mediating Indianness*, ed. Cathy C. Wagner (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), pp. 91-92.

finds itself forced to linger on the devastating violence of war—similarly to what happens, for example, in Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*—it must be noted that the constant presence of ekphrastic passages puts the reader's (or at least this reader's) patience to the test. If in novels dealing with war the emphasis inevitably tends to fall on the irrepresentability of the war itself, in this text the reader is asked more to imagine what in theory could be easily visible—Aloysius's paintings—than to wonder on the resistance that war offers to becoming the object of any artistic and literary representation. This representational dilemma does not go unmentioned, but the confidence and ease with which Aloysius creates one painting after another, as well as the control exhibited by Basile's narration, make the issue not exactly as relevant as one would expect.

The problem that these “war paintings” pose, above all, is a different one: that of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. The theme is explicitly addressed during the meeting between the Beaulieu brothers and the historical character of Anna Coleman Ladd, the sculptor who dedicated herself to creating masks for soldiers with horribly disfigured faces. While recognizing the valuable work carried out by Ladd for the Red Cross (“Aloysius was inspired by the distinctive portrayal of the masks, the stature and guise of an aesthetic pose”), the painter “worried about the ironic resemblance of the mutilated soldier as camouflage. My brother was determined to restyle the meticulous resemblance of the lost faces on the masks with abstract blue ravens. The masks would become an abstract work of art, not an aesthetic disguise” (150). Here the question becomes truly “abstract.” Without consulting with the unfortunate recipients of Ladd's masks, Aloysius decides that his abstract art is superior to the “aesthetic masks” that aim to approximate reality, produced by the sculptor. But regardless of what the wearers of such abstract masks might think, it is not at all clear why Aloysius's “abstract work of art” could not also be perceived in its own way as an “aesthetic disguise.” Furthermore, while here the term “aesthetic” takes on a negative meaning, later in the story we read that “Pierre Chaisson was inspired by the portraits of the blue ravens and declared at the exhibition that the wounds of the veterans were the very first cubist perceptions. Wounded veterans were the artists of their body images and reflections, and the natural motion of the river forever created a new aesthetic face in the water” (252). If there can be no doubt about the impact that the devastation of the Great War had

on the figurative as well as on the literary arts, the aestheticization of the wounded, here described as willing to transform themselves into works of art in flesh and blood, should raise some questions. But instead of investigating the matter further, Vizenor prefers to simply drop it. As if, for the narrator, the simultaneously ethical and aesthetic superiority of anti-realism and anti-mimicry is so obvious that it does not require any clarification.¹⁶

Theory, art, history

During a second, post-war steamship journey to France, in a critical discussion of realism in Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, Basile acknowledges that the novel "delivered the hypocrisy of the small town through light ironic dialogue and descriptions," but laments the fact that Lewis was incapable of providing his readers with "a tease of realism in a main street town" (214-15). To those who wonder what this "tease of realism" exactly might be, the narrator offers as an alternative an Anishinaabe perspective: "Native totemic realism and ironic stories were the opposite" (215). However, what is the ultimate substance of this "native totemic realism" is never specified. From the numerous discussions he devotes to literature and painting, it is clear that the narrator—exactly like Vizenor the theorist of trickster literature, whose voice is impossible not to hear in Basile's prose—prefers representations that emphasize their own impermanence, volatility, and fluidity. "Native visionary artists created a sense of presence with the perceptions of motion, a native presence in the waves of memory, and in

¹⁶ The issue deserving attention is not only that of the legitimacy of an art inspired by the horror of war, but that of its effectiveness on a political-ethical-cultural level. Even what is perhaps the most shocking document produced to denounce the horror of the Great War—Ernst Friedrich's *Krieg dem kriege*, with its photographic reproductions of the horribly disfigured faces of the wounded— notwithstanding its author's unequivocal intentions, may be considered a denunciation of the war that participates in the questionable idea that by showing people the horrors of war, they will embrace anti-war sentiments. See Ernst Friedrich, *War Against War!*, ed. and with an introduction by Douglas Kellner, (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1987 [1924]). I have dealt with these questions at some length in the first three chapters of my *Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015)

the transience of shadows" (247). "Native presence" (this concept is invoked countless times during the narrative) is to no small extent above all an absence: the object of the representation must be perceived as a reflection in the water or as a shadow, so as to make visible its absolute transience. And as if to clarify that "native" does not necessarily mean "Indian," the narrator, commenting on Ezra Pound's famous lyric, *In a Station of the Metro*, writes: "The scene of the faces and spirits in the crowd was a trace of native motion and reason. The fourteen words of the poem, and without a verb, created a sense of presence, and at the same time, a perception of impermanence in the precise metaphor of petals on a wet black bough" (227). However, what makes the "motion" and the "reason" of this poem "native" is not at all clear—at least to me. What distinguishes a "native" motility from a non-native one? It seems that the adjective "native" is very important for Basile (and for Vizenor), but if it can also be extended to a well-known exponent of modernism who, a few years down the road, was unable to resist the sirens of fascism, perhaps a few words of explanation would be appropriate. However, the desire to clarify, or to offer concrete examples of what the narrator proclaims, does not seem to be one of his preoccupations.¹⁷

What is perhaps most perplexing in all of this, is the lack of a deeper reflection on the Great War, especially in a novel where the war plays such an important role. One hundred years after that enormous massacre, which most historians see as having laid the foundations for the even greater and more shocking devastations of the World War Two, the remembrance of that event should focus not only on the pain and the horrors it caused, but on its shameful nature. How is it possible that the advanced and 'refined' European civilization, whose most mature artistic and cultural fruits are widely illustrated in the pages of Vizenor's text, was carried away by a mass murderous impulse? No one should expect a novel to offer a detailed historical and political inquiry into the nature of that horror, but I cannot help being struck by the fact that in *Blue Ravens* it is almost exclusively Germanic imperialism that is condemned, thereby erasing from the picture the

¹⁷ In all fairness, one should add that Basile appears to endorse the idea of gallery owner Nathan Crémieux, who postulates an incompatibility between fascism and modernism. "Nathan [Crémieux] was convinced that natives had always been modernists, and the only savages were those who created the fascist models and categories of the primitive" (222).

collective madness that brought even some of the best minds of the time to bless the outbreak of the war.¹⁸

A few lines after condemning the statuary figure of the archangel Saint Michael, described as obtusely monotheistic compared to the fluid supernatural and mythological figures of a native tradition, perceived as intrinsically incapable of the monumental rigidities of sculpture ("the winged archangel was fully engaged in a monotheistic duel with the husky devil of the fountain, but the figuration of celestial creature and magical flight were much more memorable in native stories. Yes, more memorable because the imagined characters were transformational in trickster stories and never represented in sculptural monuments" [272]), we discover that in one of his paintings Aloysius reimagines Saint Michael as an enormous blue raven, but now "the brute underneath his left foot on the rocky fountain mound was the semblance of the pompous Kaiser Wilhelm II" (273). Aloysius is aware of the risk that his depiction "might have been reviewed as mere caricature, not avant-garde or serious art," but he seems convinced that having rendered the emperor's face "fractured, nose severed, one eye gouged, cheek craters, crooked teeth exposed, and creased with scars" (273) is enough to prevent the painting from participating in that wave of anti-Germanic hatred that the novel stigmatizes without hesitation.¹⁹ However, why an emperor portrayed as marked with the signs of war wounds and mutilations should be perceived beyond the parameters of chauvinism is not explained. Furthermore, the fusion between the figures of Saint Michael and the indigenous raven suggests an indissoluble alliance between France and the White Earth Reservation of the Beaulieu brothers that strengthens the perception that the Anglo/French/American front is an innocent victim of pan-German aggression.

¹⁸ The war is defined on page one of the novel a "wicked crusade," but the idea that the evil of the conflict must be shared among all its participants (including those who, like the two protagonists, volunteered to serve in the army, even if they were more naive than evil in their choice to enlist) is never discussed.

¹⁹ "Seven years later the hatred of the enemy had become an obsession. The sentiments of vengeance had reached into the very heart and authenticity of avant-garde, and the marrow of popular culture. Cubism was denounced as a German perversion, and the censure was so persuasive that some cubist and avant-garde painters changed styles during the war" (249).

If these moments in which the contradictions and ambiguities of the two Beaulieus are hard to miss were presented under the sign of that irony the narrator incessantly praises, the overall tone of the novel would certainly be different and genuinely unsettling. But, to my mind, in passages like the one just mentioned, and other similar ones, there is no ironic intent. Basile preaches subversion and artistic innovation, which he sees as animating his brother's painting and totemic art but is hesitant when judging the traditions and culture of France. For example, first he praises a painting by his brother Aloysius in which "The blue ravens had unseated four elaborate golden statues on the pillars, the statues that represented the symbolic history of France" (273). But when the painting is exhibited, if on the one hand "[s]ome artists at the gallery were rather amused by the tease of ironic conversions of national narratives," "other visitors were sidetracked by the creative arrogance. *The French were rightly protective of state art and monuments*" (273, my italics). "Arrogance" is a trait that until now the narrative has denounced as incompatible with genuinely native cultures, but at this juncture, faced with the sacredness of the nation—a sacredness that is part and parcel of the rampant nationalism that made the Great War possible—even art may have to contain its "arrogant" creative drives.

It is well-known that Vizenor has always shown interest and respect for French culture. Anishinaabe culture is deeply intertwined with that of the French trappers and fur traders who, since the seventeenth century, established important economic and political relationships with the Indian tribes of the Great Lakes. For a rather long period, this large border zone was characterized not so much by those asymmetrical power relations that Mary Louise Pratt mentions in her definition of the "contact zone," and it would be better described as a paradigmatic example of what Richard White calls "middle ground": a "ground" of comparison where different social and cultural groups communicated and coexisted through a process of mutual accommodation and "creative, and often expedient, misunderstandings."²⁰

²⁰ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. xxvi. According to Pratt, the concept of the "contact zone" "treats relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and 'travelees,' not in terms of separateness, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, and often

However, if it is true that this historical phase was marked by a substantial balance of power between natives and Euro-Americans, it is also the case that during this period Whites introduced both economic and cultural practices which, over time, contributed significantly to the erosion and subjugation of the Indian nations. In other words, in the long run, the "middle ground"—as White himself unequivocally demonstrates—lost its original characteristics and turned increasingly into an asymmetrical "contact zone," an antechamber to the policies of confinement and forced assimilation. In short, while it is completely understandable that the Anishinaabe would feel in some way particularly close to those who at this point can also be imagined as their ancestors ("We were the native descendants of the fur trade who returned with new stories from France" [140]), the Francophilia that pervades the text is more difficult to accept.²¹ This Francophilia is particularly evident not only in the idealized descriptions of the artistic environment of post-war France but, as previously mentioned, in the clear choice the two Anishinaabeg make by agreeing to enlist in the US army. There is hardly any mention in the novel of the fact that at the time there were in America (and in the rest of the world) people who fought to avoid the bloodbath of war. The issue of pacifism comes up only when Augustus, the Beaulieu brothers' uncle, hastily dismisses the slogan of the great socialist and pacifist leader Eugene Debs (who for his opposition to the war was sentenced to ten years in prison, serving two before being "freed" by President Harding, who reiterated that Debs was nevertheless guilty). Augustus, Basile explains, "had mocked the slogans of the war pacifists, and examined the statements by the socialist Eugene Debs, 'I have no country to fight for: my country is the earth: I am a citizen of the world.' Our uncle consented to the earth as a country, and to natives as world citizens, but he shouted that only a vagrant would not fight for his country, and natives have fought for centuries to be citizens of the earth, the reservation, and of the country" (91). Not only are these words uncontested by the Beaulieu

within radically asymmetrical relations of power." Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 8.

²¹ "The French presence at the source of the gichiziibe, the great Mississippi River, was not the same as the colonial cruelty at the other end of the river. Our ancestors were voyageurs, fur traders not colonialists, and the union was by trade, stories, and songs, and not by slavery, otherwise we would have resisted the colonial occupation of the French" (274).

brothers, but they serve in a certain sense as a premise to their decision to enlist—a decision they will never repudiate even when, once the war is over, they will have to process the horrors and cruelties they not only experienced but took an active part in.²²

Between war and peace

Like most veterans of the Great War, Basile and Aloysius Beaulieu are tormented, in the final part of the novel, by memories of the explosions, mutilations, and devastations they have witnessed. Their memories, however, lack any self-doubting and remorse. But there is more. In the section of the book (chapters 11-15) that more closely follows the tradition of the combat novel, the text first denounces the stereotype according to which Indians were innate and fearless warriors, correctly explaining how such conceptions became an excuse to entrust native soldiers with particularly dangerous missions, thus contributing decisively to the higher mortality of Indian fighters compared to white soldiers. Later, however, when the exploits of the Beaulieu brothers and other Indians are described, those stereotypes are deployed without a trace of irony.²³ "Aloysius lowered his head and moved in the smart spirit of an animal, sudden leaps, lurches, and slithers on his belly. I followed in the same manner, and our moves were precise, only at the instance of other sounds in the forest" (130). A little further on the narrator adds that "[T]he Boche soldiers were

²² On Debs see at least Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984) and Ray Ginger, *The Bending Across: A Biography of Eugene Victor Debs* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1949). The way Vizenor's novel makes light of the figure of Debs, is to my mind one of the less felicitous moments in the text. The point, of course, is not that Indians do not have a right to fight for their country—the point is whether the US is "their" country.

²³ About 12,000 American Indians took part in World War One, with a casualty rate of five percent, compared to one percent of all US. troops. This is because native soldiers were often employed as scouts and marksmen, on very dangerous missions. The stereotype of the Indian as fearless warrior had therefore tragic consequences. See Thomas A. Britten, *American Indians in World War I: At Home and at War* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).

stunned by the face paint and surrendered for fear of being scalped by a fierce native warrior" (131). Here Vizenor follows the historical data closely. In his book on the American Indian participation in the First World War, Thomas Britten notes that at least one German soldier reported, after being captured, that there was widespread fear among his fellow soldiers that Canadian troops included Indians ready to scalp their enemies. The very fact that German propaganda was concerned with reassuring its soldiers that they would not encounter any Indians at the front, is an indication of how terrified of Indians at least some German soldiers were. However, it is disconcerting that in this case, perhaps because it serves to scare the enemy, the narrator offers no comment on the stereotype of the Indian as ruthless savage, nor does he say anything about the profound irony of the whole context. Because, as Britten explains, the fear among the troops of the central empires certainly did not arise from direct knowledge of the Indian "warriors," but from the former's assiduous familiarity with Karl May's immensely popular novels. One wonders if here Vizenor does not grasp the ironic situation in which the Beaulieu brothers find themselves, because he wants the two boys—hitherto presented as gentle and kind people—to be ready to face the ruthlessness of war—a ruthlessness that no ironic vein or "native totemic realism" seems able to dampen: "I shot the first soldier who had raised his rifle, and my brother leaped into the trench and stabbed the second soldier in the stomach and the chest with his Elephant Toy knife, and then with a swift back swing of his hand cut the throat of the enemy" (131).²⁴

Only in chapter 17, unsurprisingly titled *Deceit of Peace*, does the novel finally engage in a serious criticism of war culture. Now the two protagonists begin to feel a real disgust for the celebrations of the achieved "peace." "We were moved by the sound of ceremonial taps, and yet were constantly reminded of the political misuse of the rituals of honor and the extravagance of patriotism" (169). Not only does Aloysius refuse to pay homage in his paintings to the "romantic" culture of heroism, medals, uniforms, but it becomes increasingly clear that

²⁴ The scene I have just analyzed is, in my opinion, a paradigmatic example of what I stated at the beginning of this essay regarding my reservations about Vizenor's first novel. After having distanced himself on a theoretical level from the stereotypes that afflict Indians, when it comes to describing their actual behavior, Vizenor allows his two soldiers to act with a sort of instinctive ruthlessness that overlaps neatly with the images penned by writers like Karl May.

the "peace" celebrated and praised in official speeches is anything but truly peaceful. "The wistful notion of peace was more of a hoax, a theatrical and political revision, than a turnaround of hatred and remorse" (169). And again: "the horror of the war, and our experiences as combat scouts became a burden of nasty shadows and a revulsion of the political postures of patriotism. Yes, we were once soldiers, but never the patriots of a nostalgic culture of peace" (170).²⁵ Even more than the conventional denunciations of the myths of the homeland and the hero, what is striking in this sentence is the stigmatizing of the "nostalgic culture of peace." Even if the narrator does not clarify what this culture amounts to, it would seem clear that he intends to refer to how too often the exaltation of the values of "peace" is entirely functional to the promotion of a culture of war. To this bitter irony, one should add the paradoxical condition experienced by veterans like Basile and Aloysius, for whom after the experience of war it is nearly impossible to talk about peace. "Our return to the reservation was neither peace nor the end of the war. The native sense of chance and presence on the reservation had always been a casualty of the civil war on native liberty" (170). Here Vizenor—finally!—foreshadows the possibility that, after all, even the Great War, in which its protagonists participated with an enthusiasm similar to that of many of their young, and less young, compatriots, far from being a renewal of the alliance between French trappers and fur traders with the Anishinaabe nation, must on the contrary be understood as another episode of the long "civil war" waged against Native Americans for centuries. Unfortunately, however, this intuition is only hinted at and never developed. We can partly understand why. The narrative wants to honor native soldiers and especially the Anishinaabe soldiers who participated, in good faith and courageously, in the war. Some of them lost their lives in the war, like Ellanora Beaulieu "who had served as a nurse and died of influenza at the end of the war" (170). This fact shows how the war was an opportunity for emancipation not only for men. But this understandably celebratory desire is not easily compatible with a critical assessment of both the Great War, and more generally, any war.

Blue Ravens remains suspended between a clear and unequivocal rejection of war as both a historical and spiritual reality (which one can

²⁵ On the difficulty of distinguishing between the concepts of "peace" and "war," see my *Waging War on War*, especially the first chapter.

find in a novel like Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*), and the opposite idea that sees the participation of Indian soldiers in the war as an important stage in their emancipation. This contradiction registers the fact that Indian participation in the war was significant both on a numerical and symbolic level (many are unaware, for example, that in the First World War Indian languages were already used to transmit encrypted messages), and that it was also as a "reward" for the blood they shed in the Great War that American Indians were granted citizenship. Yet the novel misses the opportunity to explore at a deeper level what this tension between a desire for emancipation and the further subjugation to the US state meant. Vizenor, instead, solves the contradiction by providing a strictly individual way out for the two cosmopolitan and refined brothers Beaulieu. "We were not prepared for war, and we were never prepared to live on federal reservations. We learned to evade dominance with ironic and visionary stories. We became creative artists, a writer and a painter, and conceived of our sense of *liberté* in Paris. The world of creative art and literature was our revolution, our sense of native presence and sanctuary" (256). Although Basile here claims to have not been ready for the experience of war, he and his brother actively took part in it, shooting and killing, as Basile himself reminds us. When juxtaposed to the massive devastation of the war, the image of Paris as a refuge and protected space ("we were expatriates in the City of Light, in the city of avant-garde art and literature" [256]) appears not only romantically consolatory, but forgetful of how that historical phase was nothing but an inter-war period. Indeed, at this point the novel takes a markedly fantastic direction. The Beaulieu brothers' artistic rise in the coterie of Marc Chagall and Sylvia Beach has no historical counterpart. Although vaguely inspired by the example of the Anishinaabe artist George Morrison, who about *thirty years later* would study in Paris and Marseille, the sections dedicated to the artistic triumph of the Beaulieus in the French capital are completely invented.²⁶ There would be nothing wrong with that, of course,

²⁶ For an interesting discussion of Vizenor's interest in French modernist art, dealing both with the example of Morrison and the writer's Francophilia, and raising some doubts about his "cosmoprimitivism," which leads the protagonist of his novel *Shrouds* to approve the questionable choices of the Musée du Quai Branly, see James Mackay, "Wanton and sensuous in the Musée du Quai Branly: Gerald Vizenor's cosmoprimitivist visions of France," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 51 (2015), No. 2, pp. 170-183. George Morrison was an Anishinaabe painter who resided in France on a

if it were not for the fact that this coda sheds the historical novel framework only to embrace an escapist fantasy.

This does not mean that Basile, and especially Aloysius, conceive their artistic creativity as separate from the ethical and social sphere. Their works of art intend, in a completely sincere way, to promote values and convey messages alternative to the deadly ones of nation states. Take for example the painting *Saint Michel the Blue Raven*: "Aloysius painted the four columns of the monument with mushy hues of rouge, and the two winged dragon fountains were transfigured into two blue and nude war widows.[...] The statues of virtue, prudence, power, justice, and temperance were deposed by painterly mutations of the *mutiles de guerre* into four wounded soldiers with huge blue raven wings, elongated beaks, and with one enormous claw that reached over the columns" (272). Or think of the vertical totem *Blue Horses at the Senate*, on which Aloysius not only carves the faces of blue ravens but also those of the "native warriors who had resisted the military crusade and federal detention on reservations. [...] Aloysius painted and connected the blue ravens and broken faces of soldiers on the totem to the semblances of Tecumseh, Chief Pontiac, Geronimo, Little Wolf, Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, and Chief Joseph" (270). Even though also in this case the narrative does not go so far as to draw an unequivocal connection between the government's "military crusades" against the Indians and the bloody "crusade" of the Great War, the polemical intentions of Aloysius Beaulieu's art emerge here quite clearly, notwithstanding Basile's insistence that his brother "never painted political ideas" (250).²⁷

I entertain no doubts whatsoever regarding the good faith of both Vizenor and the protagonists of his novel, who demonstrate, among other things, that they understand well how their art is also part of the

Fulbright grant in 1952-53. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Morrison_\(artist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Morrison_(artist)).

²⁷ According to Cathy Covell Waegner, "The young artist's act of creating the images is generally (first) described as if he were a guerrilla urban artist painting large engagé murals on building walls or more fantastically in the air above buildings." C. Covell Waegner, "Vizenor's Shimmering Birds in Dialog: (De-)Framing, Memory, and the Totemic in Favor of Crows and Blue Ravens," in *Native American Suroivance, Memory and Futurity. The Gerald Vizenor Continuum*, eds. B. Däwes and A. Hauke (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 107.

circuit of capitalist consumption ("My brother was an extraordinary painter, but he worried that the sale of only one portrait was the total average salary for two weeks of labor in Minneapolis, and even more hours of labor in Paris" [253]), while all along holding on to the unrealistic belief that the only form of resistance to the impending barbarism is represented by trickster stories, whether oral, written, or embodied in Aloysius's blue ravens paintings. If we consider that, as previously observed, Ezra Pound himself is included among the artists capable of transmitting a sense of "native presence," it seems fair to raise doubts about the liberating and subversive nature of the avant-garde. I have no intention of demonizing a great though controversial writer like Pound. I simply wish to call attention to the fact that it is extremely difficult to attribute an unequivocal political value to art—whatever the aspirations of its practitioners. Although this should not be taken to mean that, as Basile claims, artistic objects must by definition refuse to represent political ideas (isn't the horror of war that Aloysius' paintings aim to convey a "political" idea?), art usually aspires to free itself from too rigidly defined ideological positions. In summary, therefore, it is unrealistic to imagine that art may carry out the tasks that pertain to politics. But this is exactly the paradox into which Vizenor's narrative repeatedly runs, both on the level of plot and on that of discourse. "Native" art (a term whose contours remain extremely vague) is presented as the only human activity capable of promoting an acceptable ethic, and therefore as an intrinsically social and political form, but at the same time trickster art and literature are declared extraneous (and implicitly superior) to politics, history, the social: to all those areas, that is, which produce the violence of wars and colonialism. It is not surprising, therefore, that the novel concludes with a happy ending in which the Beaulieu brothers transcend the horrors they took part in, thanks to their rise as artists who, while not forgetful of their Indian roots, have by the end largely loosened ties with their original community. Again, the point is not that we should condemn the Beaulieu brothers for their individual choices, which do differ from the communitarianism that is often espoused in American Indian literature, but rather that the Beaulieus' choices are wrapped in an aura of ethical and cultural superiority. As a whole, the novel appears to argue that only the followers of what we may describe as *blue raven philosophy* have grasped the correct way to approach both art and life.

On a formal level, it is also surprising to see how, in a novel that relentlessly praises irony and denounces "monotheism," dialogues are almost completely absent. The characters seldom have a voice independent from that of the narrator, who remains the only one entitled to report the impressions, thoughts, and sensations of others. This stylistic choice has the inevitable effect of making the narrator a supreme and absolute authority. It is also for this reason that, at least to this reader, the repeated exaltations of the beauty and correct ethical substance of the art of the Beaulieu brothers become, in the long run, not only tiresome but authoritarian, as they are never called into question by other voices.²⁸ It matters little that the reader may often agree with the substance or tenor of Basile's statements. What is more significant is that the latter are uttered in a peremptory tone, nipping any alternative perspective in the bud. Among the numerous examples that could be offered of this narrative strategy, I will examine one from the last pages of the novel, in which the theme of the relationship between Aloysius' figurative art and the pictorial currents of modernism is addressed.

My brother was excited, of course, about the innovative scenes painted by other artists, the impressionists, fauvists, and cubists, but he alone had conceived of color and contour as natural motion, and abstract blue ravens were avant-garde creations on the White Earth Reservation.

Native artists envisioned a semblance of the avant-garde in the perceptions of natural motion, and in the ordinary experiences of visual memory, the creases and fragments of reflections, impressions, stories, and visionary portrayals. (262)

Here, if on the one hand a certain affinity between the artistic avant-gardes of the first decades of the twentieth century and the painting of Aloysius stands confirmed (a point that is reiterated countless times in the text), on the other hand it is also clearly stated that the latter is distinguished by a unique and special quality that only a "native" artist

²⁸ I am fully aware that my response to the novel differs significantly from that of other readers. For discussions of a very different nature (but which in my opinion do not touch on some of the questions that I have tried to pose here), see, in addition to R. Lee, "Flight Times," and C. Covell Waegner, "Vizenor's Shimmering Birds in Dialog," also the essays by B. J. Stratton and K. Baudemann in *Native American Survivance*.

seems able to possess and reproduce in his artistic creations. Within the novel, no one dares dispute these apodictic statements, and not even the reader would seem to be entitled to raise any objections on this matter, as Aloysius' paintings are 'visible' only thanks to the ekphrastic mediation of his brother Basile. And just as here we must accept the narrator's opinion as definitive and incontestable, there are numerous points in the text where Basile sermonizes in defense of his artistic and cultural ideas in a tone that clashes with the irony and tricksterism that both the narrator and Vizenor himself claim to espouse.

War, myth, return

In an important essay that appeared some years ago in the *Los Angeles Book Review*, the writer and critic Roy Scranton subjected the majority of the most recent novels and war stories published in the United States on the Iraq and Afghanistan war experience to a severe critique, arguing that their primary rhetorical-ideological function consists in strengthening and expanding "the myth of the trauma hero."²⁹ According to this myth, a veteran is the custodian of a truth beyond words, a truth that only those who have fought on the battlefield can understand. Scranton lucidly reconstructs the genesis, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of this idea of war as a form of "sentimental education," which will in turn lead to a true "gnosis of combat" — to the belief, that is, that only those who have directly experienced military conflict are ultimately authorized to say something about war. If novelists like Ernest Hemingway and Tim O'Brien seem, albeit in different ways, to contribute to this "negative theology," for Scranton a contemporary writer like Kevin Powers would do nothing less, in his novel *The Yellow Birds*, than mechanically overthrow the idea of the irrepresentability of war, imagining "war trauma as the source of poetic transcendence: instead of denying language, the

²⁹ Roy Scranton, "The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to *Redeployment* and *American Sniper*," *Los Angeles Book Review*, January 25 (2015), <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/trauma-hero-wilfred-owen-redeployment-american-sniper/>.

experience of war inspires it."³⁰ Even those who, rather than insist on the impossibility for language to account for the war experience, make it a source of sublime artistic transcendence, eventually embrace the mythology Scranton stigmatizes.

Vizenor's novel must be credited with resisting this time-honored but by now worn-out narrative tradition. "Yes, we had survived the war as scouts and brothers," writes Basile, "a painter and a writer, but were unnerved by the wounds and agonies of peace. My literary scenes were more fierce and poetic, and the images my brother created were more intense and visionary. No one would wisely endorse the experiences of war and peace as the just sources of artistic inspiration, and yet we would never resist the tease of chance, turn of trickster stories, or the natural outcome of native irony" (144). The narrator and his brother are fully aware of the risk that the war will end up being translated into art, thus trespassing into a sphere which should remain extraneous to violence, "and yet," as the last sentence of the passage just quoted suggests, even those artistic forms that the novel insists on presenting as liberating and spiritually enriching are not impervious to lived experience. If at times the art of the Beaulieu brothers is represented as not only therapeutic but also as capable of guaranteeing the transcendence of a traumatic past, in other instances this possibility is questioned. The traumas of the past cannot be easily healed, and the idea that war can be redeemed by art is denounced as a chimera: "We learned that even the most original and ironic stories alone could not overcome the bloody scenes of hunters" (195). Here Basile acknowledges that the experience of war is responsible for the severing of ties with his ancestral past. Attempts to return to "a basic sense of survival, to hunt, fish, and in the autumn gather maple syrup and wild rice" (179) prove impractical. Of course, this break with the tribal past creates the premises for the Parisian artistic triumph of the Beaulieu brothers, but the laceration remains, making their artistic and personal achievements less satisfactory than a hasty reading of the last section of the novel might suggest.

One is tempted to conclude that *Blue Ravens* is not so much a "historical novel" as a *Künstlerroman* in which we see represented "the conflict between the ideal of *self-determination* and the equally imperious

³⁰ Kevin Powers, *The Yellow Birds* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012).

demands of *socialization*."³¹ From this perspective, what marks a clear difference between this novel and the "classic" Native American novelistic tradition, is that socialization is achieved not within a tribal, communitarian context (no matter how hybrid and changed when compared to the old times) but in Paris, in a decidedly non-Indian context. In other words, Vizenor's novel deviates from the "homing in" plot which, in a seminal essay, William Bevis identifies as characteristic of much of contemporary American Indian fiction.³² There is of course nothing wrong with that. Several American Indians novels are skeptical concerning the possibility for their characters to "home in," thus putting an end to their exilic condition. Yet, rather than highlight the unsolved tensions between indigeneity and cosmopolitanism, "native" art and Euro-American modernism, reservation life and a golden Parisian exile, "peace" and "war," the narrative simply skims over them. The narrator is thus left free to preach his artistic credo unchallenged and with a sententious tone that admits no reply. The novel is often overwhelmed by Basile's voice, which insists in telling us how we should read the events described, as if the facts presented were in and of themselves insufficient to convey the meanings that he sees inscribed in them. This is all the more a pity given that the most successful passages of Vizenor's novel are the ones where the concrete emotions of his characters and the world they inhabit are described with a degree of detachment, before the narrator hastens to turn them into the pieces of his abstract and wooden "totemic" allegories.

³¹ This is Franco Moretti's definition of the function of the *Bildungsroman*, of which the *Künstlerroman* is of course a sub-genre. See *The Way of the World. The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 15.

³² William Bevis, "Native American Novels: Homing In," in *Recovering the Word. Essays on Native American Literature*, eds. A. Krupat and B. Swann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 580-620. However, it should be noted that in *Blue Ravens* the theme of *nostos* is not absent, to the point that the narrator brings with him a copy of the *Odyssey*, from which a series of passages are quoted (but one may also think of the aforementioned merchant Odysseus, or of the meetings with Joyce in which *Ulysses* is discussed). In the final chapter, Basile reads a passage from the last book of the Homeric epic, in which Ulysses meets his father incognito and asks him if the place where he has arrived is really Ithaca. The reader knows that at this point Ulysses has finally returned home. Can we say the same about the Beaulieu brothers? Can we say that Paris is their Ithaca? By quoting Ulysses' question—"Is this place that I have come to really Ithaca?"—Basile seems to suggest implicitly that his, and his brother's, story is unlike the traditional "homing in" tales of other Indian writers.

My reservations on *Blue Ravens* have nothing to do with Vizenor's remarkable writing skills. The text has several, nicely written passages. Take for example this description of the childhood of the two Beaulieu brothers: "Every winter day we cracked and moved the thick clear chunks of ice on the schoolroom windows, and pretended to melt the ice woman and other concocted beasts and enemies of natives by warm breath, touch, and natural motion on the windowpane" (6). Here Vizenor manages to fuse together what—to use old-fashioned but perhaps still useful terms—we may call the realistic and symbolic levels of narrative discourse. The symbolic dimension is anchored in the description of concrete, simple, yet meaningful details. Unfortunately, Vizenor does not always write in this way. Too often he prefers to instruct the reader on what are the correct interpretive lenses through which the reality he describes must be assessed. His is a procedure of an almost allegorical nature, though allegorical not as in Walter Benjamin's unstable modern allegory nor even as in Nathaniel Hawthorne's multilayered symbolizations, but as in the inflexible medieval allegories. When Vizenor's novels stop telling stories and turn into novels of ideas, in my opinion, they lose their appeal. Notwithstanding their postmodern paint, they read—and I doubt this is what Vizenor wished to achieve—like not very well disguised sermons.

7. The *Human Smoke* Controversy, and Beyond: Remembering the Unpopular Pacifism of World War Two

I would like to begin with a brief mention of two recent examples of World War Two cinematic postmemory, as film is a form of memorialization and post-memorialization which is, and will most likely continue to be, enormously influential. The first is *The Darkest Hour*, the movie that allowed Gary Oldman to garner an Oscar for what many considered his stellar performance as Winston Churchill, and indeed managed to keep alive the myth that has grown around this historical figure as if he, almost single-handedly, stood up against the Nazis until the Stars and Stripes army joined the fray. As only a few critics observed, by watching the movie one would never know that this champion of democracy was also the man who, among other things, was “strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes,” who thought that Indians were “a beastly people with a beastly religion,” or who referred to Palestinians as “barbaric hoards who ate little but camel dung.”¹ This darker side of Churchill is, of

¹ Quotations of Churchill’s views are taken from Richard Seymour, “The Real Winston Churchill,” *Jacobin*, 1 Nov. 2018, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/01/winston-churchill-british-empire-colonialism>. The dark side of Churchill’s legacy is emphasized especially by Callum Alexander Scott, “What ‘Darkest Hour’ doesn’t tell you about Winston Churchill,” *People’s World*, January 17, 2018, <https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/what-darkest-hour-doesnt-tell-you-about-winston-churchill/>. On the film’s historical inaccuracies see Adrian Smith, “The errors and omissions of Winston Churchill film *Darkest Hour*,” *New Statesman*, January 18, 2018, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/observations/2018/01/errors-and-omissions-winston-churchill-film-darkest-hour>.

course, well-known to serious historians, but there is hardly any trace of it in Joe Wright's movie. If, however, you happen to have read the text which I refer to in the title of this essay, you would definitely know not only about Churchill's opinions about people of color and, more generally, non-English people; you might also begin to question the wisdom of both his war tactics and strategy. But a bit more on this later.

The other movie I want to mention here, to frame my main argument, is *Hacksaw Ridge*, the Mel Gibson take on the story of Desmond Doss, the World War Two conscientious objector who was awarded the Medal of Honor "for outstanding gallantry far above and beyond the call of duty" during the Battle of Okinawa.² While at least one reviewer lamented that the movie "makes hash of its plainly stated moral code by reveling in the same blood-lust it condemns," it must be conceded that the film has the merit of raising a topic largely ignored in literary, cinematic, and even historical representations of the Second World War: that of how pacifism confronted a war in which the enemy could be easily perceived as embodying pure, undiluted evil.³ The utterly perverse nature of the Nazi regime is most likely the main reason why pacifism and anti-warism have been virtually erased from most discourses on the war. Here was an enemy with not even a shred of human decency and with whom, therefore, no appeasement or dialogue seemed possible. There is also another motive, particularly significant in the US context, why opposition to World War Two has been largely forgotten. While anti-war movements are as a rule routinely accused of sympathizing with the enemy whether that is true or not, in this case there were indeed pro-Nazi sympathizers among the ranks of those opposing US participation in the war, and especially among the most vocal and influential anti-war group of the day, the America First Committee (AFC).⁴ The best-known case is perhaps that

² "Desmond Doss." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond_Doss

³ Matt Zoller Seitz, "Hacksaw Ridge." *RogerEbert.com*, 4 Nov. 2016, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/hacksaw-ridge-2016>.

⁴ In his study of the AFC, Wayne S. Cole argues that while one could not consider the organization as being overall pro-Nazi, several Nazi sympathizers as well as the KKK, were openly supportive of its goals. See Wayne S. Cole, *America First: The Battle Against Intervention. 1940-1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1953). The contradictory nature of the anti-war front is not overlooked in the book that is the

of Charles Lindbergh, whose anti-Semitism was shared by other AFS members—but, it must be added, also by many who supported US intervention.⁵ These two facts, along with a common-sense perception that the best that can be said of sincere opponents of World War Two is that they were completely mistaken about the situation at hand, has by and large prevented giving pacifist arguments a fair hearing.

Gibson's movie manages to pay homage to Doss by showing that it was possible for a man who as a Seventh Day Adventist refused to carry let alone fire a weapon, to display not only moral but also immense physical courage. On the other hand, as none of the reviews I read suggests, one could easily argue that while the film pays tribute to a forgotten and heroic character, it also chooses to focus on a pacifist who by no means refused to take an active part in the war. Though it is perhaps understandable that in a movie bent on emphasizing his courage in battle certain moral and political questions would be downplayed, it seems odd that the story never questions Doss's pacifist wisdom. Of course, we know that pacifism is not a monolithic ideology, and that it comes in various degrees, but as World War Two-resisters from Union Theological Seminary put it in their statement "Why We Refused to Register," while they felt "a deep bond of unity with those who decide to register as conscientious objectors," they also realized that gaining "personal exemption from the most crassly un-Christian

main object of this essay, Nicholson Baker, *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, The End of Civilization* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008). For example, he reports that Rabbi Goldstein, a member of the John Haynes Holmes' War Resisters League, though opposed to America's participation in the war, chose not to speak at the Second National Anti-War Congress because Senator Burton Wheeler was also on the program. "In view of the anti-Jewish statements Senator Wheeler has made privately and publicly," Rabbi Goldstein said, "I cannot as a matter of self-respect appear upon the same platform with him" (as quoted in Baker, *Human Smoke*, p. 330).

- ⁵ As Cole and many others have noted, while Lindbergh did denounce the persecution suffered by the Jews in Nazi Germany, he continued to entertain anti-Semitic feelings. In his well-known Des Moines speech of 11 September 1941, he stated that "the persecution they [the Jews] suffered in Germany would be sufficient to make bitter enemies of any race. But no person of honesty and vision can look on their pro-war policy here today without seeing the dangers involved in such a policy, both for us and for them. [...] A few farsighted Jewish people realize this and stand opposed to intervention. But the majority still do not. Their greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio, and our government" (as quoted in Cole, *S. America First*, p. 144).

requirements of the act does not compensate for the fact that we are complying with it and accepting its protection."⁶ In short, without questioning the good intentions of *Hacksaw Ridge's* story, and Doss's utmost good faith, the movie treats its viewers to a sort of sanitized version of pacifism—a pacifism that aimed at safeguarding one's individual conscience but certainly not at turning it into "the counter-friction to stop the machine," as Henry David Thoreau would have put it.⁷

It is to this second kind of active and militant pacifism that novelist Nicholson Baker dedicates *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization* (2008), an odd kind of book that proved to be enormously controversial. Before I say something about the book's content, however, a few words about its form are in order. The text is a collage of mostly snippets or sections from newspaper articles (in large part) as well as government transcripts and personal diaries of the time. The authorial voice is hardly audible, which is not to say that the book does not bear a strong authorial imprint. Covering the period that goes from the aftermath of World War One to American entry into World War Two after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the montage seems to advance an implicit thesis, even though—at least to my mind—such thesis is not as absolute as Baker's detractors argue. What is Baker's controversial argument? In a nutshell, what he wants to suggest is that the allies should have at least tried to negotiate an armistice with Hitler, as that was the only way in which Jews and other persecuted minorities might have been saved. This, as Baker himself has made abundantly clear in an essay that he wrote for *Harper's* in reply to his critics three years after the publication of *Human Smoke*, is by no means his own original idea. Abraham Kaufman and Jessie Wallace Hughan, respectively the secretary and the founder of the War Resisters League, in the early 1940's gave speeches, wrote letters, and handed out leaflets calling for a peace "conditional upon the release of

⁶ Don Benedict et al., "Why We Refused to Register," in *We Who Dared Say No to War*, Murray Polner and Thomas E. Woods, Jr., eds., *American Antiwar Writing from 1812 to Now* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), pp. 173-75.

⁷ Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," in *Walden and Civil Disobedience: authoritative texts, background, reviews, and essays in criticism*, ed. Owen Paul Thomas (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 231.

Jews and other political prisoners.”⁸ Dorothy Day, too, wrote on the front page of the *Catholic Worker* that “Peace Now Without Victory Will Save Jews,” a notion echoed by the Jewish Peace Fellowship, which also called for an armistice that would “make an end to the world-wide slaughter.”⁹ In the *Harper’s* essay, Baker also mentions that the British publisher Victor Gollancz sold 250,000 copies of a pamphlet called “Let My People Go,” in which the wisdom of Churchill’s carpet-bombing and fire-storming strategy was strongly called into question. “This ‘policy’—Gollancz wrote—it must be plainly said, will not save a single Jewish life.” His concern was, “and he put it in italics, *the saving of life now*. The German government had to be approached immediately and asked to allow Jews to emigrate.” If the Nazis refused such a proposal, the Allies would lose nothing and it “would strip Hitler of the excuse that he cannot afford to feed useless mouths.”¹⁰

One may well find these propositions ill-conceived and argue that negotiations with the Third Reich would not have brought about the desired results. But let me say this once again, they are not Baker’s own invention—these were ideas that at least some pacifists (and some non-pacifists, too) entertained at the time. I doubt, however, that the examples quoted by Baker would in any way make his critics relent. In fact, what several of them seem to find particularly irritating is nothing less than Baker’s dedication (in his book’s afterword) “to the memory of Clarence Pickett and other American and British pacifists. They’ve never really gotten their due. They tried to save Jewish refugees, feed Europe, reconcile the United States and Japan, and stop the war from happening. They failed, but they were right.”¹¹ It is especially the last sentence, I suppose, that many find unacceptable—the notion that Baker would know *now*, seven decades plus after the fact, what was the right thing to do *then*, and, moreover, that the right thing to do was not add fuel to fire but seek peace. What clearly transpires from the criticism that the book has received, from Left, Right, and

⁸ Nicholson Baker, “Why I’m a Pacifist: The Dangerous Myth of the Good War,” *Harper’s Magazine*, May 2011, reprinted in *War No More: Three Centuries of American Antiwar & Peace Writing*, ed. Lawrence Rosenwald, (New York: Library of America, 2016), p. 749.

⁹ Baker, “Why I’m a Pacifist,” p. 749.

¹⁰ Baker, “Why I’m a Pacifist,” p. 750.

¹¹ Nicholson Baker, *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, The End of Civilization*, p. 474. Further references are inserted parenthetically.

Center, is that it is either outrageous or ludicrous, or both, to suggest that pacifism may figure in any way significant in discussions of World War Two. In the lapidary words of David Cesarani, writing for the *Independent*, by reading Baker's book we learn that some pacifists "were truly honourable people who [...] succoured refugees from Nazism when the US administration was most stony-hearted. But some of them were idiots, and a few managed to be both at the same time."¹²

Perhaps because I share at least some of Baker's admiration for the "absolute pacifists" who did not compromise on their principles and—at least in cases like those of Don Benedict, David Dellinger, and Bayard Rustin—paid dearly for their ideas by serving prison sentences and constant abuse from guards and some fellow prisoners, I have a different understanding of what *Human Smoke* tries to accomplish. While I do agree that, as Katha Pollit has put it in another devastatingly critical review for *The Nation*, "Baker's cut-and-paste method suggests without stating outright, much less making a coherent argument," to my mind what his collage implies is not so much that, as Pollit argues, "lives would have been spared had Churchill made a separate peace and Roosevelt stayed out of the war," but that—to quote from Baker's *Harper's* piece—"the pacifists were the only ones, during a time of catastrophic violence, who repeatedly put forward proposals that had any chance of saving a threatened people."¹³ Pollit candidly admits that reading the book made her feel "something I had never felt before:

¹² David Cesarani, "Human Smoke, by Nicholson Baker. A novel view of history," *The Independent*, April 25, 2008, <https://www.independent.co.uk/artsentertainment/books/reviews/human-smoke-by-nicholsonbaker-814963.html>.

¹³ This is a complex, somewhat slippery, issue. Baker does indeed seem to imply, as I myself noted above, that a negotiated peace and America's non-entry in the war might have saved lives—mostly, though not only, Jewish lives—but that would have happened only if the pacifist agenda had been fully implemented. If, in other words, the first, most important political objective of the anti-Nazi camp had been truly that of sparing the suffering of millions of civilians. Baker himself concedes that he does not expect readers of *Human Smoke* to agree necessarily with him that pacifists "were right in their principled opposition to that enormous war—the war that Hitler began," but that their position should be taken "seriously," so as to see "whether there was some wisdom in it." I am not sure that Baker's collage ultimately suggests that, by following a pacifist strategy, the war would have been avoided. The main point of his book is that war was not the means to save the Jews, because "The Jews needed immigration visas, not Flying Fortresses. And who was doing the best to get them visas, as well as food, money, and hiding places? Pacifists were." See Baker, "Why I'm a Pacifist," p. 749.

fury at pacifists." If on the one hand I find such fury oddly misplaced considering the gallery of war criminals peopling the pages of *Human Smoke*, on the other Pollit's comment hits the right target of this whole diatribe: the unwillingness to concede that, as Baker has put it, "the Pword" may be used "in any positive way [...] especially in connection with the Second World War."¹⁴

I realize that at this point the discussion would seem to revolve around the merit (or demerit) of what is, by his own admission, Baker's tentative historical argument.¹⁵ Since I am not a historian of the Second World War, I would have little to contribute to this debate. But before finally suggesting why *Human Smoke* and the controversy that surrounds it, may be relevant to postmemory, understood as an imaginative practice in need of constant renegotiations and recalibrations, let me say that much as we may remain unconvinced by Baker's ideas, the book's insistence on the fact that—as Pollit herself acknowledges—"neither Roosevelt nor Churchill did a thing to prevent the Holocaust" is certainly praiseworthy.¹⁶ That the US State Department actually

¹⁴ Baker, "Why I'm a Pacifist," p. 748.

¹⁵ "[P]acifists opposed the counterproductive barbarity of the Allied bombing campaign, and they offered positive proposals to save the Jews: create safe havens, call an armistice, negotiate a peace that would guarantee the passage of refugees. We should have tried. If the armistice plan failed, then it failed. We could always have resumed the battle. Not trying leaves us culpable." Baker, "Why I'm a Pacifist," p. 754.

¹⁶ In this essay, as in many of the other ones appearing in *Past (Im)Perfect Continuous. Trans-Cultural Articulations of the Postmemory of WWII*, ed. Alice Balestrino, (Roma: Sapienza Università Editrice, 2021)—where this piece was originally published—the term "postmemory" is used in a much looser sense than how it was originally conceived by Marianne Hirsch. Rather than focusing on how individuals imagine, and re-member, traumatic experiences lived by their forefathers, I concentrate on how writers, activists, and politicians understand, shape, and rhetorically deploy the legacy of the war for what are eminently public purposes. Hirsch writes that "Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (Marianne Hirsch, "Postmemories in Exile Author(s)," *Poetics Today*, 17, No. 4 [Winter 1996], p. 662). One may argue that, though its nature is different, and differently motivated, also what we might wish to call historical-cultural-political postmemory is sustained by "imaginative investment and creation" and as such is always tempted to rewrite past events to bring them in line with some contemporary script. I don't think this is a practice that can be avoided, as long as the rewriting concerns the meaning and the political-cultural value of facts, not their actual occurrence nor the reasons why they took place, when such reasons have been

refused to grant visas for Jewish refugees, may not be news for people well versed in World War Two history but is something not to be forgotten if we wish to resist—as personally I think we should—what Baker calls “the dangerous myth of the good war.”

There is no doubt that the memory of World War Two is currently being threatened by the rise of far-right populism. This dangerous mix of nationalism, sexism and hatred of foreigners, and especially “dark” migrants, has taken in some European countries a distinct polemical tone vis-à-vis the legacy of the Second World War. One need only think of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán condoning the commemorations of Miklos Horthy and Jozsef Nyiro: the first, the Admiral who ruled Hungary between 1920 and 1944, and was an ally of Nazi Germany; the second, a raging anti-Semitic writer and supporter of the Hungarian fascist party. Equally shocking are some remarks on their countries’ respective Nazi and Fascist past that have come from the *German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)* and the Italian *Lega*. One of the *AfD* party leaders, Alexander Gauland, “during the election campaign, in Sept. 2017 [...] gave a speech in which he said that ‘no other people have been so clearly presented with a false past as the Germans.’ Gauland called for ‘the past to be returned to the people of Germany,’ by which he meant a past in which Germans were free to be ‘proud of the accomplishments of our soldiers in both world wars’.” More recently, *AfD* lawmakers “staged a walk out from the Bavarian parliament during a service to remember Holocaust victims” after their party had been accused of playing down the criminal record of Germany’s Nazi past.¹⁷ Meanwhile in Italy, the *Lega*’s leader Matteo Salvini is on record for publicly declaring that while such things as the Fascist racial laws were “crazy,” “many things were done in the Fascist period, such as the introduction of the pension system and the

ascertained with a reasonable degree of objectivity. By calling attention to pacifist resistance to the war, this essay is a modest attempt to complicate the moral and political lessons to be drawn by the war today.

¹⁷ Jason Stanley, “Germany’s Nazi Past Is Still Present,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/10/opinion/germanys-nazipast-is-still-present.html>; Tom Batchelor, “German far-right AfD MPs stage mass walkout during Holocaust memorial service,” *The Independent*, January 25, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/germanyafd-ministers-holocaust-alternative-parliament-walkout-nazischarlotte-knobloch-a8744256.html>.

reclamation of marshland areas."¹⁸ Perhaps the most troubling of these revisionist moves, is the outrageous Polish law that criminalizes any mention of Poles as "being responsible or complicit in the Nazi crimes committed by the Third German Reich."¹⁹

However, the odious revisionism of the far right is not the only way in which the memory of the immense human catastrophe of World War Two is smeared. As several political commentators have observed, and as no scholar has better and more convincingly argued than David Hoogland Noon, in his article "Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, the War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory," a questionable and often downright cynical use of World War Two analogies has been one of the chief propaganda instruments employed by the George W. Bush administration to sell the war on terrorism to the world's public opinion.²⁰ In fact, one may wish to add that Bush senior, at the time of the First Gulf War, was perhaps the first politician to deploy the "Good War" as a weapon useful to kick, along with Saddam Hussein's ass (Bush's own words), also the noxious "Vietnam syndrome" hindering the US army's role as global super-cop.²¹ Bush father and son have not been alone at playing this rhetorical game. At the time of the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, during Bill Clinton's presidency, Kosovars were compared to Jews, and Milosevic was renamed Hitlerovic.²² As the historian Marilyn Young put it,

¹⁸ "Lot done during Fascism - Salvini (2)," *Ansa English Editions*, January 26, 2018, http://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2018/01/26/lot-doneduring-fascism-salvini-2_35c4bc64-3906-4378-876f-3cf9198fb774.html.

¹⁹ Tara John, "Poland Just Passed a Holocaust Bill That Is Causing Outrage. Here's What You Need to Know," *Time*, February 1, 2018, <http://time.com/5128341/poland-holocaust-law/>.

²⁰ David Hoogland Noon, "Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, the War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7, No. 3 (Fall 2004), pp. 339-364.

²¹ Terence Hunt, "Bush Says Saddam Would 'Get His Ass Kicked' in Gulf War," *AP*, December 21, 1990, <https://www.apnews.com/9338e3ea47dab10fc5ebc95072825d65>; E. J. Dionne, Jr., "Kicking the 'Vietnam Syndrome'," *The Washington Post*, March 4, 1991, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1991/03/04/kicking-the-vietnam-syndrome/b6180288-4b9e-4d5f-b303-befa2275524d/?utm_term=.28488f8ca913.

²² The analogies between World War Two and Kosovo are briefly analyzed in Jeffrey C. Alexander, "On the Social Construction of Moral Universals. The 'Holocaust' from War Crime to Trauma Drama," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, No. 1 (2002), pp. 46-49. His lengthy discussion of how the Holocaust has become instrumental in

"There are, it seems, only two kinds of war the United States can fight: World War II or Vietnam. Anything that can be made to look like World War II is OK."²³ World War Two analogies, however, have been employed also outside the US. In 1999, the then "Green" German minister Joschka Fischer "told the congress that Serbian repression of the Kosovars would be 'another Auschwitz'; anyone who opposed NATO intervention would thereby be responsible for a second holocaust. [...] Thus the German military's return to offensive warfare, explicitly outlawed by the Constitution because of Nazi war crimes, was legitimated through the moral exploitation of the very same."²⁴

In his already-mentioned *Independent* review of *Human Smoke*, Cesarani suspects "that Baker is really writing about Iraq. What we have here is 1933 viewed through the lens of 2003." And if Baker may have good reasons for feeling angry at the lies and manipulations that paved the way to the Allied attack on Iraq—which, in all likelihood, could have been avoided through diplomatic means, thus sparing tens of thousands of lives—he should have known better than apply retroactively this notion to an altogether different context, as "history is too serious a thing to be left to novelists." Cesarani, as a professional historian, has of course every right to defend his trade, even though even skeptical readers of Hayden White's work would probably be more

the construction of a new moral universalism, while valuable in its own right as a sociological analysis, seems to miss some of the intricate and often very contradictory political ramifications of the current rhetoric of human rights, with its corollary notion of "humanitarian warfare."

²³ Marilyn Young, "Will Iraq Be Vietnam or WWII?", *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 2003, www.historiansagainstawar.org/pressyoung.html.

²⁴ Joachim Jachnow, "What's Become of the German Greens," *New Left Review* 81 (May-June 2013), p. 97. J. C. Alexander, in a footnote of "On the Social Construction of Moral Universals" (p. 79n), quotes a *San Francisco Chronicle* article in which Germany's deputy foreign minister for US relations explained that if Germany was able to participate in the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia it was because the "68ers," that is the veterans of the student movement, "used to tell their elders, 'We will not stand by, as you did while minority rights are trampled and massacres take place.' Slobodan Milosevic gave them a chance to prove it." From this perspective, Germany's act of war would be an explicit repudiation of its Nazi past. But from Jachnow's perspective, the very opposite is true: by taking part in a military operation (which, by the way, took place in territories formerly devastated by the Wehrmacht) the German state contravened a law created precisely to prevent any type of offensive war. This may well be a paradigmatic example of how the memory and post-memory of World War Two become entangled in both individual and collective histories, and in the politics in which such histories are inevitably imbricated.

cautious in drawing clear-cut boundaries between the province of history and that of literature. At any rate, if on the one hand it might be argued that Baker ends up committing the same sin he deplores in others—that of mobilizing a selective memory of World War Two to pursue a political agenda—on the other we must honestly ask ourselves if anyone looking at the Second World War today, and especially anyone who was not a direct witness of those events, can really avoid seeing them through the lens of contemporary concerns. The question I raise is an epistemological, not an ontological one. It concerns the realm of interpretation, not whether certain facts occurred or not. No meaningful conversation about the issues under consideration can take place if one does not share a respect for what are the incontrovertible facts of the matter. So, I can understand some of Baker's readers irritation because the documents he quotes (none of which, however, is false) appear to insinuate that Franklin Delano Roosevelt goaded the Japanese into attacking the US fleet so that he could have the *casus belli* he needed to draw a reluctant country into yet another World War. This conspiratorial thesis is rejected by most historians, and with good reasons as far as I can tell, but to conclude from this that the US were not expecting to clash sooner or later with Japanese imperialism in order to defend their own imperial interests in the Far East, would seem to be equally misconceived. At any rate, these are disagreements that have to do with how we interpret certain facts, and to imagine that how we interpret the past may not be influenced by our beliefs about the present is simply chimerical.

There is hardly any question that, while researching and writing *Human Smoke*, Baker would have had the so-called War on Terror on his mind.²⁵ His *Harper's* essay gives explicit indication that this was, indeed, the case. There, he insistently laments US readiness to bomb any corner of the planet where things appear to take turns Washington disapproves of. From the First Gulf War and the bombing of Belgrade, to the endless, intermittent pounding of both Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention the havoc let loose in Libya, World War Two is routinely

²⁵ Or, for that matter, that his antipathy for the allied conduct of the war against Japan may well have been influenced by the legacy of the Vietnam War, a conflict that would show how—from at least the assault on the Philippines in 1898 during the Spanish-American war—US imperialism in the Far East was anything but an invention of Japanese war propaganda (though of course Japan used it to cover its own criminal imperialism in China and elsewhere).

invoked as "pacifism's great smoking counterexample." As Baker writes, "we" always have no choice but intervene—and bomb—"because look at World War II."²⁶ His book was certainly not the first one to call into question simple-minded, Manichean readings of World War Two, and thus debunk the myth of the "good war." Michael C. C. Adams' *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (1994), Michael Zezima's *Saving Private Power: The Hidden History of the Good War* (2000), Jacques Pauwels' *Le mythe de la bonne guerre* (2005), each in its own way, have raised serious questions not only about the Allied conduct of the war, but especially about the way the war has been memorialized to fit political agendas that usually contemplate the recourse to military force.²⁷ Of course, any criticism of how the Allies fought the war is likely to elicit *reductio ad hitlerum* counterarguments, as if questioning, say, the firebombing of German cities is tantamount to arguing that Hitler and Churchill were war criminals of the same ilk. They were not, and it strikes me as somewhat intellectually dishonest to argue that this is what Baker wishes to suggest.²⁸ The fact remains, however, that the fire-bombing of German cities was not only—objectively speaking—as savage an act of war as the Blitz, but that as a member of Churchill's cabinet observed as early as 1941, "[b]ombing does NOT affect German morale." On the other hand, as General Raymond Lee argued, it was good for "[t]he morale of the British people [...] if the bombing stopped, their spirit would immediately suffer" (434).

One may continue to believe that, notwithstanding Churchill's predilection for bombing—to quote Baker—"as a form of pedagogy—a way of enlightening city dwellers as to the hellishness of remote battlefields" (191)—and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's refusal to allow

²⁶ Baker, "Why I'm a Pacifist," p. 742.

²⁷ Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Michael Zezima, *Saving Private Power: The Hidden History of the Good War* (New York: Soft Skull, 2000); Jacques Pauwels, *Le mythe de la bonne guerre. Les Etats-Unis et la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale* (Bruxelles: Edition Aden, 2005).

²⁸ Tariq Ali's recent book, *Winston Churchill: His Times, His Crimes* (London: Verso, 2022), however, shows that there were indeed several instances in which the views of Churchill were very close if not identical to those of the German dictator. The crimes committed by these two figures are different in scale, but war crimes are war crimes, and they can and have been perpetrated both by dictators and democratically elected political leaders. A contemporary case in point is of course Israeli war criminal Benjamin Netanyahu.

Jewish refugees into the country, any comparison of the evils committed by the two sides is out of the question. Personally, I don't think our primary aim should be to compare evils—our moral imperative should be to tell the truth. And yes, all truths of course must be contextualized, but how else would we call fire-bombing a city, knowing you will kill thousands of civilians and provoke terror and endless human misery, if not a war crime? If one wishes to defend or in any case justify the destruction of Dresden, the firebombing of Tokyo, or the dropping of the Atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, one must be ready to argue that in some instances recourse to terrorism and criminal violence may be necessary—this is what implicitly Churchill himself admitted when he declared “that the Germans should be made to suffer in their homeland and cities something of the torments they have let loose upon their neighbors and upon the world” (358). The torments inflicted on Germany had to be equal to those the Nazis had visited on their enemies, and to be equal they had to be meted out in the same ruthless fashion. Again, I am no historian nor a military strategist but even assuming historians and strategists had all the right answers and they were able to offer decisive evidence that only by pursuing the war the ways the Allied did, the Third Reich could be defeated, I would still want to call a spade a spade.

In a way I can understand the anger of some reviews. To claim that pacifism was a viable alternative, or, worse still, to feel sympathy for those who, consistently with their beliefs, actively opposed the war effort by refusing even to serve in labor camps the way David Dillinger did, may be irritating to whomever thinks not only that the Axis could be defeated only by military force but also because—I suspect—it seems to imply that amid so much chaos and ambiguity one could preserve intact one's most deeply felt beliefs. What lies behind *Human Smoke's* hostile reviews, I think, is “fury” against would-be “Beautiful Souls” who did not wish to compromise their abstract love of non-violence. I don't think, however, that this is how people like Bayard Rustin, Don Benedict, David Dellinger, Rabbi Cronbach, or Milton Mayer saw themselves. These war resisters held a strong belief in the power of non-violence—they may have been mistaken, of course, but they sincerely believed lives could be saved not by looking the other way, but by *fighting in a different way*. As Baker writes summarizing Milton Mayer's argument, “we couldn't fight fascism by acting like animals—we could fight it only by trying to stay human” (150). In Mayer's own

words, "War is at once the essence and apotheosis, the beginning and the triumph, of Fascism."²⁹

Even though, unlike Mayer, we may feel that in those days war was the only way, we should never, I think, make the mistake of arguing that it was a "good" way. It may have been a necessary way but even if we don't like to admit it, I think Mayer was by and large right: to fight Fascism in several instances the "good guys" had to resort to the kind of savage warfare that also the Fascists practiced. That Etty Hillesum could write in her diary, on March 15, 1941, "It is the problem of our age: hatred of Germans poisons everyone's mind," is something that should give everyone pause. She certainly didn't mean to suggest that hatred of Jews was unimportant. What she meant was that "[i]ndiscriminate hatred is the worst thing there is. It is the sickness of the soul" (236). Perhaps there are extreme conditions under which most of us are forced to hate. Indeed, one may wish to observe that even Hillesum implicitly acknowledged that what made hate unbearable was its lack of discrimination—the fact that haters were not able to make distinctions between those who might have deserved to be hated and those who did not, or not to the same extent. In other words, in Hillesum's phrase, hate was the equivalent of the bombings (conducted by both the Allies and the Luftwaffe), which would not distinguish between military and civilian targets. Should we be "furious" at those like her, who resisted the spirit of the times and interrogated—not many years later, but in the thick of it—the sanity of the war? I cannot bring myself—I must admit that—to join with utter conviction Baker in declaring that pacifists "were right." But on the other hand, I also refuse to believe that they were certainly wrong, as many hostile reviewers of *Human Smoke* have either stated or implied. Most importantly, they were no armchair war resisters. Not only were they willing to go to jail to uphold their principles and follow their conscience. "They tried to save Jewish refugees, feed Europe, reconcile the United States and Japan," and they refused to give in to the barbarous common-sense of the day (474).

As the memory of the horrendous conflict that devastated the world inevitably gives way to postmemory, its legacy will continue to be intensely, and at times fiercely contested. It is hard to imagine that

²⁹ Milton S. Mayer, "I Think I'll Sit This One Out," in *We Who Dared Say No to War*, p. 187.

it could be otherwise. Hence, we will most likely continue to see the war invoked any time a “sanctifying touch” is needed to justify mostly US-led military interventions around the planet, while in some countries the effort to whitewash their participation in the horrors and slaughters of the war will be instrumental to the pursuit of xenophobic and authoritarian political agendas.³⁰ But there will be also other ways in which the moral capital of the war will be invoked. As I write these lines, activists engaged in saving the lives of immigrants who try to reach the shores of Europe are invoking a new Nuremberg against those politicians who, like Italian former deputy prime minister and minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini, have closed seaports to ships carrying refugees. Considering that many of the ships that are forced to go back end up returning migrants to Libyan detention camps—where, according to the UN, they are held “in horrific conditions,” and many end up dead, raped or otherwise abused—the analogy to the ways in which many western countries, and the US in particular, responded to the Jewish refugee crisis from the 1930’s onwards, seems legitimate.³¹ That is also why we need a book like Baker’s *Human Smoke*. Regardless of how convinced we might be of its overarching thesis, by resisting the myth of the “Good War,” far from belittling or excusing in any way the crimes of Nazi and Japanese imperialism, it insists that we should not forget the horrors which all participants in the war perpetrated. If, as my generation was taught, the ultimate legacy of World War Two was that war and violence are not the answer to political and social conflicts, wouldn’t it be absurd to forget the work done by those who preached this moral also *before* the catastrophe took place?

³⁰ Noon, “Operation Enduring Analogy,” p. 339.

³¹ See *United Nations Office of the High Commissioner. Human Rights*, “UN human rights chief: Suffering of migrants in Libya outrage to conscience of humanity,” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22393>

8. Against Embedded Literature.

Brian Turner's Iraq War Poetry

The US-led war in Afghanistan, and to a greater extent the second Iraq War, have by now both yielded a substantial literary output in the form of essays, poems, autobiographical narratives, short stories, and novels. Written for the most part by those who served in the conflict, many of these accounts are certainly interesting on a documentary as well as on a socio-cultural level, but often may leave a bit to be desired as literature (no matter how contested this term has become over the last decades).¹ A number of writers, however, have garnered positive reviews comparing them to classic war-literature authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Erich Maria Remarque, Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, Tim O'Brien, and even Homer. A short list of acclaimed fictional texts would include at least Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, the recipient of the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award and a finalist for the 2012 National Book Award; Phil Klay's *Redeployment*, the winner of the 2014 National Book Award (as well as of a number of other prizes); Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, the winner of the 2012 National Book Critics Circle Awards.² Also worth mentioning, is the satirical novel *Fobbit* by David Abrams, the recipient of a number of lesser prizes and, like *Billy Lynn*,

¹ For an interesting 'ethnographic' reading of some of the early texts on the new American wars, see Keith Brown and Catherine Lutz, "Grunt-lit: the participant-observers of empire," *American Ethnologist* 34, No. 2 (2007), pp. 322-28.

² Kevin Powers, *The Yellow Birds* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012); Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (New York: Penguin, 2014); Ben Fountain, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (New York: Ecco, 2012).

often hailed as the *Catch-22* of the War on Terror.³ Among the short story collections, the best so far is *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War*, a book endorsed by the late E. L. Doctorow as "necessary to write, necessary to read," according to the back cover of the 2013 edition.⁴ In the realm of verse, Brian Turner, described in a recent article as "a rock star" of contemporary poetry circles, seems to stand out as *the* Iraq War poet.⁵ His first collection, *Here, Bullet* (2005), sold more than twenty-five thousand copies, with his second volume, *Phantom Noise* (2010), also doing extremely well. His work has been compared to that of celebrated war poets like Wilfred Owen, Randall Jarrell, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Bruce Weigl.⁶

All the works I have just mentioned, as well as others, are undoubtedly interesting on different levels, and though many are debuts, they are for the most part the product of remarkable talent. However, a question one might wish to ask is how valuable these texts are as a record of American empire. What I mean by that is, quite simply, how much these much-praised writers help us in making sense of the US conduct toward 'foreign' peoples and their territories. As John Carlos Rowe has written,

³ David Abrams, *Fobbit* (New York: Black Cat, 2012).

⁴ *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War*, eds. Roy Scranton and Matt Gallagher (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2013).

⁵ James Gleason Bishop, "'We Should Know These People We Bury in the Earth': Brian Turner's Radical Message," *War, Literature, and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 22, No. 1 (2010), pp. 299-306.

⁶ I must add, however, that a great deal of war or, better, "anti-war" poetry has been written both before and after the US attack on Iraq. An excellent discussion of "The Reemergence of War Resistance Poetry" following George Bush's launching of the War on Terror can be found in Philip Metres, *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront since 1941* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), pp. 219-36. The work of poets opposed to the war acquired great media visibility when Sam Hamill and others refused Laura Bush's invitation to a White House Symposium on "Poetry and the American Voice." In record time, besides *Poets against the War*, ed. Sam Hamill (New York: Nation Books, 2003), three more anthologies appeared in 2013: *100 Poets against the War*, ed. Todd Swift (Cambridge, UK: Salt, 2003); *enough*, eds. Rick London and Leslie Scalapino (Oakland, CA: O Books, 2003); and *101 Poems against War*, eds. Matthew Hollis and Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2003). Metres' approach is nicely balanced, as he sees both the potential and the limitations of different poetry genres. For another interesting and useful discussion of both British and American poetry, see Saman Gupta, *Imagining Iraq: Literature in English and the Invasion of Iraq* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011), pp. 32-95.

modern imperialism has relied centrally on discursive and symbolic means to exercise, disguise, and justify its force. [...] The poet, novelist, and critic may have no powers to combat the troops called up to secure territories for the empire, but they certainly do have the ability to question the rhetoric of imperialism and educate their readers regarding the cultures and peoples subjugated.⁷

From this perspective, I submit, the literary representations of the war in Afghanistan and Iraq are often rather disappointing. In a series of articles appearing on the online journal *Jadaliyya*, the Arabist Elliott Colla and the Iraqi scholar and poet Sinaan Antoon have both suggested that most US literature on the Iraq war is best understood as "embedded literature."⁸ Colla argues that, as is the case with embedded journalism,

In the new war canon, the Iraq invasion and occupation again appear as almost exclusively American events. Again, Iraqis are largely absent from the frame. Again, torment and pain—and humanity—belong to US soldiers rather than Iraqi civilians. Again, the war and its rationale may be available for critique, but only in a very limited way. Like the failure of embedded journalism before it, the failure of embedded literature is one of imagination and research.

The article in which the statement I have just quoted appears is entitled "The Military-Literary Complex." The author himself admits that, "it may be an overstatement to call the new model of embedded literature a 'military-literary complex,' since much of the activity—especially vet activity—is independent, uncoordinated, and even dissident." Yet, Colla goes on to write, "there is evidence [...] of a strategy to make sure military stories have a privileged place on bookshelves. Commercial publishers are not passive actors in this story, for they are

⁷ John Carlos Rowe, *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 294.

⁸ Elliott Colla, "The Military-Literary Complex," *Jadaliyya*, July 8, 2014, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18384/the-military-literary-complex>; Sinaan Antoon, "Embedded Poetry: Iraq Through a Soldier's Binoculars," *Jadaliyya*, June 11, 2014, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18082/embedded-poetry_iraq_through-a-soldiers-binocular.

publishing and promoting military titles with regularity while consistently marginalizing war literature by Iraqi authors." One may object that the nationality of the writer is no guarantee that his or her text will provide a more comprehensive perspective. Perhaps the challenge for a writer is to write, in a sense, above the fray, so that, as Simone Weil wrote of Homer's *Iliad*, one would be hard pressed to decide whether the poet was Trojan or Greek, American or Iraqi. Therefore, while the marginalization of Iraqi and more generally non-US writers is certainly something that deserves sharp criticism, it is on the failure of imagination and research that Colla tracks in the work of US authors that I want to dwell for a few moments. I will do so by referring to the critical remarks that the afore-mentioned Iraqi writer Sinaan Antoon has directed at Brian Turner's first book, which he sees as an example par excellence of "embedded poetry." According to Antoon, *Here, Bullet*, "views Iraq and Iraqis from an observation post and through military binoculars. And whatever it sees is filtered through a version of the war's official narrative. The occupier is a victim trapped in a foreign landscape, fighting a war in an incomprehensible place." Even though Antoon acknowledges that Turner does not completely erase the suffering of Iraqi civilians, he insists that Turner's poetry participates in a narrative that "obfuscates the tragic reality that is Iraq and absolves the authors of the war of any responsibility." His article ends with three lapidary statements condemning Turner's "embedded" poetry:

The civilian victims are disappeared.

The soldiers are the victims.

Did the war wage itself?

The critical points Antoon raises in his brief but sharp review are important ones, and I cannot do justice to all of them here. Without altogether discounting the importance of his remarks, however, regarding the three final points he raises I must observe that:

- 1) Antoon himself writes in the article that Turner does not ignore altogether the sufferings of civilians;

- 2) it is hard to find any war literature that would not consider the soldiers themselves (beginning of course with those fighting on the author's side) as victims of the war. Of course, this is problematic insofar as soldiers are also agents of the war and presenting them only as victims may have the effect of turning war into an impersonal mechanism that, as Antoon suggests in his third point, has no cause outside itself. Yet, no one would deny that soldiers are also victims, both during and perhaps especially after the war—as witness the tragic fate of so many veterans of all wars. It is no accident that pacifist and anti-war literature has opposed the image of the beautiful, tough, masculine hero by calling attention to how war actually brutalizes soldiers.⁹

- 3) Most students of war literature would probably agree with Samuel Hynes' statement, in his influential *The Soldier's Tale*, that "why war" is not a question to which war stories either can or should provide an answer.¹⁰ Even though one may well resist this idea—I, for one, find it rather problematic—it is true that traditionally war literature, including much of what goes by the name of "anti-war" literature, is often vague when it comes to denouncing the causes of war.

What I am trying to say is not that Antoon's reservations on US war literature on Iraq in general, and on Turner in particular, are gratuitous. However, I do not think Antoon gives Turner enough credit for the ways in which he does attempt to look at Iraq by setting aside, so to speak, his binoculars. Turner's texts do belong in many ways in the soldier-poet tradition: he is a direct witness of both war's horrors and

⁹ The legitimate concern with the soldier as a victim of war, however, can easily feed into what Roy Scranton—a soldier, writer, and critic himself—has attacked as "the myth of the trauma hero." See "The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to 'Redeployment' and 'American Sniper.'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 25 January 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/trauma-hero-wilfred-owen-redeployment-american-sniper/>. Similar reservations on recent US war fiction can be found in Sam Sacks, "First-Person Shooters: What's Missing in Contemporary War Fiction," *Harper's Magazine*, August 2015, <http://harpers.org/archive/2015/08/first-person-shooters-2/>.

¹⁰ Samuel Hynes, *The Soldier's Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York: Penguin, 1997), pp. 11-12.

of soldiers' remarkable spirit of sacrifice. Yet, Turner's poetry is also animated by a sincere desire to produce a record of events open to the viewpoints, the culture, and the history of the people of Iraq. In this sense, I believe that Turner's outlook deserves to be identified as cosmopolitan, at least if by that term we mean, as Bruce Robbins has suggested, not an impossibly "neutral" perspective but, more realistically, "a striving to transcend partiality that is itself partial, but no more so than similar cognitive strivings of many diverse peoples."¹¹ As he has written more recently, cosmopolitanism may be an indispensable intellectual and political resource in confronting "the indifference, the ignorance, the lazy habits of backing one's own and of not thinking too much about the other side that maintain a sort of perpetual rehearsal for future military intervention while they also legitimate and enable ongoing ones."¹² If that is what we mean by cosmopolitanism, Turner's work—whatever its limitations and contradictions—is in my view a valuable effort to turn it into a poetic practice.

In the last chapter my *Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature*, I have focused mostly on the ways in which Turner contextualizes the US invasion of Iraq within a much-expanded historical, even pre-historical framework, thus intersecting the problematic notion of "deep time," as well as on the larger question of forgiveness.¹³ In the present essay, by looking briefly at a few poems I could not discuss in the book, I would like to concentrate on what rhetorical strategies Turner deploys in order to include 'the enemy' in his poetic discourse. In poems like "2,000 lbs.," or "16 Iraqi Policemen"—which point to the literally shattered lives of both occupiers and occupied—Turner shows how human beings from both sides are swept away by an impersonal force closely resembling the one Simone Weil, in the essay I referred to above, describes as a relentlessly destructive

¹¹ Bruce Robbins, "Comparative Cosmopolitanism," *Social Text* 31-32 (1992), p. 181.

¹² Bruce Robbins, *Perpetual War: Cosmopolitanism from the Viewpoint of Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 6.

¹³ Giorgio Mariani, *Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), pp. 199-215. By expanding enormously the historical context in which cultural forms may be understood, "deep time" (as employed for example by Wai-chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006]) opens up texts to new readings, but at the risk of overlooking the significant differences that mark specific historical and political settings.

power "before which man's flesh shrinks away."¹⁴ This is not to say that Turner tries to ease his guilt by always blaming a disembodied, cruel Fate. In "Caravan" (HB, 71), for example, the poet contrasts the boxes full of "millions of bullets" shipped to the Persian Gulf from the US, to the cardboard boxes full of body parts (which are of course the net result of a war fed by the constant supply of ammo) "which will not be taped and shipped / to the White House lawn." This may stop short of identifying the causes of war, but it does indicate that the war is not waging itself; that it is waged by political power.

Equanimity does not necessarily mean equidistance. In "Body Bags," Turner juxtaposes the cynicism and callousness of US soldiers to the rightful questions raised by the dead Iraqis:

who look as if they might roll over,
wake from a dream and question us
about the blood drying on their scalps,
the bullets lodged in the back of their skulls
[...]
and rise, wondering who these strangers are
who would kick their hard feet, saying
*Last call, motherfucker. Last call. (HB, 24)*¹⁵

Here one might well say that the poet is much closer to the Iraqi victims than he is to his own fellow soldiers. While the former pose a legitimate question, the latter have only insulting words. To the soldiers kicking the bodies of the dead enemies, this is their last call. The poet makes sure they will call again.

Turner's effort to offer us sympathetic and humanized portraits of both Iraqi combatants and civilians stops short, I think, of any

¹⁴ Brian Turner, *Here, Bullet* (Highgreen: Bloodaxe, 2005), pp. 51-4; 41. Further references are included parenthetically, following the abbreviation HB; Simone Weil, *The Iliad; or, The Poem of Force*, trans. Mary McCarthy (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1956), p. 11.

¹⁵ To insist that all combatants, no matter what side they are on, are in the end victimized by violence is (according to Simone Weil) to adopt a "Homeric" stance that does not necessarily entail ignoring the political responsibilities a given nation has in starting a war.

imaginative exploitation of an exoticized Other. The feelings Turner displays for the landscape, the people, the culture, and the history of Iraq is both full of admiration and regret. Turner is a poet but the member of an invading army too, and while he is never as merciless regarding the "enemy" as his comrades in "Body Bags," he knows his relationship with the Iraqi population cannot but be marked, for the most part, by ambivalence. As he writes in "What Every Soldier Should Know,"

There are men who earn eighty dollars
to attack you, five thousand to kill.

Small children who will play with you,
old men with their talk, women who offer chai—
and any one of them
may dance over your body tomorrow. (*HB*, 19-20)

Turner knows that, due to his relationship with Iraq being always mediated by war, his regard for the people and the environment is compromised by the surrounding violence and hatred as well. In the prose poem "Last Night's Dream," the speaker imagines making love to an Arabic-speaking woman and while at times the two seem to reach a perfect understanding ("In the dream she kisses Arabic into my skin and I understand every word of it"), the love-making bleeds into war-making:

In the dream her breasts become confused in my lips. I shoot an azimuth to her navel while her fingertips touch me with concussions, as if explosives rang through the nerves of my body, as if I am strung with wire, a huge receiver of UHF radio transmissions, frequency hopping with our tongues as we kiss and I slide into her with a sound of flashbang grenades that make her eyes cloud over in smoke from the heat of it. [...] In the dream our orgasm destroys a nation, it leaves thermite and gunpowder in the air above us, a crackling of radio static as we kiss on, long into the denouement of skin and fire, where medevac helicopters fly in the dark caverns of our lungs in search of the wounded, and we breathe them one to another, a deep rotorwash of pain and bandages. (*HB*, 65)

To my mind, rather than being an allegorical representation of the American rape of Iraq, this is a metaphorical rendering of how, given their surroundings, the two lovers are unable to leave war behind. After all, the poem is dedicated "to Ishtar," the Babylonian goddess of both love and war, a cross between Venus and Athena. War has colonized the lovers' minds, their souls, and their bodies. On the other hand, it has not extinguished their desire for love, for opening oneself to the Other.¹⁶

In her intelligent study of Turner's first collection, Stacy Peebles writes that

though Turner seems to enjoy taking Iraq in, he does so with respect [...] he watches, studies, considers, emphasizes. The clarity of his writing comes from the desire to cross boundaries between people, nations, and ways of seeing. Yet as the collection progresses, the viability of boundary crossing as a sustainable or even productive practice becomes increasingly suspect. Moments of clarity are inextricable from moments of destruction, and light that illuminates can also blind.¹⁷

The prose poem I just quoted provides a poignant example of the irresolvable tensions mentioned by Peebles. Another instance can be found in the contrasting images of the sun in the final lines of two consecutive poems, "R & R" and "Dreams from the Malaria Pills (Bosch)." In the former, the speaker, "all out of adrenaline, / all out of smoking incendiaries," imagines the future reunion with his lover back home, and in the closing lines sees "Birds that carry / all my bullets into the barrel of the sun" (*HB* 44). The image suggests a farewell to arms of sorts, with the sun mercifully accepting the speaker's ammunition. In the latter poem, however, the dream is incendiary and the sun, too, "rises up over the earth at dawn / like the opened mouth of a flamethrower, 140 degrees" (*HB*, 45).

¹⁶ I acknowledge, however, that the poem may be read also in more critical terms, with the language of war superimposed on the language of love precisely to signify rape. Judging from the response of the audience to two public discussions of this text, I would say that each reading has, roughly, a 50% rate of approval.

¹⁷ Stacy Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier's Experience in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 129.

It may well be true that *Here, Bullet* "ends on an unmistakable note of loss" —it would indeed be surprising if it were not so for a book that finds nothing redeeming in the violence of the war.¹⁸ Yet, even in a poem like "Night in Blue," where the poet admits to having "no words to speak of war / I never dug the graves in Talafar / I never held the mother crying in Ramadi," he does indeed have something, however small, however traumatic, to take back home:

I have only the shadows under the leaves
to take with me, the quiet of the desert,
the low fog of Balad, orange groves
with ice forming on the rinds of fruit.
I have a woman crying in my ear
late at night when the stars go dim,
moonlight and sand as resonance
of the dust of bones, and nothing more. (HB,70)

In an important passage of his book *Globalization and War*, Tarak Barkawi writes that "War involves interconnection between peoples and places, whether experienced by the soldiers actually fighting one another or by civilians on the home front following events from afar[...]. The enemy, in wartime and later on, is always constituted in and through meaning in ways that relate the self to the other. War produces cultural resources that can be used both to vilify the enemy and glorify the self, or to find common human ground between combatants."¹⁹ My contention is that Turner's poetry strives to take the latter route, and I would even go as far as saying that it provides some of the most humane, compassionate, and interesting pictures of the "enemy" and its environs to be found in the whole tradition of American war writing. In its best moments Turner's work projects what I would call a transnational imaginary where Iraqi as well as Americans are both, simultaneously, at home and exiled. In one of the poems from section I of *Here, Bullet*, "The ghosts of American soldiers / wander the streets of Balad by night / unsure of their way home" (HB, 28). In the erotic

¹⁸ Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck*, p. 132.

¹⁹ Tarak Barkawi, *Globalization and War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), p. 123.

prose-poem I quoted earlier, orgasm is seen as capable of destroying a nation, an ambiguous formulation given the poem's oscillation between the language of love and the rhetoric of war, but one with emancipatory potential, nonetheless. In another poem, from the book's final section IV, the speaker imagines providing his own personal answers to the routine questions posed by a radio operator concerning a medical evacuation procedure. To question number 8, regarding the patient's nationality, the speaker answers:

If they die here, what will it matter? The plains of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, this land of confluence and heat will become their nation, and even if they live, it will be theirs as well—the land that tested their souls and changed them. (*HB*, 69)

Here Turner may be said to rewrite J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's celebrated motto, *Ubi panis, ibi patria*, so as to read, *Ubi bellum, ibi patria*: war redefines the concepts of "home" and "nation" both internally and externally. The interconnection of Iraq and America generated by the war lives on in the soldier's memories and consciousness, thus giving rise to what may be described as a third imaginary space owned by neither nation. It is by no means a liberated or Utopian space, but it is a ground, I believe, where some meaningful reconciliation may take place.

Several of the poems in Turner's second collection, *Phantom Noise*, are devoted to a description of this transnational meeting ground, whose outlines, however, may be found also in texts from *Here, Bullet*. An exemplary one is "Katyusha Rockets," where the missiles shot by the Iraqi fighters are imagined as travelling so far away in both time and space so as "to land in the meridians of Divisadero Street," near the poet's home, during a veteran parade. The outside scene is the objective correlative of what goes on inside the speaker's mind:

Rockets often fall
in the night sky of the skull, down long avenues
of the brain's myelin sheathing, over synapses
and the rough structures of thought, they fall
into the hippocampus, into the seat of memory—

where lovers and strangers and old friends
 entertain themselves, unaware of the dangers
 headed their way, or that I will need to search
 among them. (HB, 43)

This no-nation's landscape of the mind hardly provides any idyllic reconciliation. It is not a pacified space, but one where dangers lurk nearly everywhere. Once the poet is back in the US the war remains a haunting presence, no matter how much one wishes to "improve" oneself and feel "at home" again.

In the tellingly entitled "At Lowe's Home Improvement Center," the speaker accidentally busts "a 50 pound box of double-headed nails" and he confuses them with "firing pins / from M-4s and M-16s." This incident triggers a series of war-related memories and the distance from "front" to "home" collapses as "Sheets of plywood drop with the airy breath / of mortars the moment they crack open / in shrapnel," and "Cash registers open and slide shut / with a sound of machine guns being charged" (HB, 15, 16). Likewise, in "Perimeter Watch" the poet gets ready for sleep and double-checks the bolts, "just to make sure," but through the venetian blinds he sees scenes from Iraq: water buffalos, prisoners of war, snipers, and, to boot, "it's difficult to tell the living / from the dead, walking the dim elephant grass, papyrus thickets / lining the asphalt streets. I see Bosch, my old rifleman, / sleepwalking—on fire and unaware of it" (HB, 27). These haunting images are part of what, in the poem that provides the title for Turner's second book, the poet describes as "phantom noise"—"this ringing hum this / bullet-borne language ringing / shell-fall and static."²⁰ Unpleasant as they undoubtedly are, drenched with images of death, suffering, and the poet's own guilt, these memories convey what I think must be described as a moral imperative. Thus, "Perimeter Watch" does not end with the speaker's attempt to barricade himself inside his home but, on the contrary, with an invitation to welcome those outside, no matter how unsettling their company may turn out to be:

²⁰ Brian Turner, *Phantom Noise* (Highgreen: Bloodaxe, 2010), p. 38. Further references are indicated parenthetically, after the abbreviation PN.

When I dial 911,
 the operator tells me to use proper radio procedure,
 reminding me that my call sign is Ghost 1-3 Alpha,
 and that it's time, long past time, to unlock the door
 and let these people in. (PN, 38)

Also in "Illumination Rounds" the scene is suspended between feelings of culpability, anxiety, and a desire to find a way to accommodate the ghostly remnants of war haunting the poet's dreams:

Parachute Flares drift in the burn time
 of dream, their canopies deployed
 in the sky above our bed. My lover

 sleeps as Iraqi translators shuffle
 in through the doorway—visiting
 as loved ones might visit a hospital room,
 ill at ease, each of them holding
 their sawn-off heads in hand. (PN, 29)

In what is both an act of mercy and perhaps a futile attempt to bury all his unpleasant memories, the speaker starts digging in his backyard. "We need to help them, if only with a coffin," he explains to his lover when she finds him "shoveling / the grassy turf." Yet, after staring at the "blurry figures,"

[...] with a gentle hand
 [she] stays the shovel I hold, to say—
We should invite them into our home.
We should learn their names, their history.
We should know these people
we bury in the earth. (PN, 30)

These words are uttered in a dream; they express a wish that may not be easily realized in real life. As Turner has stated in one of his

"Home Fires" entries for the *New York Times*, he is aware of the difficulties and the pain entailed in his choice, but he also believes that this is the only ethical thing he (and, ideally, all of America) should do: "If we learn who the dead are and what they were like, if we allow the dead their own unique humanity, we risk the possibility of being overwhelmed by loss. I believe that, as a country which has initiated war, we have no right to do otherwise."²¹

In both *Here, Bullet* and *Phantom Noise*, I could not find a single poem where the word "peace" appears. Turner mentions love, refers to hearts breaking and people crying, writes some beautiful lines about his and other people's desire for a clean break from a world at war. One might then say that "peace" is actually very much on the poet's mind, despite its nominal absence. Yet, the poems in which some momentary stay against the cruelty and confusion of war is achieved are rare and, for the most part, they project a longing for peace of mind and soul that is factually unavailable. In "Elephant Grass," for example, Turner describes a local woman who, done with her domestic duties, as the moon rises over Mosul finally finds relief in bathing in the river

where she undresses, loosening her hejab
and laying it down, easing her body
out into the dark water, cooling her
better than she ever imagined it would (*HB*, 29).

As Peebles correctly notes, despite the sensuality of the language, "The image here is less one of eroticization than it is of envy. How nice it must be, he [the poet] reflects, to put away the clothes that make us who we are, and find shelter in the consuming darkness."²² On the other hand—and this should not be taken in any way as a condemnation of the poem on my part—we might want to add that here, in order to envy the woman, Turner must first imaginatively appropriate her as a woman who would find bathing a truly alleviating experience,

²¹ Brian Turner, "Verses in Wartime (Part 2: From the Home Front)," *New York Times*, October 24, 2007, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/10/24/verses-in-war-time-part-2-from-the-home-front>.

²² Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck*, p. 123.

something that anyone familiar with the endemic, endless fighting that went on in Mosul since the invasion would probably see as at best a pious wish. Whether describing the Iraqi or the US terrain, Turner projects a world that has trouble finding the peace it needs and partly longs for.²³ To quote from Carolyn Forché's blurb for *Phantom Noise*, "Flashbacks explode the daily hell of Baghdad into the streets and malls of peaceful California, at the same time sending Turner's imagination reeling back to Iraq." As Tom Engelhardt, among others, has eloquently argued, the US is a war state. It should come as no surprise that for many of the soldiers who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the war does not end once they return home, nor does the violence, especially if we consider the rate of suicides among the War-on-Terror veterans, or the violence they unleash onto others.²⁴ Vis-à-vis this "forever war" (as Dexter Filkins has aptly renamed the so-called War on Terror), Turner's evocation of a "third space" beyond the nation, and beyond the clutches of empire and embedded language—whatever its aesthetic and ideological imperfections—is an important act of poetic and political resistance.²⁵

²³ In a piece published on March 17, 2008, five years after the invasion of Iraq, Renee Montagne and Lourdes Garcia-Navarro noted how "perhaps no place is more emblematic of the war than the northern city of Mosul. The fighting in Iraq's third-largest city seems to just go on and on. The US military takes part of the city only to lose it again. Insurgents move out, then they come back in." *National Public Radio*, <http://www.npr.org/2008/03/17/88336442/mosul-and-the-fight-for-iraq>.

²⁴ Tom Engelhardt, *The American Way of War: How Bush's Wars Became Obama's* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2010). As of early June 2012, there had been 154 suicides among active-duty troops since the beginning of the year, which means nearly one suicide per day. This represents an 18 per cent increase over the rates of suicides for the same period in the previous year (see Timothy Williams, "Suicides Outpacing War Deaths for Troops," *New York Times*, June 8, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/09/us/suicides-eclipse-war-deaths-for-us-troops.html?_r=0. Williams). On the high number of veterans who perpetrate domestic violence or engage in other kinds of criminal behavior, see "Veterans and Criminal Justice," *Swords to Plowshares*, 2011, <http://www.swords-to-plowshares.org/wp-content/uploads/Veterans-and-Criminal-Justice-Literature-Review.pdf>.

²⁵ Dexter Filkins, *The Forever War* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

9. War, Poetry, and the Noir.

Elliott Colla's *Baghdad Central*

Poetry and noir in Iraq

In one of the several flashbacks that punctuate Elliott Colla's *Baghdad Central*, a noir novel set in US-occupied Iraq during the two weeks preceding the capture of Saddam Hussein, we learn of a memorable school incident in the life of protagonist Muhsin al-Khafaji, the chain-smoking, Scotch-drinking Iraqi Inspector forced by circumstances to collaborate with the Americans in setting up a new, Baathist-purged police force. During a poetry class, the teacher copies on the blackboard a few lines from what he introduces to his pupils as "Ibn al-Rumi's masterpiece on the devastation of war." In this poem—the teacher goes on to explain—al-Rumi describes "how the Zanj laid waste to the great city of Basra [...]. Now, you will notice there is a tension between the beautiful imagery of the lines and the ugliness of the subject matter—which is death and destruction." These are the lines the teacher transcribes:

*Exchanged, those palaces, for mounds and hills
Of ash and piles of dirt.
Fire and flood are lorded upon them
And their columns collapsed into nothingness.*¹

¹ Elliott Colla, *Baghdad Central* (London: Bitter Lemon Press, 2014), p. 119. Further references will be cited parenthetically.

Young Muhsin cannot resist correcting his teacher. The last words of the final line cannot be *into nothingness*. They are *into total ruin*, and when the teacher checks the book and pronounces Muhsin wrong, the latter objects that the text must be incorrect because *into nothingness* doesn't fit the meter. "[I]t doesn't scan, sir. It's the light meter, correct? Listen'. As Muhsin read the words back to the class, the mistake in the textbook showed itself. 'Total ruin doesn't only make more sense in the context of the meaning, it actually fits the meter in this case. Sir. And this is a central part of the tension of the poem—using the light meter to talk about such a heavy event'" (120). While in the case at hand his zeal earns cadet Muhsin an invitation to report to the Director's office, his ear (and eye) for rhythm and meter—or, to put it differently—his talent for spotting patterns and structural frames amidst apparent disorder, will prove, for better and for worse, perhaps his most important professional asset.

I begin by focusing on this minor episode because it seems to me that here the author's intention is to raise, in an oblique but unmistakable way, the question of whether the literary form he has chosen for his narrative is adequate to represent and interrogate the butchery of the Iraq War. At stake here is not so much what Paul Fussell has described in his influential *The Great War and Modern Memory* as "the collision between events and the language available—or thought appropriate—to describe them".² By recoding what his teacher approaches in more rarified aesthetic terms as a contrast between beauty and ugliness, as one between lightness and heaviness, Muhsin not only shifts the discussion from matters of content to issues of form; he also bypasses what is the focus of Fussell's remarks—that is, the alleged incommunicability of the war experience. In Muhsin's reading of al-Rumi's poetry, it is precisely because the "light meter" may seem inappropriate to measure the fact of war, that we are—by contrast—in a better position to appreciate the brutality and savagery of armed conflict. If we now apply this line of reasoning to Colla's own novel, we need to ask to what extent his choice of noir—regardless of whether one considers it a genre, a style, a mood, or a set of themes and images—may be not only morally appropriate but also effective in trying to capture something important about the Iraq War. One might object

² Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 169.

that the analogy with al-Rumi's poetic form is a bit strained, as it would be hard to think of noir as a "light" form. But is it, really? Isn't noir, both as cinema and literature, an extremely popular form, with roots in pulp fiction and hard-boiled detective stories, and therefore 'light' in the sense of being an easily recognizable and by now immensely successful narrative convention? More importantly, traditionally the noir thriller sets a resilient and tough individual adrift in a confused, degraded, corrupt world, which he must navigate knowing all along that there is no reliable map he can count on. Surrounded by darkness, alienation, meanness, noir heroes are asked to reconstitute order—an impossible task, to be sure, but also an inescapable one.

As Robert Porfirio has put it, "[t]he preexistential world of the classical detective was ordered and meaningful; social aberrations were temporary and quickly righted through the detective's superior powers of deductive reasoning [...]. The hard-boiled writers replaced this with a corrupt, chaotic world where the detective's greatest asset was the sheer ability to survive with a shred of dignity".³ Concurring with Porfirio, Jerold J. Abrams has more recently reframed this point in a cartographic vein, by writing that "whereas the maze of the classic detective form represents a mannerist maze (with an escape), the maze of the noir detective form is a rhizomatic maze (without an escape)".⁴ In the modern waste land of the noir, and even more so in the post-modern, "mapless" urban spaces of what several critics describe as neo-noir, social aberrations are neither temporary nor rightable.⁵ The best the hero can achieve under these conditions is a Frostian "momentary stay against confusion". Muhsin al-Khafaji's fate is no different. His impotence and frustration epitomize in several ways the conditions of war-ravaged, violence-ridden, socially disintegrated Iraq. His own (partly private, partly official) investigation—his search for a meaningful pattern that may help him understand what happened to his missing niece Sawsan, and to the mysterious Zahra Boustani—can thus be apprehended allegorically as an attempt to restore some order,

³ As quoted in Jerold J. Abrams, *From Sherlock Holmes to the Hard-Boiled Detective in Film Noir*, in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), pp. 74-75.

⁴ Abrams, *From Sherlock Holmes to the Hard-Boiled Detective*, p. 74.

⁵ See Daniela Daniele, *Città senza mappa: paesaggi urbani e racconto postmoderno in America*, (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 1994).

some small sense of measure in the moral chaos and cacophony of a world that has precipitated, indeed, into total ruin.

Poetry is not only a constant refrain—the novel's musical score, as it were—in Colla's novel. It is also often referred to precisely as a synonym for form. When mid-way through the narrative we become privy to Muhsin's dark past as an intelligence agent for Saddam's regime, we learn that his superiors in the Directorate

had wanted him to read files quickly. But he showed them that he also knew how to read closely. Creatively. He could make an autopsy look like a birth certificate. If he had enough reports, he could make dead informants talk for years. Read them like a poem, he used to say. Study them. Learn to see their rhythms. Look for the deeper structures. If you weren't reading for the patterns underneath, you weren't reading at all [...]. He was only good behind a desk, he was happiest there. Looking for missing feet and broken rhymes. Looking for poetry. (199)

His close-reading skills continue to serve him comparatively well also now, when he must work under a different master. Mistaken for a high-ranking official of the crumbled regime—a namesake the Americans have dubbed The Three of Diamonds—and therefore mercilessly beaten in Abu Ghraib, Muhsin is offered a way out if he accepts to become a collaborator. The US-led provisional government has realized that it was a severe case of poor judgment to disband, along with the Iraqi army, also the civilian police. Muhsin will have to sift through dozens of files of former policemen to see which ones, at least in principle, may be called back on the force. He agrees on condition that his daughter Mrouj—who has long been suffering from kidney failure, a medical condition made nearly lethal due to the sanctions imposed on Saddam's Iraq—may be finally treated. And so, there he is, at his desk in the privileged Green Zone, reading "files closely, as if they were lines of poetry. He looks for meter and rhyme, then for missing feet and broken sounds" (203).⁶ This Muhsin does more willingly when is asked by his American boss Hank Citrone to take up a new assignment. Zahra Boustani, a beautiful young woman—"one of the first

⁶ As noted by Henry Peck, the name Hank Citrone is a clear throwback to *The Third Man's* Harry Lime. See Henry Peck, "Elliott Colla: Grays in the Emerald City," *Guernica*, August 15, 2014, <https://www.guernicamag.com/grays-in-the-emerald-city/>.

'terps' we hired" – has gone missing and the former inspector is asked to spend some time ("a couple of days [...] maximum") to see if he can find out what happened (129). Not that Hank has any illusions of finding the woman alive, but he thinks it will ease the anxiety of the other "terps" to know someone is on the case. Muhsin Khafaji has his own reasons for being interested in all this. Sawsan, the daughter of his dead wife's brother Nidal, also young and beautiful, and a recent university graduate, has disappeared too, and Muhsin begins to wonder whether the two events are connected.

One may be inclined to think, at this point, that the novel constructs the poetic imagination, with its rhythms and rhymes, as a bulwark against the confusion and the unreadability of a war-torn country, but we should be wary of assigning to poetry only lofty aesthetic and ethical features. The poetic-investigative skills Khafaji displays in what seems now a worthy cause, are the same ones that in the past won him the commendation of the Party for his work against opposition networks. The poetry-loving inspector has blood on his hands, and though he thinks of it as "the only year of his life he wished he had never lived" (190), we learn that in 1987 he actively participated in the forced 'relocations' of peoples in northern Iraq and the genocidal campaign against the Kurds. In his acknowledgments, Colla himself clarifies that

There are many places where poetry plays a key public role. But perhaps it is only in Iraq that the public repertoire of poetry includes modernist, often experimental verse. Statues of poets are urban landmarks in Baghdad, Basra and Najaf, giving names to prominent public squares and the neighborhoods around them. In contemporary Iraq, Shiite religious parties routinely sponsor poetry performances just as the Baathist regime once did, and before them the Communist Party and the Hashemite court. Even when composed as lines on the page, Iraqi poetry is never silent. Entire poems are memorized and debated, individual lines are relished and used in everyday speech. To educated Iraqis, none of the poets in Khafaji's mind would be unknown. In fact, many of them are household names. (331)

Poetry is an integral part of the national conversation in Iraq, a key language of the public sphere. As such, it may work both against power and to support power. Poetry as such is not a value: there is good poetry and bad poetry, poetry put to a good use – like the poetry

Mrouj and her father share during his hospital visits—and the bad poetry of Michel Aflaq, "[t]he great Baathist intellectual [...] who insisted that politics be composed as poetry, and who ruined both in the process" (218). Aflaq's 'poetry,' far from being a refuge from violence, is complicit with the brutality of the regime, and though Khafaji has hardly anything positive to say about a philosopher "no one would ever read unless the Party made them," this serves as another reminder that, no matter how genuine and intelligent a poetry lover Muhsin is, he too went along with whatever the Party made him do.

The fact that even the arts were put to the service of the late regime is of course not surprising. More importantly, it is in keeping with the moral tone of much of the narrative, and with the choice of noir as a storytelling strategy to represent Iraq in the post "mission accomplished" phase. Elliott Colla himself has stated this much, in a lengthy interview with Henry Peck for the online magazine *Guernica*.

The novel is really interested in a moment of ambiguity. Setting it in the fall of 2003 is not an accident; this is a moment that is important for us to return to, and this is what the book is asking us to do. To go back to the moment where the clarity of war, and the sharp divisions between us and them, good and evil, lovers of freedom and Baath Party, break down. And they break down precisely because the US has gotten itself into a situation of military occupation where in order to rule and to occupy it has to deal with the people it has just spent all this effort to demonize.

This is why it's so suitable for the book to be in the noir genre—it has to do with the actual murkiness of a situation. Noir is where the clarity of moral divisions break down, the black and whites turn into grays. So as I was thinking about this particular moment of compromise on the part of the US, where it was learning how to make alliances with all sorts of Shiite groups in order to occupy, and creating all sorts of new divisions that didn't exist before. Just as certain Cold War binaries were collapsing, new binaries of Sunni versus Shia or Arab versus Kurd were being created by the new occupation force. It's the corruption of that moment that I am really interested in.⁷

Colla is of course right to call attention to the miscalculations, contradictions, and the overall perverse logic of the American assault on Iraq, but here what I am most interested in, are the remarks on his

⁷ Henry Peck, *Elliott Colla: Grays in the Emerald City*.

storytelling choice. Faced with a world in ruins, a world that has lost its former shape without morphing into a stable new one, Colla sees noir as providing a way to accommodate the formlessness of a shifting and shifty social condition. "[M]oral ambiguity: murky distinctions between good guys and bad guys, ambivalence about right and wrong, conflicts between law and morality, unsettling inversions of values, and so on."⁸ This is a standard definition of noir, but these words could be equally applied, not only to post-invasion Iraq, but to the whole debate that took place *before* the invasion, as the Bush administration tried to sell the attack on Saddam's regime as a sort of miniature "good war" that would lead to a "good occupation" destined to bring democracy to Iraq, in a repetition of the pedagogical occupations of post-World War II Germany and Japan.⁹ Conflicts between (international) law and morality were raging well before the first US grunts set their boots on Iraqi territory, and when they did so, it was in explicit violation of UN recommendations. What gives even the heated pre-war discussions a noir flavor, as it were, is the fact that virtually no one, at least outside Iraq, wished to deny that Saddam was indeed a very bad guy. What opponents of the war argued, was simply that to go to war against a bad guy did not make you automatically a good guy, and that waging war was not the best way to restore order and morality to a country already devastated by previous wars, by a bloody dictatorship, and by sanctions that in the end may have killed more people than the grotesque dictator himself. To stick to a literary terminology one might well say that while Bush, Blair, and their acolytes, tried to narrate the war as a World War Two movie, or perhaps, even better, as a Western, drawing up a scenario of, indeed, "sharp divisions between us and them, good and evil," the anti-war movement responded by calling attention to the noir features of a situation in which there was no such clarity, many supposedly "good guys" were actually no better than the "bad guys," and the violence of war—far from bringing, in classical Western-style, peace and order to a town threatened by thugs and bandits—would bring more violence to a region already ridden with endemic ethnic, social, and political conflicts, many of

⁸ Aeon J. Skoble, "Moral Clarity and Practical Reason in Film Noir," in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, p. 41.

⁹ See Susan L. Carruthers, *The Good Occupation: American Soldiers and the Hazards of Peace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

which actually fueled by long-standing colonial and neo-colonial policies.

There is another important reason why the noir formula has served Colla so well. An Arabist and Comparative Literature professor at Georgetown, Colla is on record for raising in the journal *Jadaliyya* some significant critical questions on the developing canon of Iraq and Afghanistan war literature. Colla warned about the dangers of an "embedded literature," sustained by what he identified as a state-sponsored "military-literary complex," in which the "enemy"—not only the combatants, but most significantly the civilians—was virtually disappeared or cast in largely stereotyped roles as either terrorist, victim, or mediator (the "terp"), and by and large systematically denied an autonomous point of view. Even novels and stories more or less openly opposed to the invasion—as not only Colla, but other critics have also argued—seemed interested in criticizing the war mostly by turning the US soldiers into victims of a disembodied fate. Most importantly, American authors, Colla complained, hardly tried to imagine what the war would look like if seen through Iraqi eyes.¹⁰ Once Colla made up his mind to write a novel about Iraq, it is hardly surprising that he would have chosen to do what he lamented others had not dared: create a novel not only with an Iraqi protagonist but one where American characters would play pretty much secondary roles.

By choosing the noir form, Colla circumvented the pitfalls of traditional counternarratives like, say, the so-called revisionist Western, in which Native Americans are often romanticized and paradoxically re-colonized by the white imagination as sheer victims. Colla wanted in his story not only fully human Iraqi characters, but characters who could speak to the tragic and contradictory history of the nation. In literary noir, Lee Horsley argues, "it is the creation of the protagonist that is of paramount importance [...]. [W]hether the narrative is first- or third-person, it is kept close to the mind of the character who is immersed in the action and struggling to make sense of what is happening. The noir narrative is frequently focused through the mind of a single character who is bemused or disingenuous; it ironises his evasions and disguises; it calls into question his judgements; it foregrounds the

¹⁰ Elliot Colla, "Still in Bed," *Jadaliyya*, June 13, 2014, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/30818/Still-in-Bed>.

difficulties of interpreting a mendacious society."¹¹ Muhsin Khafaji fits the bill, and by focusing on his often inadequate though unflagging attempts to arrive at some kind of clarification, the narrative constructs his search for order as both heroic and futile, necessary and doomed to fail.

Moreover, if you want your protagonist to be a morally ambivalent figure himself, the noir provides a useful blueprint. Widowed, with a sick daughter, evicted from his home, abandoned by his relatives, savagely beaten by his American captors in Abu Ghraib, and a poetry lover, too, former inspector Khafaji initially stands out as a likable underdog. But as we delve into the novel, we quickly understand that far from being a "neither tarnished nor afraid" Chandlerian hero, he has a past as a Baathist war criminal.¹² Perhaps he was a reluctant one, as I hinted above, but one might well say that in Khafaji's case distinctions between the investigator and the criminal are not only blurred. He is, or at least he has been, both a criminal and an investigator. More than to Chandler's proverbial "knight/crusader," Khafaji seems closer to the dubious morality of a Sam Spade. Indeed, just as "it is only in the final pages of *The Maltese Falcon* that we discover the full deviousness of Spade's character," it is only in the latter part of *Baghdad Central* that we learn the enormity of Khafaji's past conduct.¹³

Shapes of violence

If noir is a form apt to accommodate the ambiguity and corruption of post-invasion Iraq, I would submit that it also provides a useful narrative style to deal with the various shapes of violence of the moment. Traditional American war stories about Iraq are of course filled with violence, but it is a violence largely perceived through the US soldier's perspective. This is by no means to say that the work of writers such as Kevin Powers, Phil Klay, or Matthew Gallagher, naively juxtaposes forms of 'good', supposedly defensive, violence, to the nasty, 'illegal'

¹¹ Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (London: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 21-22.

¹² Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, p. 1.

¹³ Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, p. 31.

violence of terrorists and insurgents.¹⁴ However, perhaps inevitably, violence continues to operate largely as a binary: "our" force is countered by "their" force. More significantly, perhaps, as Roy Scranton has argued in his critique of American literature's "trauma hero," violence translates into a "combat gnosticism" granting the soldier a unique and "mystical" access to an ultimate truth that others will never be able to understand.¹⁵ To appreciate the extent to which the noir offers Colla a more adequate narrative frame for dealing with the violence of what only superficially can be considered a post-war situation, I would like to refer to some observations animating a chapter of Franco Moretti's *Far Country*, where he offers a comparative analysis of the western and the noir film. According to Moretti, in the western, the hero's violence is always "defensive" and "self-controlled" and made legitimate by the fact that in the West there is no state yet. "The Western needs heroes, because it has no stable mechanism to enforce the law. The hero fills the void of the absent state—he is the state." With noir, however, things are different. "In film noir, the state is perfectly solid, and no one fears for the stability of the social system. There are plenty of transgressions, of course, but they are always local: Stanwyck [in *Double Indemnity*] is dangerous for her husband and a couple of lovers, not for everybody" (86).¹⁶

This may well be true of the classic noir film on which Moretti concentrates, but in the case of *Baghdad Central* things work in a rather different way. Not only is Iraq a failed state. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), besides enjoying a dubious legitimacy, never won any significant support from the local population and at any rate it

¹⁴ Kevin Powers, *The Yellow Birds* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012); Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (New York: Penguin, 2014); Matthew Gallagher, *Kaboom: Embracing the Suck in a Savage Little War* (Cambridge: DaCapo Press, 2010) and *Youngblood: A Novel* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2016). These are of course only a few of the US writers who have published on the Iraq War. For a more extensive discussion of the emerging canon of Iraq and Afghanistan war literature, see my "Gli scrittori e il 'complesso militare-letterario.' Un'introduzione alla letteratura americana sulle guerre del nuovo millennio, *Ácoma. Rivista internazionale di studi nord-americani*" 11 (2016), pp. 123-53.

¹⁵ Roy Scranton, "The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to *Redeployment* and *American Sniper*," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 25, 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/trauma-hero-wilfred-owen-redeployment-american-sniper/>.

¹⁶ Franco Moretti, *Far Country: Scenes from American Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), p. 86

largely lacked the infrastructure to function as a state proper. One could well argue, in fact, that in Colla's novel all violent transgressions are a danger for society at large and, moreover, that even the allegedly "legitimate" violence of the 'state' not only is undermining Iraq as a whole, but also operates in violation of its own official codes of conduct. This is of course the case with the interrogation techniques in places like Abu Ghraib, but it equally applies to the seedy prostitution ring Citrone supervises, an emblem of the nearly universal state of corruption to which Americans—to an extent almost inevitably, given the dynamics of the occupation—largely contribute. In sum, violence is not limited to "transgressors," because in the absence of a legitimate principle of authority, all violence is transgressive, and all apparently "local" conflicts constantly threaten to spill over into all-out civil war.

Let me quote from Horsley's fine study again: "noir plots turn on falsehoods, contradictions and misinterpretations, and the extent to which all discourse is flawed and duplicitous is a dominant theme".¹⁷ This applies to Colla's *Baghdad Central* as well, and this helps explain why any attempt to contain violence into some legitimate, acceptable form is doomed from the start. When no one can be trusted, when truth and falsehood are relative concepts, when no discourse can claim the moral high ground, and when violence or the threat of violence has spread across the entire social fabric, it is well-nigh impossible to distinguish between a legitimate and an illegitimate use of force. In this regard, another observation in Moretti's piece may be helpful to account for the nature of the plot Muhsin Khafaji—with his daughter's decisive help, as if to underscore that even his remarkable eye for "missing feet and broken rhymes" has its limitations—must uncover. In the Western, Moretti rightly claims that killing is somehow "definitive." "In the Western, killing [...] arose from the discovery of the fundamental conflict, and then—once the enemy was dead—the story was over, and the future could begin." On the contrary, "In the noir, killing is just the first step in a series of ever-shifting alliances dictated by the interest of the moment."¹⁸ To illustrate his point Moretti invokes, by way of contrast, Georg Simmel's *Sociological Significance of the Third Element*. In Simmel's view, "[t]he appearance of the third party indicates transition, conciliation, and abandonment of absolute contrasts." All

¹⁷ Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, p. 23.

¹⁸ Moretti, *Far Country*, p. 83.

true, Moretti glosses. "The Third can mediate, and act as an impartial referee; it stands for all sorts of institutions that mitigate conflicts and strengthen the social bond [...]. Just not in film noir. Here, the Third multiplies conflicts, endlessly postponing their resolution."¹⁹

The Third Element, in Colla's novel, is largely represented by people like Muhsin himself: by those "collaborators" whose task is, from the occupiers' viewpoint, precisely that of overcoming conflict and strengthening mutual trust. Needless to say, these figures are seen in a completely different light by the occupied. Collaboration with the enemy is not mediation but treason, and it is no accident that the insurgents' violence is aimed especially at those fellow Iraqis whose in-betweenness is perceived as itself an attack on the resistance. But of course, collaborators cannot entirely be trusted even by those who actively seek to increase their ranks. It is no accident that the case Khafaji investigates centers around what at first looks like a case of kidnapped interpreters. The old dictum *traduttore/traditore* applies with a vengeance in war-torn Iraq. Interpreters are considered traitors by the resistance and by all those who see the American forces as the new absolute rulers. In our case, however, the "terps" turn out to be double-crossing the Americans, first by pretending (with Citrone's help) to be translators when they actually cater to the 'rest and recreation' of male soldiers, and, second, by actually providing a cover-up for the resistance. In Mrouj's words, "The girls weren't interpreters. This [a collection of files Muhsin has inadvertently left on her bed during one of his visits] tells of a plot to overrun the Green Zone [...]. This woman [Zubeida] was running a ring. Only it wasn't a sex ring" (322). Rather than being agents of reconciliation, as in Simmel's sociology, these third elements are literally engaged in the multiplication of conflicts.

Writing about *Baghdad Central* in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Neve Gordon praises the novel for its "in-depth exploration of the psyche of the collaborator, and his or her key role in military occupation." Gordon argues that Colla's narrative calls attention to the fact that occupiers actually benefit from the ways in which "the culture of deception [...] corrodes the occupied society," because "[t]he resulting social disintegration is the kind favored by occupation forces—a divided

¹⁹ Moretti, *Far Country*, p. 82.

society is one that has trouble resisting." More importantly, perhaps, the novel also shows that

in the end, the deceptive and corrosive nature of military occupation also makes the US military vulnerable. To put it simply, a network of collaborators was created mostly by inexperienced agents who bought—using different means—the services of Iraqis. Colla shows that when the official policy is one of corruption, and there is no robust firewall to prevent it from recoiling, the agents may end up paying operatives who end up betraying and killing Americans. To use the same medical metaphor Petraeus's cronies deployed when describing the fight against insurgents, collaboration is like a contagious virus that ends up also infecting the occupier. The handlers become the handled.²⁰

Citrone believed he was using Zubeida for his own ends, when in fact he was being used by her. But things are even more complicated. For one thing, Zubeida is herself a pawn in the hands of a larger organization and when she claims to Khafaji, who has uncovered the sex plot (but is not yet in on the insurgent one) that she provides "work and protection to girls who need it" (243), she may not be lying, or not completely so, as the girls are a cover-up for the bases the resistance is trying to set up in the Green Zone, but they are also making money for themselves and their families. In fact, both Khafaji and Zubeida (with the latter sharing several traits of the femme fatal of the hard-boiled tradition) are Third figures who are being used by the people who trust them and, in their turn, try to profit from their privileged position to pursue their own individual agendas. They are not only linked by the fact that Zubeida turns out to have been the lover of Khafaji's brother, a literature professor at Oxford. They also share a love for files, archives, patterns, and organization. With the inspector, this is visible both in his love of poetry and in his investigative skills. In Zubeida's case, it is both part of her job as an academic teaching "courses on organizational structure"—for her, as Mrouj observes, "organization is everything"—and of her undercover work for the Iraqi resistance. The resemblances between hunter and hunted are of course standard fare

²⁰ Neve Gordon, "Talking about Collaborators," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, February 25, 2014, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/talking-collaborators/>

in most detective fiction. In our case they seem to raise the thorny question of whether, as a Third element—as a “local” occupying the interstices between two enemies—it is more moral—or amoral, if you will—to work for one side or for the other.

Morality, Ideology, Politics

To raise the question of the morality of the characters' behavior, is at one and the same time to raise the question of the ideology of the narrative form in which Colla has chosen to embed his representation of war-devastated, post-American invasion Iraq. In light of the fact that, as was noted earlier, Colla has been explicitly critical of the Iraq war stories most American authors have published, it does not seem unfair to ask in what ways the politics of his noir novel are an improvement over tales of “trauma heroes,” and their “loss of innocence.” It is of course true that Colla has managed to do what other authors have generally failed to accomplish—that is, write a novel in which Iraqis are the protagonists, and stand out as fully human subjects, as proverbial “round” characters endowed with E. M. Forster's “incalculability of life.”²¹ Though even a very sympathetic critic like Neve Gordon describes *Baghdad Central* as an Orientalist work, Colla has been generally praised for his avoidance of stereotypes and clichés. As another reviewer has put it, “Unlike many thrillers, there are no ‘good guys’ here, save perhaps Khafaji's daughter. There are few definitively ‘bad guys,’ either. Colla paints a nuanced landscape of a country at war, where each character is driven by a complex tangle of personal and nationalistic aims.”²² This is generally correct, though of course it always depends on what one means by “good” or “bad” guy. Muhsin Khafaji is not perceived by the reader as a thoroughly bad guy even once we have come to learn of his involvement in the crimes of Saddam's regime, because we sympathize with what he does to cure his daughter

²¹ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1927), p. 118.

²² India Stoughton, “A portrait of Iraq under occupation,” *The Daily Star. Lebanon*, February 21, 2014, <http://www1.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Books/2014/Feb -21/ 248118-a-portrait-of-iraq-under-occupation.ashx>

and, more generally, because the whole narrative unfolds from his viewpoint. Yet, he is someone who participated actively in a genocidal operation against the Kurds. Are we sure he deserves our sympathy more than Zubeida Rashid, who, one might argue, is fighting against a foreign occupation? Would she still look devious and dangerous if the story were told from her point of view? *Baghdad Central* is not simply filled with fully human characters, with flaws and limitations. The world of the novel is thoroughly and unmistakably noir in that, to repeat, the “hero” whose fate the reader follows with considerable sympathy and trepidation, is a former war criminal, a man who, with others, supervised operations in the infamous concentration camp of Topzawa.²³ Not that the Americans or other occupiers fare much better. They seem equally to blame for the indiscriminate violence of a war and an occupation that relies on corruption, deception, thuggery and the purchase of the locals’ support through a mix of threats and bribery.

According to Lee Horsley, “[a]n exploration of guilt is at the core of noir, and there can be no clear distinction between guilt and innocence. [...] Characters suffer either from failures of agency (powerlessness, immobilising uncertainty) or from loss of community (isolation, betrayal). Obsessed, alienated, vulnerable, pursued or paranoid, they struggle with fatality, suffering existential despair as they act out narratives that raise the question of whether they are making their own choices or following a course dictated by fate.”²⁴ These words, I think, can be applied well enough to Colla’s novel. Characters like Khafaji or Zubeida can be neither absolved for the violence to which they have contributed nor thoroughly condemned because of their limited agency. We are not sure how much of what they have done is their own responsibility or simply the outcome of irresistible external pressures. If we wish to see them, at least in part, as victims of fate, there is no question that the fate that conditions their lives is a man-made one. Saddam, Bush, the masterminds of the operations against the Kurds, and Paul Bremer are not capricious gods. They are human beings with the power to make decisions affecting the lives of thousands, even millions of people—but they remain distant from the story. We know

²³ See Human Rights Watch, *Genocide in Iraq*, Chapter 8, *The Camps*, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/ANFAL8.htm>.

²⁴ Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, p. 14.

they, and others, are largely responsible for much of the misery of recent Iraqi history, but they are not the characters whose lives we follow. As ultimate power players, the Baath Party and the neo-cons are further removed from the novel than Greek gods were from the stage of the great classic tragedians. So, inevitably the question arises, if all the major characters in the novel are in one way or another, guilty, isn't in the end the novel approaching a conclusion not too distant from the one reached by the literature that Colla has criticized for failing to be clear and unequivocal on who is to blame for the assault on Iraq? True, the main characters are Iraqi, and the Americans are in the background. True, the Americans carry the blame for attacking Iraq, and, to quote yet another reviewer, they are unequivocally presented as "another set of tormentors" of the Iraqi people.²⁵ But by showing that corruption and deception were a feature of Iraqi society well before the invasion, and by describing a resistance that is ruthless against both occupiers and anyone suspected of collaborating with the enemy, isn't the novel, in the end, presenting a set of mitigating circumstances for the American invasion, in a way that may be considered analogous to that of mainstream novels or memoirs by US war veterans, which, by describing the single American grunt as victim of a disembodied "war," dissolve the difference between the sufferings of the invaders and those of the invaded?

To ask this question is in a way to ask what the politics of noir is — is it a narrative style that, as many would argue, allows for voicing protest, critique, and disenchantment, and, by underscoring that guilt is nearly always both individual and social, is implicitly transgressive and inimical to hypocrisy, conventional wisdom, established institutions? Or, to look at things from a different though related angle, do noir narratives embrace a universal pessimism, a radical "sceptical distrust of the whole of society" such that, since no shred of human decency seems to survive, any moral as well as political condemnation of the sins committed in the dark city becomes both impossible and nonsensical?²⁶ Isn't the fact that, as is generally acknowledged, the noir

²⁵ Jane Jakeman, "Baghdad Central by Elliott Colla, book review: A murder mystery set in post-Saddam Baghdad is as good as it is daring," *The Independent*, February 7, 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/artsentertainment/books/reviews/baghdad-central-by-elliott-colla-book-review-a-murder-mystery-set-in-post-saddam-baghdad-is-as-good-9112979.html>.

²⁶ Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, p. 13.

thrives “at any time of discontent and anxiety, of disillusionment with institutional structures and loss of confidence in the possibility of effective agency” enough to consider it a politically consolatory form, a narrative strategy meant to absorb the shock of a world gone insane, unjust, and filled with violence, which we despair of changing?²⁷ Though my knowledge of the scholarship is limited, my impression is that students of noir have insisted by and large that these questions cannot be answered in general, but only on a case-by-case basis. It makes little sense to say that the noir is politically conservative or progressive, the mirror of a moral or an amoral world. Each narrative needs to be assessed on its own merits and, especially on the ways in which its narrative logic intersects other narratives and discourses outside the text.

So, to come back to *Baghdad Central*, I would argue that, by making the hero of his narrative not an average Iraqi somewhat compromised with the regime, but a former war criminal—“the American bogeyman, the villain” as he has himself put it—Colla forces the reader not so much to realize that even people who have done horrible things may be able to redeem themselves (personally, I do not think there is much of a redemptive dynamic at work in the novel), but they are human beings, too.²⁸ And, perhaps, if they could have built their lives cultivating their better qualities—their love of poetry and the arts, their love of family—they might have been able to flourish, rather than collaborate with a murderous regime. Muhsin Khafaji's story, though, is not the story of his loss of innocence, as he was born in a sinful world and he shares his guilt with many, many others. This does not make the crimes which, in “noirish” fashion, come out of the past to haunt him, any less serious, but it does suggest that the solution to the problem that is Iraq should take place at a collective, not at a merely individual level. We all remember that the narrative sold to the public opinion by the Bush administration to justify the attack argued that, once Saddam had been removed, democracy and prosperity would thrive in Iraq, and that the quarrel of the US and its allies was not with the Iraqi people, but with the regime. *Baghdad Central* shows that this is sheer nonsense, as in a country subjugated for years by a brutal dictatorship, and strangled by ruthless, outright criminal sanctions, no

²⁷ Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, pp. 12-13.

²⁸ Elliot Colla in Henry Peck, “Elliott Colla: Grays in the Emerald City.”

simple-minded, easy distinctions can be made between innocent and guilty people. Moreover, since the occupiers are no less prone to violence, corruption, and deceit than the thugs of the previous regime, they are in no position to rebuild the country or reeducate its citizens. The noir's uncomfortableness with moralizing is, in the case at hand, perhaps the best way to critique the moralizing tone in which Bush and the neo-cons packaged their unctuous proclamations of solidarity with the people of Iraq.

The many years that have now followed Operation Iraqi Freedom (a fine example of the neo-cons' Newspeak) have given ample support to all those who insisted that the whole greater Middle East region is a political, social, religious, and ethnic puzzle that admits no simple solution. Recourse to violence, and to all-out war in particular, can only bring more suffering, hatred, and destruction to peoples who, in several cases, have never experienced an extended period of peace in their lives. If noir is a form that, by "unsettling confidence in our ability to interpret and judge the world" heightens "a universal sense of absurdity", *Baghdad Central* follows suit by sending out the message that the worst way to confront the problems of such a complicated geopolitical area is by trying to impose on it a comfortable narrative of loss and redemption.²⁹ To a storytelling centering on the rhetoric of "mission accomplished," the novel opposes its inconclusive, fragmentary plot, at the end of which not much is accomplished. We learn that Citrone was played out by Zubeida, who is severely injured during an armed assault on her house, but we do not know who Zubeida was really reporting to (the "resistance" remains a spectral entity) nor is it altogether clear (at least to me) whether all the girls who were part of the sex ring were aware of it being all a side-show. At the end of Muhsin's (and Mrouj's) investigation, there are several "loose ends" (to use a term from one of Zubeida's organizational papers) that cannot be tied up. The detective has shed some light on a single mystery, but he is still caught in a rhizomatic maze, in "a labyrinth ... [that] has no center; it has no perimeter; and, worst of all, it has no way out."³⁰ No reassuring moral or epistemological conclusion has been reached, even though the author ends his novel with a pair of small signs of rather qualified hope, meant, I suppose, to allay the bleakness of the ending.

²⁹ Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, p. 13.

³⁰ Abrams, *From Sherlock Holmes to the Hard-Boiled Detective*, p. 72.

The first is Mrouj's health improvement. While we are by no means authorized to grasp the betterment of her condition as symbolical of a change in the body politic, it does signal that Muhsin got the thing he most cared about when he accepted to collaborate with the CPA.

The other moderately hopeful and altogether "poetic" sign that Colla works into the novel is a much awaited and welcome rainfall. After painting the urban landscape of Baghdad as a veritable wasteland of debris, overflowing garbage cans, and ubiquitous plastic bags, the author chooses, contra the quintessential modernist poem, to let the rain fall. That Colla has T.S. Eliot in mind is made clear by a few clues he disseminates through the narrative. Muhsin's Khafaji's brother, professor of English at Oxford University, is a great T. S. Eliot scholar. The first chapter of the book is titled "April 2003," a cruel month for Iraq, if ever there was one. Much later in the novel, when Khafaji is taken by the Army to the Kirkuk region and memories of his involvement in the ethnic cleansing come back to haunt him, the image of a "[c]ruel spring bred from a forgetful winter" is explicitly evoked. The reference to "dull roots stirring with the late rains" is a nearly literal quotation from *The Waste Land*, and it is an appropriate one as Muhsin is reminiscing about "the dirt of graves turned in the night"—that is the "burial of the dead" Kurds, interred in mass graves. Perhaps (though I admit this is more tentative) even the fight that breaks in Kirkuk following a card game, at a party supervised by "an old lady," is a nod at Madame Sosostris' "wicked pack of cards." What is, I believe, unquestionable, is that the thundershower that ends the novel has all the overtones of a cleansing ritual—as if to provide the text with the "flash of lightning. Then a damp gust" Eliot imagines, but withholds from his Fisher King.³¹

Drops hitting every surface under the skies. The balconies, the window-sills, water tanks on the roofs, cars, men, and the thirsty streets and the dusty heaps of garbage. Slowly at first, the parched surfaces crack and spit like drum skins. Then louder, more violently, with the slapping, tossing sound of creeks and rivers. The skies open up and a cold torrent drops onto Baghdad. Washing away the dust from the trees and buildings, washing the dirt from the concrete and roads. (329)

³¹ Quotations from *The Waste Land* are, respectively, from l. 4: "Dull roots with spring rain"; l. 46; l. 393.

This may be indeed a moment of renewal for Muhsin al-Khafaji, who in the last part of the novel has had difficulty remembering the poetry he so much loves. As the rain falls "only then do the lines begin to pour again into his ears. Only then do they wash across the dry shores of his mind." Unlike the impotent King, who in Eliot's poem "sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind," Muhsin thinks of lines in which "echoes of thunder evoke / Stories sung by Scheherazade / To that mad king / On winter nights" (329).³² I think it would be a mistake to construct the voice of the thunder, with its attendant rainfall, as a triumphantly redemptive moment. Nature and history remain separate. And yet, by evoking Scheherazade, these lines remind us that stories too—some stories, at least—can help people survive. It may take more than one thousand and one nights to catch the glimpse of a world no longer "mad," but there is some comfort in knowing that you will live at least to see the next dawn. Total ruin, after all, is not nothingness, and, appropriately, the novel ends with some poetic fragments shored against a landscape of ruin

³² See *The Waste Land*, ll. 423–4.

10. Re/visions of World War Two:

Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*
and Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*

You say it is the good cause that hallows even war?
I say unto you: it is the good war that hallows any cause.
– Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Part I

Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*: World War Two and the matrix of "humanitarian warfare"

Kicking the Vietnam syndrome

On March 3, 1991, George Bush was finally able to utter the words which had no doubt been on his mind since the beginning of Gulf War One: "We have finally kicked the Vietnam Syndrome." From day one, the first Gulf War was carefully constructed by the United States government, the military, and the media as the antithesis of the Vietnam War—as a war that would be quick, efficient, nearly bloodless (as far as "our boys" were concerned, of course), and, most importantly, victorious. As General Norman Schwarzkopf put it in his initial address to the troops stationed in the Middle East: "This is not going to be

another Vietnam. We're going to wrap this thing up and get you all home as soon as possible."¹ What is worth noticing is that, as Michelle Kendrick has shown, the specter of the Vietnam War was agitated not so much by those who were either skeptical about, or outright opposed to the war, as by those who saw in the Gulf War a unique opportunity to promote, through a "heroic narrative of technological and moral power," "a view of recovered or newfound American strength" up to par with the leading role the US were now to play in the "new world order."² By being everything that the Vietnam War was not, the Gulf War would lay to rest forever the ghosts of Hồ Chí Minh and General Võ Nguyên Giáp.

Of the various stories comprising the multilayered Gulf War One narrative, here I would like to focus briefly on the moral aspect of the conflict; or, better, on what Donna Przybylowicz and Abdul JanMohamed have called "the economy of moral capital in the Gulf War." In their view, the concern with the material gains of a war like the one in the Gulf, and similar ones to come, should not distract us from the need "to develop an articulate analysis of how symbolic or moral value is extracted in the course of these wars and is then transformed and reaccumulated as moral capital and eventually circulated and reinvested so that it can accrue further moral profit. In short, the production of moral surplus value is as crucial a function of these wars as is the transfer of material surplus value."³ These words—which, in light of what would later take place in the Balkans, first, and with the War on Terror, later, may well be described as prophetic—raise an interesting problem: in order to produce moral surplus one needs an initial moral capital. Now this could be hardly provided, except by way of contrast, by the Vietnam War, and this is why before, during, and after the Gulf War, commentators, army personnel, and first and foremost George Bush himself, invited the American public to view the engagement in the Gulf through different conceptual lenses: those of World War Two.

¹ This quotation, as well as the preceding one from Bush, are taken from Michelle Kendrick's "The Never Again Narratives: Political Promise and the Videos of Operation Desert Storm," *Cultural Critique* 29 (Autumn 1994), pp. 129-47.

² Kendrick, p. 130.

³ "The Economy of Moral Capital in the Gulf War", *Cultural Critique* 19 (Autumn 1991), p. 5.

Since the early days of the crisis the president stressed that no appeasement with Saddam Hussein was possible, as it would have been nothing short of a repeat of the infamous 1938 Munich compromise with Hitler. As Bush went on to compare Iraq's invasion of Kuwait with the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia, the media followed suit. *The New Republic*, for example, featured a cover picture of the Iraqi dictator with cropped moustache while a nation-wide network like TNT, as well as many local channels, inundated TV screens with reruns of World War Two combat movies. As John Carlos Rowe has put it, "the improbable analogy with the Allies' efforts against Axis forces was made credible by media repetition."⁴ In other words, kicking Saddam Hussein's ass (George Bush's words) as well as the Vietnam Syndrome would be easier if people were encouraged to think of the Gulf War as a sort of miniature yet "clean," "sanitized," "high-tech" version of the Good War par excellence—the only war whose justice and necessity almost no American would dare call into question. With that kind of moral capital further accumulation would inevitably ensue.

The evocation of World War II was therefore meant to provide with a moral as well as an ideological substance a military operation destined not only to push Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, but also to exorcise the ghost of the Vietnam War haunting the collective memory of the United States by erasing the latter's moral deficit. In light of this rather explicit manipulative use of history during Gulf War One, which would of course be repeated in later episodes of the current "global war," and keeping in mind that—as Winfried Flück has recently observed—"the collective memory of a society like that of the U.S.A. is now largely in the hands of Hollywood," the analysis of recent World War Two movies takes on special cultural and political significance.⁵ It is of course far from surprising that many of these productions amount to rather uncomplicated celebrations of American

⁴ John Carlos Rowe, "The 'Vietnam Effect' in the Persian Gulf", *Cultural Critique*, 19 (Fall 1991), p. 124.

⁵ Winfried Flück "The 'Imperfect Past': Vietnam According to the Movies," in *The Merits of Memory: Concepts, Contexts, Debates* (2008), pp. 353-385. [https:// www.jfki.fu-berlin.de/en/v/publications_fluck/2000/fluck_imperfectpast/Fluck_Imperfect_past.pdf](https://www.jfki.fu-berlin.de/en/v/publications_fluck/2000/fluck_imperfectpast/Fluck_Imperfect_past.pdf). Quotation on p. 353. Several recent studies have investigated the theoretical as well as practical implications of the contemporary "global war" scenario. A useful recent collection is *Conflict, Security and the Reshaping of Society: The Civilization of War*, eds. Alessandro Del Lago and Salvatore Padilla (London: Routledge, 2010).

heroism facing absolute evil.⁶ Some recent films, however, while on the one hand inevitably contributing to the World War Two revival, on the other would seem to be animated by a sincere desire to offer new ways of looking at the most devastating war in recorded world history. The Clint Eastwood diptych, *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters From Iwo Jima* (2006), for example, has certainly many merits, including that of refusing to demonize the Japanese enemy, as well as, more generally, that of resisting and indeed denouncing the mythologizing of war by media and politicians. A revisionist intent would also seem to lie behind the two blockbuster movies that may be said to have initiated the massive return of the World War Two film: Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998). In this essay I have chosen to focus on these two films because—whatever one may think of them—they have sparked a lively critical debate on the extent to which the war movie may be said to be also a means for the dissemination of "pacifist," or at least "anti-war" sentiments. While to some critics Spielberg's and Malick's films, though in different ways, should be seen as contributing to the mythology of World War Two as the Good War, others feel that they actually resist recent attempts to appropriate the Good War's moral capital in order to promote the notion of "humanitarian" warfare.

Of course, one may legitimately argue that interest in World War Two has been an important feature of US popular culture well before Gulf War One made it convenient to draw comparisons between Hitler and Saddam Hussein. In an essay focusing on "the reengineering of a massive wartime information and entertainment apparatus into a new apparatus of popular-culture remembering," Philip Beidler writes that "the last great production achievement of war industry became the ongoing production of the war itself."⁷ This production was obviously, though by no means exclusively, centered in Hollywood, where—until the advent of the Vietnam War movie—war films were nearly always grandiose celebrations of America's heroic and glorious role in the Good War. In particular, after 1945, these movies took on a new

⁶ Jonathan Mostow's *U-571* (2000) and Michael Bay's *Pearl Harbour* certainly fit into this category.

⁷ Philip Beidler, "The Good War and the Great Snafu," *The Georgia Review* 52 (Spring 1998), p. 62. The essay has been later incorporated in *The Good War's Greatest Hits. World War II and American Remembering* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998).

significance and became instrumental in mobilizing patriotic feelings that would sustain the US's Cold War crusade, thus prompting a marketing of World War Two as a cultural and ideological construct that may be said to have never stopped.

It would be wrong, however, to think that the notion of World War Two as the quintessential "Good War" never met with any opposition. One need only think of the ironic quotation marks surrounding the title of Studs Terkel's classic oral history of the war, or of a string of important and often popular war novels such as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), James Jones's *From Here to Eternity* (1951) and *The Thin Red Line* (1961), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)—all works which, in their different ways, can hardly be said to be outright celebrations of the war's "goodness." If to this impressive body of fiction one adds the work of historians like Christopher Simpson, Jacques Pauwels, Len Deighton, and Michael Zezima, it should be easy to see that to many the Second World War has been hardly a "good war," and perhaps not even a "bad" though uncomplicatedly "just" war.⁸ No one—at least no serious scholar or writer—has ever had any doubts regarding the need to defeat Nazism and Japanese imperialism, but the idea that the Allies were engaged in a purely defensive and noble war, with no shrewd geopolitical calculations of their own, or the belief that it was only the enemy who engaged in ruthless and criminal military strategies, have been thoroughly criticized from both a fictional and a historical point of view. To this one should also add the more recent impact that Vietnam War movies like Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) have had on the war film as a genre. Whatever reservations one may have on these films, or similar ones, it would seem obvious that the emphasis they

⁸ Christopher Simpson, *Blowback: America's Recruitment of Nazis and Its Effects on the Cold War* (New York: Grove Press, 1988); Len Deighton, *Blood, Tears and Folly: An Objective Look at World War II* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993); Michael Zezima, *Saving Private Power: The Hidden History of "the Good War"* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2000); Jacques R. Pauwels, *The Myth of the Good War: America in the Second World War* (Toronto: Lorimer, 2002). See also Beidler's *The Good War* for a useful analysis of many World War Two novels, and of how their translation into successful movies went along with the erasure or drastic rewriting of their most critical traits.

place on the brutality and dubious morality of the conflict in Indochina, not to mention the critical view that Coppola and Kubrick in particular offer of the army as an institution, would put a damper on all subsequent attempts to resurrect a heroic vision not only of the Vietnam War, but of *any* war. All this, however, at least in Philip Beidler's opinion, hasn't really changed the way most American citizens feel about World War Two. "The legend of the Good War has not only persisted, fostered by wartime propaganda and reinforced in the aftermath of victory, but has proven remarkably flexible in its capacity both to resist specific historical challenge and to restyle its more general mythological configurings so as to serve the needs of a series of changing social and geopolitical contexts."⁹ It is certainly true that, during the time that goes from the end of the Vietnam War to the collapse of the Soviet Union, cinema and literature have shown less interest in World War Two, but in the long run the disenchantment with the war in Vietnam seems to have strengthened rather than weakened the mythological status of the Good War.

Compared to a conflict with uncertain aims, which divided public opinion, and ended with a defeat, World War Two stands out as its opposite. The latter—so the story goes—was a just war supported by majority of the population and fought not only to defend freedom and democracy from brutal dictatorships, but also in response to the gratuitous aggression of Pearl Harbor. It is thus far from surprising that, as historian Marilyn Young has argued, in American public discourse these two wars have taken on the status of alternative rhetorical and interpretive paradigms. "There are, it seems, only two kinds of war the United States can fight: World War II or Vietnam. Anything that can be made to look like World War II is OK."¹⁰

⁹ Beidler, *The Good War's Greatest Hits*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Marilyn Young, "Will Iraq Be Vietnam or WWII?", *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 2003, www.historiansagainstawar.org/pressyoung.html. As Young goes on to explain, in the case of Gulf War One the attempt to represent it as a reenactment of World War Two was marked by comparisons between the UN Great Coalition and the Allies, with the Kuwaitians playing the part of the Poles, and the Kurds that of the Jews. The audacity of such parallels is such, however, that "since the conditions for World War II cannot be replicated, most wars run the danger of being or becoming Vietnam." Witness what has happened in both Iraq and Afghanistan, where the dreams of pacification and democratization imploded whenever a guerrilla attack raised the ever-present specter of Vietnam.

*Saving Private Ryan and the Baby Bombers*¹¹

These preliminary considerations were necessary to set the stage for my reading of the two key films initiating the World War Two revival—a revival that is far from being over, as witness the recent Spielberg HBO mega production *The Pacific* (2010). *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*, I shall argue, are two rather different films, not only because Spielberg's is a popular, melodramatic, and patriotic film, whereas Malick's is an auteur movie which, despite its cost and its parade of Hollywood stars, could never compete with the former at the box office. If several of the standard ingredients of war movies are certainly to be found also in Malick's film, there is no question that Spielberg's is the one that more readily fits the genre. It is no accident that, as several critics have noted, Spielberg quotes an infinity of other war movies, as if one of his intents were that of producing a sort of ultimate, archetypal, encyclopedic war film. Moreover, as we shall see, *Saving Private Ryan* employs a traditionally cathartic plot that is not only absent, but is explicitly repudiated by Malick's *The Thin Red Line*. Despite the unquestionably dazzling and innovative pyrotechnics of its first half hour, and other interesting features, *Saving Private Ryan* follows a rather conventional narrative structure and, whatever its director's intentions, there is no question to my mind that the movie made a significant contribution towards "kicking the Vietnam syndrome" out of Hollywood's studios. The praise the movie received by several left-leaning critics (especially in Europe, and in Italy in particular) are from my point of view both exaggerated and often based on blatant misreadings of the movie that miss the ideological reverberations of its representation of war in an age marked by the new "human rights" imperialism.¹²

¹¹ The expression "baby bombers" has by now become familiar. I first encountered it in the title of an article by Carl Bildt ("La guerra intelligente dei baby bombers" — the baby bombers' intelligent war) published in *Il Manifesto*, May 5, 1999.

¹² A few minutes on the Internet should suffice to notice how most English-language reviews, and especially those appearing in widely read publications like *Newsweek*, *Time*, or the *The New York Times*, have hailed Spielberg's movie as a masterpiece. Among the rare reviews criticizing the movie, two notable ones are those by Louis Menand and Vincent Canby (see below). Analogously, in Italy the film met with praise not only in the pages of mainstream newspapers like *Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa*, but also in those of left dailies like *L'Unità* and *Il manifesto*. The latter paper

This is not to say that Spielberg's movie has no cultural or artistic merit.¹³ I too agree, for example, that the first twenty or so minutes of the movie are among the most riveting in the history of war cinema. Moreover, while it can be hardly denied that—as even the most favorable reviews have not failed to mention—Spielberg often crosses the line into a sentimentality at odds with the sheer brutality of the opening scenes, I think he is sincere when he says that "I didn't want another war-movie stereotype" and that his main intent was to tell Americans "the hard truth about what real combat was like."¹⁴ Yet I find it difficult to believe that, as Jon Meacham has written in *Newsweek*, some viewers may be tempted to dismiss Spielberg's "gritty movie [...] as the baby boomers' cynical, leftish reinterpretation of their father's nobler history."¹⁵ If anything, I would say that *Private Ryan* may be seen as an emotional if perhaps indeed "leftish" homage that the baby boomers-turned-baby *bombers'* generation is all too willing to pay to their fathers in order to cash in on the Good War's moral capital. If any cynicism is involved here, it lies not so much with the movie per se as with the way a movie of this kind can easily play into the hands of a US eager to regain a position of moral supremacy in the world.

In what follows I will focus mainly on two aspects of the movie. First, I would like to consider the dubious claims made for the supposed anti-war message woven into the "mosaic of terror" comprising

even engaged in a sort of promotional campaign, as witness the coverage the film received in the October 24, 1998 weekly supplement *Alias*. On the nexus between "human rights" and imperialism, see, for an introduction, Uwe-Jens Heuer and Gregor Schirmer: "Human Rights Imperialism," *Monthly Review* 49 (March 1998), <http://www.monthlyreview.org/398heuer.htm>. Among the essays and books on this subject, I would recommend, among others, Danilo Zolo, *Invoking Humanity: War, Law, and Global Order* (New York: Continuum, 2002); Id., *Cosmopolis: Prospects for World Government* (London: Polity Press, 1997); Slavoj Žižek, "Against Human Rights," *New Left Review* 34 (July-August 2005), pp. 115-133.

¹³ For a useful analysis of the movie that takes a stand different from mine, see, for example, Richard T. Jameson, "History's Eyes: *Saving Private Ryan*," *Film Comment* 34 (Sept.–Oct. 1998), pp. 20-23.

¹⁴ The first Spielberg quotation is taken from Rick Lyman's "True to the Timeless Fact That War is Hell," *The New York Times*, July 19, 1998; the second from an article written by Steven Spielberg for "A Century on Screen Supplement", *Newsweek*, 131 (Summer 1998), pp. 66-68.

¹⁵ "In the Line of Fire," *Newsweek*, July 13, 1998, p. 50.

the movie's opening section.¹⁶ My point will be that while time and again critics and reviewers of both war films and war literature have welcomed as being anti-war any frank exposure of the carnage of battle, more often than not the spectacular display of the horrors of war has ended up serving a different, indeed often opposite aim, by setting the stage, paradoxically, for calls for further bloodshed. Secondly, I wish to discuss how, in a way that uncannily resembles the dominant narrative of the 1999 NATO bombings of former Yugoslavia disseminated during the conflict by the Western media, what Spielberg himself terms the "morality play" at the core of his film works as a diegetic machinery designed to domesticate and refunction the initial experience of horror into a rather conventional celebration of American heroism. The "monument" that Spielberg erects to his father's generation ties past and present together in a seamless web, thereby absolving the nation not only from the sins of Vietnam, but also from all the other errors and horrors of the decades separating us from the end of World War Two.¹⁷ Even though, as Vincent Canby has put it in one of the rare critical reviews of the film, "restoring the nation's heroic image of itself probably wasn't what Steven Spielberg had in mind," with its relentless advance from the gory to glory, *Saving Private Ryan* fulfills a national longing deeply felt by the baby boomers'/baby bombers' generation: "to wipe clean the collective American conscience after the trauma of the Vietnam War."¹⁸

The best way to begin questioning the emotional-political effect of

¹⁶ The phrase "mosaic of terror" comes from Richard Schickel, "Reel War," *Time*, July 27, 1998, p. 56.

¹⁷ For example, the unflagging support the US provided in the name of anti-communism to bloody military dictatorships in South America; or the "counter-insurgency" campaigns sponsored throughout the world by the CIA, which in Indonesia alone claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, not to mention—while we are on the subject of World War Two—the fact that, as Noam Chomsky and others have insisted, the historical record shows quite clearly that the role of the United States during the Holocaust was by no means a pretty one, and, moreover, while "[o]nly a tiny scattering" of Jewish refugees were accepted into the US in the aftermath of the war, "[p]lenty of Nazis were admitted [...] straight out of their SS uniforms." Noam Chomsky, *Chronicles of Dissent: Interviews with David Barsamian* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1992, p. 97). That Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) may have died not only to save Private Ryan (Matt Damon), but also this unappealing, darker side of America could never be remotely guessed by watching Spielberg's movie.

¹⁸ Vincent Canby, "Saving a Nation's Pride of Being; The Horror and Honor of a Good War," *The New York Times*, August 10, 1998, p. 47.

the terrifying landing sequence that opens the movie is by quoting from an article written by Spielberg for *Newsweek*: "Of course every war movie, good or bad, is an antiwar movie. *Saving Private Ryan* will always be that."¹⁹ What I think Spielberg is trying to say here is that, whatever message a war movie wishes to convey, just by virtue of showing war—of revealing the hell that is war—a war movie becomes instantly an anti-war movie. It is by espousing such an (ill) logic that several reviewers have called *Ryan* an anti-war film. For them, as for Spielberg, regardless of what story a war film tells, if it does not hide the horrors of war, it inevitably makes a statement *against* war. Of course, some critics have been quick to point out that, given that *Ryan* is about World War Two—that is, the Good War—it cannot be anti-war the way, say, *Platoon* or *Full Metal Jacket* are. Thus, Spielberg can have it both ways: he can throw in the anti-war perspective and yet go on to fight his just war. In a movie like his, in other words, being anti-war means simply not to deny the fact that wars are bloody, messy, and gory affairs. From this viewpoint one must agree once again with Vincent Canby when he notes that, although *Ryan* is "anti getting shot, maimed, dismembered, disemboweled, blown up and killed", all this, by itself, does not make it an anti-war movie.²⁰

Let us now take a closer look at the issue of the "horrors of war," which Spielberg has indeed frankly displayed both in the by now famous Omaha Beach landing sequence and, more generally, in the careful rendering of the soldiers' emotional response to the sheer terror of intense firefights. What remains to be seen is whether the "intense bodily reactions" that spectators experience when watching scenes of carnage and nausea have the pedagogical effect many think they are intended to deliver.²¹ As I have argued elsewhere, nearly a century ago, at a time when war was being constantly poeticized and jingoistic sentiments ran high in the US and elsewhere, William James argued that the pacifist strategy of insisting on "war's irrationality and horror" was doomed from the start: "the horrors make the fascination [...]. The

¹⁹ Steven Spielberg, "A Century," p. 66.

²⁰ Canby, p. 49

²¹ Julie Turnock, "A Cataclysm of Carnage, Nausea, and Death: *Saving Private Ryan* and Bodily Engagement," in *Affective Encounters: Rethinking Embodiment in Feminist Media Studies*, eds. Anu Koivunen and Susanna Paasonen (Turku: University of Turku, 2001), pp. 253-269. In Turnock's view, there is no guarantee that the response to such scenes of carnage is as morally instructive as many would like to believe.

horror makes the thrill [...]. The military party denies neither the bestiality nor the horror [...]; it only says that these things tell but half the story. It only says that war is *worth* them [...].”²² Typical assessments of *Ryan’s* display of war horrors, like the one in *Ciak* by Marco Balbi who, though critical of the second part of the movie, writes that its first twenty minutes are more effective “than twenty pacifist rallies,” are to my mind just as ill-conceived as reviews written one hundred years ago in praise of Stephen Crane’s realistic representation of war in *The Red Badge of Courage*.²³ “The Universal Peace Society might circulate this novel as a tract,” wrote a reviewer in *Life*, an idea echoed by the *London Speaker*, in whose view “a book like this [...] is more likely to cool the blood of the Jingo [...] than a hundred sermons or tracts from the Peace Society.” As I tried to show some years ago, instead of cooling the blood of the Jingo, it is more likely that *Red Badge* reminded them of their thirst for blood, and, whatever Crane’s personal feelings about war in general, the record shows that he later worked as a reporter for two of the most blatantly pro-imperialist papers of the time like the *New York World* and the *New York Journal*—yet another illustration of how difficult is to trace a line between the genres of war and anti-war writing and cinema.²⁴

Extending and refining William James’s position, in the 1930’s Kenneth Burke returned to the problem of whether an almost exclusive and obsessive emphasis on war as nothing but a blood bath could not end up having an effect rather different from the intended one. “It is questionable—he wrote—whether the feelings of horror, repugnance, hatred, would furnish the best groundwork as a deterrent to war. They are extremely militaristic attitudes, being in much the same category

²² “The Moral Equivalent of War”, in William James, *Writings, 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York, The Library of America, 1987, p.1287). See also Giorgio Mariani, *Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), pp. 65-70.

²³ *Ciak*, October 29, 1998. <http://www.iann.it/film/Critiche.asp?IdFilm=1347>.

²⁴ See my *Spectacular Narratives: Class and War in Stephen Crane and the American 1890s*, New York, Peter Lang, 1992. The *Red Badge* reviews quoted above have been reprinted in *Stephen Crane: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Richard M. Weatherford (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 128, 105. This is not to say that Stephen Crane was not able to offer important critical insights about war. Generally, however, these are to be found in the works written after *Red Badge*, as shown by several of the essays appearing in *Stephen Crane in War and Peace*, ed. James H. Meredith. A special Edition of *War, Literature and the Arts* 11, No. 2 (1999).

of emotion as one might conceivably experience when plunging his bayonet into the flesh of the enemy. And they might provide the firmest basis upon which the 'heroism' of a new war could be erected. The greater the horror, the greater the honor of enlistment." It is by ignoring this fascination with horror, Burke goes on to argue, that "deeply pious tracts" turn into "preparation for new massacres."²⁵ This is precisely what happens with the deeply pious intentions behind the opening sequence of *Saving Private Ryan*. Instead of providing the basis for a serious analysis of war's most frightening implications—beginning with the fact that, as Louis Menand has noted, "war is specially terrible not because it destroys humans beings, who can be destroyed in plenty of other ways, but because it turns human beings into destroyers"—the frightening landing sequence has eventually the effect of making us more eager to see "our boys" succeed.²⁶ From this perspective it seems to me that what Barbara Correll has written of Edward Zwick's movie *Glory*, applies equally well to Spielberg's *Ryan*: "the task [...] is to surpass the initial gesture toward a relatively recent antiwar cinematic genre: to recuperate glory, dependent upon abstractions that transcend the body, from the gory, which reveals the body in pain."²⁷

It is true that Spielberg makes no mystery of the "unheroic" side of the American landing troops when some of them, for example, do not

²⁵ Kenneth Burke, "War, Response, and Contradiction," in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 234-57. For a textbook, practical illustration of this point, one need only think of how Israel and the US have used the atrocities committed during the October 7, 2023 attack, as a justification for their devastating onslaught on Gaza, which as this essay is being revised, has resulted in over 50,000 dead, in large part women and children.

²⁶ Louis Menand, "Jerry Don't Surf," *New York Review of Books*, September 24, 1998, pp. 7-8. It is worth noticing that a brief article in the Italian daily *La Repubblica* (August 19, 1999) announced that the Pentagon, "after a series of private screenings ... of *Saving Private Ryan*" had decided to set aside 45 million dollars to create an institute of "creative technologies" in which, as at the time Army Secretary Louis Caldera explained, "the Pentagon will learn from the world of cinema." To put it in different terms, cinematic simulations will help prepare the new, real wars. This would seem one of the ways in which "pacifist tracts" are transformed into something quite different not only on the aesthetic and ideological level, but on a practical and technological one as well.

²⁷ Barbara Correll, "Rem(a)inders of G(l)ory: Monuments and Bodies in *Glory* and *In the Year of the Pig*," *Cultural Critique* 19 (Autumn 1991), p. 150. Zwick's film tells the story of the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth, the Afro-American regiment that fought in the American Civil War under general Robert Gould Shaw.

hesitate to shoot down mercilessly a group of surrendering German soldiers. Yet, while the camera lingers in painful detail over the American soldiers' wounded or dismembered bodies, their opponents die the way soldiers used to die in 1940s or 50s movies—that is, once shot, they fall like bowling pins. So what? They're Nazis, but what about the idea that an anti-war movie should try to show that even the worst enemy is after all a human being? Unlike Malick, who in his *Thin Red Line* draws a very compassionate and moving picture of terrified and suffering Japanese casualties, Spielberg cannot grant the enemy much of a human face. That the German prisoner whose life is spared by Captain Miller's squad ends up killing Miller himself, not to mention the fact that Corporal Upham, who insists on sparing the German's life, turns out to be a coward, are both significant details. Even though the movie's story, as described by Spielberg, is "a mission of mercy, not the charge up San Juan Hill," its overall narrative strategy hangs very much on the need for an absolute evil foe deserving no break.²⁸

Morality play

This brings us to the second point I wish to discuss. The problem with Spielberg's mission of mercy, in a nutshell, is that—as we noted a few moments ago—it is by his own admission structured like a morality play. And a World War Two morality play hinging on the theme of Nazi evil confronting an American Everyman must be free of any degree of ambiguity. A mission like the one Miller's squad is assigned could have been used to raise some very interesting moral questions.²⁹ For example, the mission-of-mercy motif could have functioned as a way to ask whether a modicum of humanity can survive the hell of war; or to wonder if, how, and when can war become an instrument of mercy; or to make problematic the issue of mercy itself. This last point

²⁸ Spielberg, "A Century," p. 67.

²⁹ Though not so much the question of whether eight lives should be put at risk in order to save James Ryan, thereby bringing some relief to a desperate mother who has already lost three sons. After all, as someone has noted, in comparison to what they have just gone through on D-day, rather than complain for what may be taken to be a sort of "diplomatic" mission meant to show the Army's humane concerns, Miller's soldiers should feel glad they were not assigned to a more risky operation.

is nicely raised by Louis Menand, when he writes that "there were ways to make the Private Ryan story carry some plausible moral weight. One was to have made Ryan, when he is finally found, a character of less than admirable proportions. [... Yet...] the possibility that Ryan would turn out to be an unworthy beneficiary of daring and sacrifice was plainly never even in the cards."³⁰

Just as the initial carnage quickly becomes what Kenneth Burke would have called an "aesthetic barrage" designed to make the audience accept the need for further killings, Private James Ryan turns out to be not only what Italian reviewer Stefania Giorgi humorously calls "a bionic hero," but—as dictated by the morality-play structure of the film—an allegorical incarnation of all that is pure, innocent, and heroic about America.³¹ It is not for nothing that, once found, Ryan refuses to be "saved," asking instead to do his share of the fighting in the battle with which the movie ends. Entrenched in a ruined French village, Miller's squad must defend a bridge against a massive German attack. Once again, Spielberg's magisterial filming technique makes for a spectacular and extremely bloody fight. Yet, on close inspection, this battle turns out to be very different from the opening one—indeed, I would say that it amounts to nothing short of an aesthetic as well as ideological recanting of the landing sequence. Germans and Americans have traded places: the former are now the attackers and we, as spectators, view the fight over the shoulders of "our" boys, enjoying every single casualty they inflict on the enemy. In a sense it is as if we had been magically lifted from the World War Two scenario in which we have been so far immersed, in order to land somewhere in the Wild West. Not only Miller's soldiers agree that, when all is lost, they will make their last stand at a site Miller names "the Alamo," but when all does indeed seem lost, our boys are rescued at the very last moment by the Seventh-Cavalry in the guise of the US Air Force—"the Angels on our shoulders," as Miller dubs them.

Finally, as anyone who has observed the audience's reaction during these final scenes can testify, the battle is clearly staged to elicit an unquestioning identification of the spectators with the acts of violence performed on the screen by "our" heroes. Which viewer, for example, does not hate Corporal Upham when, paralyzed by fear, he is

³⁰ Menand, "Jerry Don't Surf," p. 8.

³¹ Stefania Giorgi, "L'ultima spiaggia per la vittoria," *Il Manifesto*, 31 Ottobre 1998.

incapable of preventing his Jewish comrade from being killed in hand-to-hand combat by a German soldier he could have easily shot down? And who isn't relieved when Upham, a few minutes later, finally manages to make his first kill, by wiping out the former prisoner he himself had insisted should not be executed? Despite its realism, in this final battle scene gone are the harrowing close-ups of the body in pain of the initial landing sequence; gone and forgotten is the *pietas* elicited by those anonymous soldiers torn to pieces by gunfire. Miller's death scene is in this context exemplary. Die he does, but peacefully and sentimentally the way he would have died in a war movie or a Western of fifty years ago. In fact, Miller has even the time to impart a final warning to Ryan: "earn it!" — that is, make sure your life was worth our sacrifice.

The ideological implications of the film's ending can be better grasped if seen in the light of its director's idea of the movie as a "monument" to his father's generation. Spielberg's movie, which begins with a display of the body in pain, ends with an opposite rhetorical gesture predicated on the transcendence of the physical body, and therefore on the logic underlying most war memorials. I am not so much referring to the full-screen shot of the flag with which the movie ends as to the fact that, whereas at the beginning of the movie we are encouraged to think that the old American reminiscing in the Normandy battlefield memorial had participated in the landing, and is quite probably Miller himself, by the end we discover that the old man is in fact James Ryan, now kneeling in front of Miller's grave. The question is obvious: given that Ryan was parachuted beyond the German lines the night before D-day, how can the landing sequence be framed as something of which he has a direct and personal recollection? By way of this "dislocation of collective memory into another character," it seems to me that rather than problematizing "within the narrative structure itself the relationship between the individual and subjectivity, the commonality of experience and that of memory," as Giuliana Muscio perceptively argues, Spielberg suggests a sort of posthumous fusion between Miller and Ryan that mimics the military logic whereby the single soldier may (and often *must*) die, while the army he belongs to lives on.³² In the allegorical terms of Spielberg's morality

³² Giuliana Muscio, "Schermi di guerra: il secondo conflitto mondiale in *Salvate il soldato Ryan*," *I viaggi di Erodoto* 37 (marzo-maggio 1999), p. 10.

play, the individual body of the soldier is destroyed so that the collective body of the nation may be preserved. Of course this is a movie about World War Two, and we all wish to pay homage to those who gave their lives to save the world from barbarism, and yet we should not be blind to the fact that it is through such rhetorical strategy that all wars—the Good as well as the bad ones—are justified.

The cathartic and consolatory matrix of *Saving Private Ryan* may be better understood if we compare its narrative structure to the similar one of Bobbie Ann Mason's novel, *In Country* (1985). Mason's novel begins with three characters (the mother and the daughter of a soldier killed in Vietnam, and a Vietnam veteran who is the girl's uncle) on their way to visiting the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. Before they reach The Wall (as the Memorial is usually called) the narrative turns into a long flashback explaining what reasons have prompted the young Samantha and her uncle Emmett to undertake the pilgrimage to the Wall. We discover that "Sam" suffers not only for the loss of a father who was killed in Vietnam before she was born, but also for not being able to come to terms with the injury—both personal and collective, individual and national—of the Vietnam War. After exploring in a long flash-back the social and existential conditions of the main characters, the novel finally makes its way back to the opening scenes. As suggested by the shape of the narrative, the excavation and remembering of the past must culminate in its ritual acceptance and transcendence. The cathartic moment occurs not so much when Sam finds, amongst the over 58,000 names inscribed in the Memorial's black granite, that of her father, as a few seconds later, when she notices a soldier's name that is identical to hers: "Sam A. Hughes." The novel ends with Sam "touching her name," and thus figuratively taking part in a history she never witnessed in the first person, but which is in many ways also *her* story. With her simple gesture, Sam seems to overcome the gender, generational, and ideological boundaries separating her from the men, the times, and the world she has been desperately trying to understand throughout the entire novel.³³

As should be clear from even such a cursory description of the novel, no matter how different *In Country* may be from *Saving Private Ryan*, their morphology is strikingly similar. In both stories, the narrative's circular movement takes on a ritual function aiming to heal both

³³ Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 351.

a private and public trauma. In tales of this kind the obvious risk is that the narrative closure may all too easily overcome the painful tensions and contradictions on which the story is built. It is thus no accident that the ending of Masons' novel has been much discussed and at times criticized because it would seem to suggest, through Sam's gesture, that the reconciliation with the legacy of Vietnam can take place by embracing the memory of the US soldiers who perished there, without taking into much account the nearly *two million* Vietnamese dead. If to this we add that Sam seems by the end to identify with a kind of male double, it cannot be surprising that someone has interpreted the novel's ending as an act of submission on Sam's part to an ideology of male bonding embodied in the Vietnam Memorial. On the other hand, it can be also argued that the novel's symmetrical structure does not necessarily imply a total rejection of the skepticism regarding the possibility of a final reconciliation with the past that pervades most of the narrative. Sam's identification with her masculine alter ego can only be as literally *superficial* as the contact between her fingers and what is after all only a name inscribed in marble.³⁴ That name in this case not only indicates an absence, like all names inscribed in funereal monuments, but also a textual void: in Mason's novel Sam A. Hughes exists only in the shape of a number of "dead" letters. Even though I see why *In Country* may lend itself to a totalizing, consolatory reading, I also believe that there are objective textual elements running against the transformation of its symmetrical ending into an instance of ideological closure.³⁵

³⁴ Among the several critical discussions devoted to the novel's ending, two exemplary ones are those by Susan Jeffords and John Limon. The former, in *The Remasculinization of American Culture: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 62-65, sees Samantha's desire to understand the experience of Vietnam as leading to her, albeit superficial, masculinization. The visit to the Wall should thus be read as a sign of submission to the military-masculinist solidarity celebrated by the memorial. John Limon, instead, in *Writing after War. American War Fiction from Realism to Postmodernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 215-19, believes that the novel performs the rare trick of providing "the satisfactions of closure and symmetry without sacrificing any of its desperate skepticism" (p. 218).

³⁵ My reading of the novel's ending is therefore closer to Limon's than to Jeffords', though it seems to me that while Limon objects to the idea that Sam's reconciliation with her father is a superficial one, to my mind it is precisely the superficiality (in a literal rather than a moral sense) of Sam's relation with Vietnam that safeguards the skepticism which Limon rightly considers a valuable feature of Mason's novel. For

Saving Private Ryan's is constructed in a rather different way. The final shots bring us back to the initial scene of an American family visiting a military cemetery in Normandy. An old James Ryan, accompanied by his wife, children, and grandchildren, falls down on his knees crying once he reaches the cross that marks Miller's grave. Miller is the man to whom he owes his life, but also the one who warned Ryan he should "deserve" the sacrifices Miller and his men made. It is likely that Miller's "Deserve it!" must have haunted Ryan throughout his life—in fact, those dying words may be considered both a blessing and a curse. Which individual may lead a peaceful existence knowing his life must be "worth" the lives given by others to save his? If Spielberg had worked on this insoluble, intolerable dilemma, his morality play could have acquired a valuable moral and existential complexity. As Phil Landon has put it, when Ryan "asks his wife if he has justified the sacrifice of Miller and the others who died saving him, he is speaking for the audience and for the entire country. Has America, the film asks, earned the sacrifices made by men like Miller a half century ago?". In Landon's view, the fact that Ryan's wife replies in the affirmative should not lead us to believe that this is the answer given by the film as a whole, since Ryan's spouse's "primary interest is in comforting her husband not confronting unpleasant truths."³⁶ For Landon, the question is left unanswered.

Personally, however, I fail to see what would leave the issue in doubt. Ryan may be merely "comforted" by his wife, but he is clearly represented as a virtuous white middle-class man—as a benign patriarch surrounded by loving children and grandchildren. Moreover,

some further, important observations on the ending, see William D. Ehrhart (whom Mason thanks in a note for his help and advice), "Who's Responsible", *Vietnam Generation Journal & Newsletter*, 4 (April 1992), http://lists.village.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Texts/Reviews/Earhart_In_Country.html 08/10/01. According to Ehrhart, the novel would have been better if Mason had ended it differently, also because "the Wall has become a terrible cliché." There is a sizable critical literature on the Vietnam Memorial. See, among others, Jan C. Scruggs and Joel L. Swardlow, *To Heal a Nation: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985); Marita Sturken, "The Wall, the Screen and the Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial", in *A Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 163-78; Kim Serviant Theriault, "Re-membering Vietnam: War, Trauma, and 'Scarring Over' After 'The Wall'," *The Journal of American Culture* 26, No. 4 (December 2003), pp. 421-31.

³⁶ Phil Landon, "Realism, Genre, and *Saving Private Ryan*", *Film & History* 28, No. 3-4 (1998), p. 62.

there is nothing in the movie to suggest that Ryan may have *not* deserved Miller's sacrifice. And yet the half a century separating the young Ryan from the older one, are the fifty years of the Cold War, of Korea and Vietnam, of the CIA-sponsored coups in Latin America, Indonesia, Iraq, and Africa. The movie makes no reference, however implicit or oblique, to anything that may help the viewer reflect on the huge gap between the ideals allegedly inspiring the "Good War," on the one hand, and the internal as well as international conduct of the US from 1945 onwards, on the other. Moreover, even if the spectator may be left with some lingering doubts concerning the "merits" of Ryan and of the country he symbolizes, Miller's generation is spared any critique and becomes an unquestionable moral yardstick that can be used to measure all subsequent history. Whereas *In Country* shows that the difficulties encountered by Samantha in her daily life are due to the legacy of a war that is far from being in any possible way "good," *Saving Private Ryan* is only possibly troubled by the degree to which Ryan (and therefore America) may have failed to live up to a glorious past that is construed as a mythological Origin beyond any critique and reproach. In other words, if *Saving Private Ryan* cannot be accused of having invented the myth of the Good War, it has certainly contributed in a significant way to the revamping of the myth during a historical phase in which, from Gulf War One to the current war on terror, World War Two continues to be invoked by the US as a nearly inexhaustible source of moral capital.³⁷

Feminizing Captain Miller

In a poignant discussion of what he terms "World War II chic" — that is, the "special reverence for the look and feel of wartime" widespread in end-of-millennium USA — Richard Goldstein pointed to *Saving Private Ryan*, Tom Brokaw's bestseller *The Greatest Generation*, and the new vogue enjoyed by swing, as examples of an attempt to

³⁷ A further proof of the use of the World War Two paradigm as moral capital was provided by the ludicrous campaign against France (the "freedom fries" crusade) on the eve of the invasion of Iraq. Due to its opposition to preemptive war, France was accused of being an ungrateful nation, undeserving the sacrifices the Allied made to free the country from the Nazi occupation.

reimagine the World War Two era as a Golden Age, home to "the greatest generation any society has ever produced."³⁸ Goldstein's thesis that this cult of the good old days of World War II springs from the guilt complex of many former baby boomers in relation to the parricidal instincts they indulged in the Sixties, his observations (written three years before the fateful 9/11) on "the mall-weary American soul [... yearning] for the consolation of a seemingly pure time, when we shared a common enemy and a set of beliefs that united us, for better or for worse," provides a convincing rationale for the World War Two vogue. Even though some may disagree with it, there can be no question to my mind that Spielberg's vision of the generation who lived during the Good War is largely mythological. As Goldstein notes, it should be enough to consider "the crucial scene where General George Marshall decides to save Private Ryan because his brothers have all been killed. Hovering under the action is the idealized image of a well-ordered society, with all the hierarchies of age and gender intact. A young woman notices the name Ryan recurring in her death tallies, and she brings this information to an older woman, who walks it in to a young man, who takes it to an older man, who delivers it to the patrician Marshall, who invokes the ultimate American patriarch—Abraham Lincoln—in his letter to the bereaved mother Ryan."³⁹ This military universe is founded on the Utopian vision of America as one great (white, of course) family, where all know their place and have faith in the moral guidance of their wise, compassionate and authoritative (rather than authoritarian) fathers.

The patriarchal nostalgia animating this section of the movie is not an isolated episode. The paternal metaphor is a regular feature of the relationship Captain Miller has with his men and is instrumental in drawing an idyllic portrait of the masculine bonding intrinsic to the army as an institution. The fact that the military world of fifty years ago was predominantly male and white cannot justify the lack of any mention of its widespread racism and sexism. It would have been enough to bear in mind what Norman Mailer had written in *The Naked and the Dead*, or Irwin Shaw in his much more conventional *The Young*

³⁸ Richard Goldstein, "World War II Chic," *The Village Voice*, January 13-19, 1999, <http://www.villagevoice.com/1999-01-12/news/world-war-ii-chic>; Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998).

³⁹ Goldstein, "World War II Chic."

Lions (1948), to realize that celebrating those who fought against tyrants and barbarism did not entail forgetting the questionable and at times outright repugnant features of the Allies' military world. In light of *Saving Private Ryan's* glorification of male bonding, one might be tempted to detect in this film a belated manifestation of that process of "remasculinization" pursued by a post-Vietnam US culture eager to make up for the humiliation of a lost war, so well described by Susan Jeffords.⁴⁰ However, unlike the movies and the texts analyzed by Jeffords, which focus on the Vietnam War, Spielberg's movie is not fueled by a desire to vindicate a masculinity undermined—in the most paranoid versions—by the Vietcong, as by the feminine softness of a home front ready to betray the front-line troops. We must be clear on this: Miller has nothing whatsoever to do with Rambo and his progeny. His is a reassuring, non-vindictive, poised masculinity, ready to absorb certain feminine traits not only because Miller knows how to be both paternal and maternal with his men, but also because the "humanitarian" mission he leads is described as the by-product of an originally feminine desire—the mother's desire for her last surviving son.

From this perspective, the movie would seem to embrace a rather traditional view of women as in need of male protection, and therefore as the ultimate reason why men must go to war. The "war within the war" of Miller and his platoon is fought to oblige a defenseless woman's wish. On the other hand, as Miller explains in a crucial scene in which he faces the potential rebellion of his soldiers, tired of risking their lives for an objective many consider absurd, "Ryan. I don't know anything about Ryan. I don't care. The man means nothing to me, he's just a name. But if, you know, if [...] finding [Ryan] so he can go home, if that earns me the right to get back to my wife, well then, then that's my mission. Ryan." Here (and elsewhere) Miller perceives his wife—and, implicitly, woman as such—as a traditional and idealized icon of peace, thus allowing us to see how the feminization of peace paradoxically ends up enlisting women in support of war. Moreover, here we also see how this rhetoric has the effect of tempering and somehow domesticating war by reimagining it as a tool whose brutality is necessary to preserve a delicate and tender domestic world (most memorably embodied in Miller's remembrance of his wife's pruning of the

⁴⁰ Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of American Culture. Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

rose bush in their garden). Captain Miller is Spielberg's idealized portrait of a man of his father's generation who has, however, also acquired feminine traits inspired by a post-feminist and post-Vietnam culture lying half a century ahead.

As A. Susan Owen has explained in detail, Miller is a man who is afraid, cries, and tenderly loves his wife. "He is both courageous and compassionate, a warrior dedicated to his duty, and yet disdainful of romantic idealizations of war."⁴¹ Miller, of course, is impatient when certain "feminine" weaknesses tend to prevail. An exemplary moment is the one in which Private Caparzo is hit by enemy fire for trying to reach and console a frightened French girl. This excessive "maternal" instinct provokes Miller's reaction: "*That's* why we can't take children." However, in the above-mentioned scene where his men want to execute the German sniper who has killed the unit's medic, Miller takes control of the situation not by invoking abstract hierarchical principles nor by proving himself to be the most virile of the lot, but, instead, by virtue of his affabulatory power. Miller's verbal skills stand out as "feminine" not so much because the story he tells partly concerns his wife, as because at a moment like that he unveils the most intimate and personal part of himself. "[T]he unexpected act of conversational intimacy in the context of mutiny" shows that Miller is capable of holding on to the prerogatives of his male role while also taking on some markedly feminine traits.⁴²

The "remasculinization" of American culture suggested by this character is therefore quite different from the aggressive masculinity described by Jeffords. To the extent that, though without ever questioning his role (and his duties) as a soldier, Miller manages to occupy the feminine space of peace, morality, and democratic, non-violent persuasion, he participates in that "cannibalization" of women that Jeffords finds in many cultural productions of the post-Vietnam era. But besides the fact that the ways in which Miller occupies a feminine space is rather different from the "feminizations" detected and criticized by Jeffords in several texts on the Vietnam experience, it is Miller's historical, pre-Sixties situation that makes him a unique figure. By

⁴¹ A. Susan Owen, "Memory, War and American Identity: *Saving Private Ryan* as Cinematic Jeremiad", *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 (September 2002), p. 266.

⁴² Owen, "Memory, War and American Identity," p. 271.

displaying admirable feminine traits that can coexist with his masculinity, Miller stands for an idealized past that seems to require none of the changes the baby boomers would later fight for. To quote once again A. Susan Owen, “historical characterizations like John Miller can function to discredit the urgency of feminist critiques of past and present American gender practices, or to imply that contemporary feminist critique is obsolete.”⁴³ The renegotiation of gender lines is thus an integral part of Spielberg’s mythmaking and a further proof that, in comparison to the “greatest generation’s” legendary past, our present can only be “infinitely wanting.”⁴⁴

Mission of mercy/mission of murder

I would like to conclude with some remarks on the issue from which we started, that is, the relation between the representation of war provided by *Saving Private Ryan* and the contemporary political and cultural scenario. What may link a movie centered on a “humanitarian” mission to a global political situation in which the recourse to war is constantly presented as a form of “humanitarian intervention” in defense of “human rights”? This strategy of selling war was employed especially in the case of the NATO attack on the former Yugoslavia, when Belgrade was bombed in order to “protect” the Kosovars from the Serbian army—an event that took place only a few months after the release of Spielberg’s film. Since then, the discourse of human rights, democracy, and humanitarian aid has been constantly mobilized whenever the US and its Western allies have conducted military operations around the globe. “Peace bombs”—an updated version of Orwell’s “War is Peace”—have by now become a regular feature of the current landscape of global war. Where does Spielberg’s movie stand in relation to this ideological framework? Commenting on the definition he had given in an interview of Captain Miller’s rescue operation as a “mission of mercy,” Spielberg added that at some point he had begun to wonder whether such humanitarian mission should not be

⁴³ Owen, “Memory, War and American Identity,” p. 272.

⁴⁴ Goldstein, “World War II Chic.”

better described as a "mission of murder."⁴⁵ Despite the delightful ambiguity of his phrase (why not call it a suicide mission, for example?), it is quite clear that by "murder" Spielberg here means "being murdered." In other words, he is pointing to what many see as the central moral dilemma of the movie, wondering whether it is still possible to describe as a mission of mercy a mission that, in order to save the life of one particular soldier, ends up costing several American lives. It goes without saying that, since this is not just a war movie, but a Good War movie, the question of whether we can call mission of mercy an expedition in which its participants will be asked not only to risk losing their own lives but will inevitably be required to *take* other people's lives—that is, they will be required to become or continue to be murderers—can be almost completely, and to some extent justifiably, ignored by Spielberg. And yet it is hard to miss the ideological implications in the way the film solves the mission of mercy/mission of murder dilemma. What Spielberg is actually suggesting is that what counts as a murder is not the loss of a human life, but the loss of an *American* life. If in the case of World War II there was technically no way to ensure that a mission of mercy might not at some point degenerate into mission of murder (in Spielberg's sense), it was left to contemporary high-tech weapons to fulfill (at least in part) the military utopia implied in Spielberg's moral and strategic logic. As we all know, only a few years before *Ryan* was filmed, the first military US engagement in the Gulf cost 400 American lives versus, by most estimates, roughly 100,000 Iraqi lives.⁴⁶ Gulf War I has obscenely demonstrated that a "humanitarian" mission can indeed easily turn into a mission of murder, though in a sense that is directly opposite to Spielberg's paradigm. Violence is not the price we must unfortunately pay for our desire to be "merciful." Violence is the way in which our "mercy" is expressed.

I am not suggesting that Spielberg's intention in *Saving Private Ryan* was simply to celebrate the newly found imperial masculinity of the United States after the triumph of operation "Desert Storm," or to

⁴⁵ The interview is quoted in Schickel, "Reel War."

⁴⁶ On the "disappearance" of such a huge number of Iraqi dead from the chronicles of Gulf War One, see the last chapter of Margot Norris's wonderful book, *Writing War in the Twentieth Century* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), pp. 234-51.

consciously pave the way for further deployments of the World War Two discursive and narrative paradigm. What I do wish to emphasize, however, is that the logic underlying Spielberg's filmic narrative, whose initial display of the horrors of war quickly gives way to a celebration of our heroes' victorious violence, and then goes on to focus on a humanitarian mission that is a mission of murder only when those on our side are killed—a logic that sees war as horrible because "it" kills and not because it requires that all its participants become killers—is the same one that, in the Spring of 1999, pointed to the atrocities committed by the Serbian army against the Kosovars as justifying the NATO's "humanitarian bombings," which in their turn killed hundreds of civilians.

Everyone, along with Spielberg, should wish to honor the American soldiers who gave their life to defeat Nazism, and yet one wonders why neither *Saving Private Ryan* nor other current "Good War films" make any mention of the fact that while 300,000 US soldiers died bravely to save the world from Hitler's barbarism, even though subjected to a totalitarian regime of their own, some sixteen *million* Russians lost their lives in World War Two. This is a historical fact that terribly complicates things for those who are enamored (or blinded) by the myth of the Good War, with its neat confines between Good and Evil. As David Walsh has noted, "[b]eginning in 1941 Soviet forces faced 75 percent of German troops, with only one quarter of Hitler's troops deployed on all other fronts. This had dropped to 58 percent by D-Day, but Axis troops fighting against the USSR still outnumbered those arrayed against a cross-Channel invasion by nearly three to one [... Yet o]ne would not gather from Spielberg's movie that any forces other than American ones were engaged in the struggle against Hitler's armies."⁴⁷ When mentioning these facts there is always the risk of being considered a fan of Stalin. But these are simply hard facts which authoritative historians of different ideological persuasion have carefully and repeatedly documented. As Arno Mayer reminded us some years ago, "Certainly during the Second World War the Red Army contributed infinitely more 'blood, sweat, and tears' than the US military to turning the tide of battle against the Axis powers in Europe.

⁴⁷ David Walsh, "Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*: Small truths at the expense of big ones," July 31, 1998, *World Socialist Web Site*, [http://wsws.org/ arts/1998/july1998/ryan-j31.shtml](http://wsws.org/arts/1998/july1998/ryan-j31.shtml).

Had the Red Army not broken the back of the Wehrmacht in 1942–1943, more than likely the American-led landings in Normandy in June 1944 would have turned into a tragic bloodbath.”⁴⁸ Similar arguments can be found in Liddell Hart’s classic *History of Second World War*, which insists that victory in Europe was made possible to a large extent by the nearly superhuman sacrifices and efforts of the Red Army.⁴⁹ The Nazi war machinery was largely destroyed by the Soviet forces and, as all should know, the turning point on the European theatre was not—as one would imagine by watching *Saving Private Ryan*—the landing in Normandy, but Von Paulus’s defeat in Stalingrad. Considering what Spielberg has stated in an interview regarding the hope that, by seeing his movie, people would feel the need to know more about World War Two, I don’t think it is inappropriate to insist on these details. The point is not, of course, to deny the importance of D-Day and of the US contribution to the war in Europe, nor to ignore that while the Allied armies were at the service of democratic (though far from perfect) societies, the commander –in-chief of the Red Army was a brutal and paranoid dictator. The point is simply that one must have the courage—if one does indeed want spectators to learn some history—to remember also facts that do not fit into a sort of fairy-tale version of the Good War. If we do not wish to see the “angels” on the shoulders of Miller and his comrades transformed into Stealth aircrafts and drones engaged in missions of murder to be sold to public opinion as missions of mercy, we should perhaps begin to look at our common past more honestly. Whatever merits *Saving Private Ryan* may have in terms of filming style and technical innovations, its mythologizing can hardly help us to get a better grasp of a messy, contradictory, and bloody past from which—as the contemporary global war scenario demonstrates—we seem to have indeed learned all too little.

⁴⁸ Arno Mayer, “Beyond the drumbeat: Iraq, preventive war, ‘Old Europe,’” *The Monthly Review* 54 (March 2003), http://www.monthlyreview.org/0303_mayer.htm

⁴⁹ B. H. Liddell Hart, *History of Second World War* (New York: Putnam, 1971).

Part II

Homer in the Pacific: Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*

Cain murdered Abel, and blood cried out from the earth [...]. The force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted. That is why the first event is known to have been an expulsion, and the last is hoped to be a reconciliation and return. So memory pulls us forward, so prophecy is only brilliant memory [...].

— Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

A genre “in denial”

In a polemical chapter of his *Movie Wars*, Jonathan Rosenbaum compares the enthusiastic response accorded by critics to *Saving Private Ryan* with the hostile reactions most reviewers reserved for Joe Dante's animated film, *Small Soldiers*. As Rosenbaum notes, the two movies were released at nearly the same time and both came out of Spielberg's Hollywood studio, DreamWorks. However, only a few critics understood that the true “anti-war movie” was *Small Soldiers*, whereas *Saving Private Ryan* was nothing but a “sophisticated form of warmongering.” While Dante's devastating anti-militarist satire was completely misunderstood, with review after review representing the film as an attempt to cash in on Disney's *Toy Story*'s success, the presumed anti-war message of *Ryan* was often praised, and even the *New Yorker* managed to describe it on its cover page as the film “to end to all wars.”⁵⁰ Though I broadly agree with Rosenbaum's argument, here I am not so much interested in his critical assessment of Spielberg's

⁵⁰ Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Movie Wars. How Hollywood and the Media Conspire to Limit What Films We Can See* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2000), pp. 63-77.

and Dante's productions as in the more general point he implicitly raises. Whatever interpretive skills any individual film critic may display, it is always rather difficult to establish what distinguishes a "war film" from an "anti-war film." As we have already remarked above, many critics seem to believe that the more a movie clearly and unreservedly shows the horrors of war, the stronger its anti-war message will be. This is, however, a largely naïve view, even though more skeptical perspectives are not problem-free. If it is true that, as Rosenbaum writes, many spectators are all too eager to plunge into the "blood baths" of war cinema, it is also the case that it would be hard to imagine a filmic technique providing a foolproof mechanism capable of preventing scenes of violence from generating some kind of visual appeal. This is one of the reasons why, as Rosenbaum writes, some film critics have reached the drastic conclusion that "the anti-war film does not exist."⁵¹ Any war film, whatever its director's intentions, is always at risk of being "wrongly" decoded by the spectator. A scene of violence meant to raise the viewer's disgust may turn into a form of war pornography.⁵²

The idea that all war films may in the last analysis turn out to be pro-war, or at best "neutral," however, would seem to be simply an inverted mirror-reflection of Spielberg's belief that all war films are anti-war films by default. No matter how complicated it may be to situate a movie in one of the two camps, it does not stand to reason to lump all war films into one general category. For example, one may have doubts about the extent to which Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal*

⁵¹ Rosenbaum, *Movie Wars*, p. 69.

⁵² The dilemma facing war cinema is thus not that different from the one confronting war literature, though it is nearly universally accepted that images are more difficult to control than words. The horror in cinema (or photography) strikes the viewer in a different, apparently more direct way than when it is described in writing ("a picture is worth a thousand words"). The power of the image—its ability to affect our emotions—may turn out to be, however, also its limit. Whereas literature may combine representation with interpretation by evoking both emotional appeal and rational detachment, visual images of horror and cruelty may convey our reactions into a pre-political limbo. This is of course an enormously complicated issue, and Susan Sontag's writings are probably the obligatory starting point for any further reflection on the topic. See *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

Jacket (1987) may be judged an anti-war film.⁵³ Yet there can be little doubt that Kubrick's representation of the Vietnam War is light-years distant from that offered by John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968). Distinctions must be made, though whether it is possible to argue that the anti-war film is a genre, or even simply a sub-genre of the war film, is a difficult critical matter that does not admit of being easily settled. The problem, to my mind, is that there is little consensus on what would account for the anti-war or, more ambitiously, "pacifist" nature of a war film. In an article devoted precisely to the difficulty of offering an exact definition of the anti-war movie, Mark Richardson argues that the latter should be described as a "genre in denial" — a genre that tries to transcend its intrinsic limitations so as to provide a critique of martial ideology but which, more often than not, falls short and therefore ends up fulfilling "only a ritual function."⁵⁴ According to Richardson, Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* provides the perfect example of this inherent structural ambiguity of the genre or sub-genre of the war film. Though the film is obviously critical of the brutality and senselessness of war, and even though it tries in various ways to distance itself from generic conventions, Malick's movie — "beautiful" and "poetic" as is — raises no *political* questions on war in general, and World War Two in particular. Malick makes an appeal to our emotions, thereby invoking a form of "pre-political" indignation. In short, its anti-war message would seem to share many of the same defects of Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. True, Malick stays away from the patriotic overtones of Spielberg but, in Richardson's view, *The Thin Red Line* juxtaposes — in a naive and unsatisfactory sort of way — the Utopian community of the Melanesians, immersed in a tropical Eden, to the violence and evil of war. By seeking refuge in a realm of fantasy, Malick, in a way that is ultimately not that different from Spielberg's, refuses to investigate war as a historically determined phenomenon.

It is difficult to disagree with Richardson's observations on the genre of the war film. The so-called "anti-war cinema" has very often contributed very little to a serious critical understanding of war and

⁵³ See, for example, Jeffords' observations on the gender and racial politics of the movie (*Remasculinization*, pp. 169-80).

⁵⁴ Mark Richardson, "Forms of Resistance: A Lacanian Report On the Health of the Antiwar Film," *Film Journal* 11, http://www.thefilmjournal.com/issue_11/anti-war.html.

has in general preferred to mobilize our gut-response rather than stimulate our critical intelligence. It seems to me, however, that Richardson underestimates the hiatus separating *The Thin Red Line* from the war film tradition. Malick's movie is certainly not "political" in the sense wished-for by Richardson. The film does call attention to the mystifications of military propaganda ("Everything a lie," to quote Sergeant Top), but it must be conceded that—as also Colin MacCabe has noticed—*The Thin Red Line* is scarcely interested in exploring the historical and political context of World War Two.⁵⁵ One may argue that Malick's film is certainly far from being unique in this respect. As Trevor McKrisken and Andrew Pepper have remarked, it is hard to find any World War Two movie that has paid much attention to the historical background of the conflict and, in particular, to whatever its *causes* may have been.⁵⁶ Or, to move from cinema to literature, one may consider what is commonly considered as *the* American Civil War novel par excellence. *The Red Badge of Courage* has precious little to say about the political meaning of the war or its relevance in US history, and yet an analysis of its complex narrative and ideological machinery cannot stop at this preliminary observation. The fact that Crane seems to be uninterested in the causes of the Civil War, and that he privileges the symbolical and especially the psychological aspects of war, should not lead us to conclude that *The Red Badge* is an anti-historical novel. The novel's "historicity" may well lie elsewhere—for example, in its vexed relation to an emerging "society of the spectacle" in which war becomes another image for mass consumption, as a number of recent studies of Crane's work have insisted.⁵⁷

Analogously, while Malick refers only in passing to the strategic relevance of the battle of Guadalcanal as crucial to the defeat of Japan, this is not enough to argue that *The Thin Red Line* has no "political"

⁵⁵ Colin MacCabe, "Bayonets in Paradise," *Sight and Sound* 9, n.s. (Feb. 1999), pp. 11-14.

⁵⁶ Trevor B. McCrisken and Andrew Pepper, "Saving the Good War: Hollywood and World War II in the Post-Cold War World," in *American History and Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 89-130.

⁵⁷ See Amy Kaplan, "The Spectacle of War in Crane's Revision of History," in *New Essays on The Red Badge of Courage*, ed. Lee Clark Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), pp. 77-108; Giorgio Mariani, *Spectacular Narratives: Representations of Class and War in the American 1890s* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), pp. 139-171; Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane and the Economy of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 125-59.

intentions. More specifically, I would argue that the innovative and ultimately political value of the movie is to be found in the novel ways in which its camera focuses on *both* the hell of war and the “heaven” of human affects and dreams; on both the abjection of what J. Glenn Gray has called *Homo furens*, and the beauty and mystery of a natural world human beings seem to have forgotten and which can, instead, “fan the creative sparks within us and strengthen the concern for preserving ourselves and others.”⁵⁸ But before I say more on this score, let me state at the outset that the movie is by no means built around a simplistic juxtaposition between the Edenic tropical world of the Melanesians—described in the first section of the movie—and the infernal one of a war brought by evil non-natives. For Malick, as for the literary and philosophical sources on which he draws, paradise is always *lost* and therefore—as we shall see in a moment—also the Melanesian community, admirable as in some respects may be, is far from embodying a realized Utopia. This does not prevent Malick, however, from seizing alongside, and indeed *within* the hell of war, the contours of “another world,” as if the “glory” and the “light” constantly escaping our grasp needed the apocalypse of war to fully reveal their “shining,” intoxicating beauty. After all, as John P. Mc Williams has written in another context, “visions of Paradise are often beheld most clearly by men in infernal conditions.”⁵⁹ In sum, Malick dares to confront head-on a problem most war cinema often ignores—the problem of “peace” as something more, and more complicated, than just the absence of war and the soldiers’ desire to go back home. In Malick’s movie, peace stands out as a moral, affective and at the same time *aesthetic* force whose power is equal, but opposite, to that of war.

In pursuing his ambitious filmic project, Malick must accept a number of risks not only on a “political” plane, but also on a purely artistic one. *The Thin Red Line* unfolds erratically, its narrative often interrupted by poetic and philosophical monologues some viewers have found either baroque or outright pretentious and irritating. In my view, what at first may indeed appear as flaws, read more closely are the very elements that manage to impart to the story a Homeric depth.

⁵⁸ J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*. With an introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York: Harper Thorchbooks, 1970), p. 235. For his definition of *Homo furens*, see p. 27.

⁵⁹ John P. McWilliams, *Hawthorne, Melville, and the American character: A Looking-Glass Business* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 134.

The often-disembodied words, spoken by voices of characters who are not even on screen when their words are heard, or indeed by voices of people who are never seen in the movie, along with the majestic shots of the natural world, should be considered as so many equivalents of the epic's proverbial digressions. They shift the focus from the main action and at the same time complicate the meaning of the visual narrative. In this sense I agree with Simon Critchley, when he writes that *The Thin Red Line* is "is a war movie in the same way that Homer's *Iliad* is a war poem."⁶⁰ Though I do not think that this should be taken to imply that war is not the major focus of Malick's movie, I would argue that, like all masterpieces of either cinema or literature, also *The Thin Red Line* cannot easily be contained within a specific generic category, and the term "epic" may be a useful one to point to features of the film that not only exceed but actually reconfigure the usual war-movie narrative.⁶¹

However, there is a further, perhaps deeper sense in which *The Thin Red Line* may be said to be "Homeric" besides its lyricism, its melancholia, and the "poetry" — both verbal but especially visual — through which the experience of war is represented. I am not thinking of direct quotations from Homer's text: the only character who recites verses from the *Iliad* is Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte), a figure with whom the spectator is unlikely to identify, especially when compared with the more humane Captain Staros (Elias Koteas). In fact, I would suggest that, with his "literal" citation of the *Iliad* (which he claims to have studied *in the original* at West Point!) Tall evokes a myth of war that has little to do with the actual conditions in which modern wars are fought. Indeed, the filmic narrative contrasts the authoritativeness of "ancient Greek" — which in the character of Tall is at one with his rigid notions about military discipline — with a "contemporary Greek" — a Greek in flesh and blood — like Captain Staros, who sees war as a form

⁶⁰ Simon Critchley, "Calm—on Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," in *The Thin Red Line*, ed. David Davies (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 12. Critchley here seems to be echoing a well-known line from *The New York Times'* review of Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*: "to call *Going After Cacciato* a novel about war is like calling *Moby Dick* a novel about whales."

⁶¹ "The ambition of *The Thin Red Line* is unapologetically epic, the scale is not historical but mythical, and the language is lyrical, not metaphysical." Critchley, "Calm," p. 12.

of senseless slaughter, and who refuses to send his men on a mission in which many of them would be openly exposed to Japanese fire.

Following Malick's lead, I would like to contrast the prestige of the *Iliad* as the archetype of a certain "heroic" war culture, with the interpretation of the epic given by Simone Weil on the onset of World War Two—an interpretation that some classicists have objected to, but whose cultural relevance is undisputable. In her celebrated reading of the *Iliad* as a "poem of force," Weil calls attention to a number of "Homeric" traits featured also in Malick's narration. My point is not to uncover a possible, hitherto unacknowledged "source" of Malick's film (there are no explicit references to Weil in *The Thin Red Line*) but simply to highlight what I would describe as an elective affinity between the French philosopher and the American film director.⁶² Faced with the immense tragedy of World War Two, and more specifically with a European fascism that claimed the Greek-Roman heritage to promote martial virtues and the cult of war, Simone Weil tried, *au contraire*, to uncover in the founding text of the western literary tradition a frank and brutal, if often misunderstood, representation of the cruelties of the battlefield. In other words, Weil re-read one of the key texts used to glorify war as a text that, as she wrote elsewhere, should have warned European against starting another Trojan War.⁶³ Analogously, Terrence Malick does in some sense look at World War Two—as Colin MacCabe accuses him of doing—as if the latter were "a modern version of the Trojan war," but if the gaze of his camera may in some respects appear to be a "mythicizing" one, this does not make it an apolitical gaze.⁶⁴ For Malick, as for Weil, the central agent of the martial universe is not the human being but "force. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man's flesh shrinks

⁶² This is not to suggest that Malick thinks Homer's epic may provide him with a stable narrative paradigm to frame his war film. On the contrary, Malick would certainly agree with Fredric Jameson when the latter writes that "It is not to be imagined [...] that we can return to some earlier state of wholeness, in which, as in Homer, individual hand-to-hand combat would at one and the same time somehow epitomize totality." F. Jameson, "War and Representation," *PMLA* 124 (October 2009), Special Topic "War", pp. 1533-47.

⁶³ See "Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie" ("Let's Not Fight the Trojan War Again"), *Nouveaux Cahiers* 1: 2-3 (1-15 April 1937).

⁶⁴ MacCabe, "Bayonets," p. 13.

away."⁶⁵ From Weil's perspective, this undermines the idea of war as a theater where valiant combatants may perform "heroic" deeds. As she argues, crushed by the weight of "force," "the hero becomes a *thing* dragged behind a chariot in the dust."⁶⁶ Similarly, as we hear in one of the many voiceovers punctuating Malick's film, far from being heroic icons, the bodies of dead soldiers are "no different than dead dogs, once you get used to the idea. They're meat, kid." For both Weil and Malick, what Sarah Cole describes as the "enchantment" of war—"the tendency to see in violence some kind of transformative power"—is altogether fraudulent.⁶⁷ And just as for Weil the *Iliad* offers its readers no "comforting fiction [...] no consoling prospect of immortality; and on the hero's head no washed-out halo of patriotism descends," Malick's partial erasure of the historical context of World War Two—far from being an a-political gesture—is instrumental in preventing any "enchantment" of the horror of the battlefield in the name of the "comforting fiction" of the Good War.⁶⁸

Between Heidegger and James Jones

The notion that Malick's is a "philosophical" film has been underscored in many reviews, as well as analytically argued in a sizable number of scholarly essays. Before he turned to filmmaking, Malick

⁶⁵ Simone Weil, *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*, trans. Mary McCarthy (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1956, p. 11.

⁶⁶ Weil, *The Iliad*, p. 3.

⁶⁷ Sarah Cole, "Enchantment, Disenchantment, War, Literature," *PMLA* 124 (October 2009), Special Topic "War", p. 1633.

⁶⁸ Weil, *The Iliad*, p. 4. The reader may well wonder why what I earlier criticized in Spielberg (his failure to give a more accurate account of World War Two, which wasn't simply a "Good Americans versus Evil Nazis" affair) I am now praising as a narrative strategy resisting the Myth of the Good War. The problem is that Spielberg does not simply erase certain facets of history—he reinvents history as American mythology. The shots of the US flag bracketing the movie are in this respect significant. Malick does his best to erase from the movie any "consoling" historical background, and in particular any "comforting" nationalist fiction, whereas Spielberg's movie—one need only think of the scene in which General Marshall is informed of the peculiarly tragic circumstances of the Ryan family, and his letter mentioning Abraham Lincoln—mobilizes certain historical details to sustain the mythology of the Good War.

studied philosophy at Harvard, where he worked closely with Stanley Cavell. Later, he taught at MIT and translated and introduced one of Heidegger's works.⁶⁹ Unsurprisingly, a number of critics have pointed to this controversial German philosopher as one of the main inspirational sources of *The Thin Red Line*. For example, in a dense essay, Kaja Silverman argues that Malick's film is actually much more "than a philosophically oriented film. It does philosophy." More specifically, in her view one could go as far as to argue that *The Thin Red Line* stands as the cinematic equivalent of Heidegger's "What Is Metaphysics?"⁷⁰ Given Malick's cultural interests, the abundance of references to Heidegger in the critical literature on *The Thin Red Line* is altogether understandable. However, this would also seem to confirm Richardson's hypothesis regarding the "pre-political" nature of the film. Very often, in fact, the evocation of Heidegger has the scope of emphasizing the theme of death as a natural, transhistorical fact at the expense of death as a specific by-product of war. A concern with being-toward-death displaces a reality where death is delivered by human hands, not by the vagaries of nature. "Philosophy" becomes instrumental in erasing history. War is no longer grasped as a concrete social fact but, as Richardson has noted, as "an inevitable consequence of the inauthentic *Dasein* losing the correct mode of access to the question of Being".⁷¹

Even as interesting and brilliant an essay as Silverman's does not seem to be wholly exempt from this plunge into the metaphysical. On the one hand, she observes that "Malick takes phenomenology to a

⁶⁹ *Vom Wesen des Grundes: The Essence of Reasons*, trans. T. Malick (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

⁷⁰ Kaja Silverman, "All Things Shining," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, eds. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: California UP, 2003), p. 324. Other Heideggerian readings of *The Thin Red Line* can be found in Simon Critchley, "Calm"; Hubert Dreyfus and Camilo Salazar Prince, "The Thin Red Line: Dying without Demise, Demise without Dying," in *The Thin Red Line*, ed. D. Davies, pp. 29-44; Marc Furstenau and Leslie MacAvoy, "Terrence Malick's Heideggerian Cinema: War and the Question of Being in *The Thin Red Line*", in *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, ed. Hannah Patterson (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2003), pp. 173-85; Adrian Gargett, "Is This Darkness in You Too?", *Talking Pictures*, n. d. http://www.talkingpix.co.uk/Article_Thin%20Red%20Line.html; Hwanhee Lee, "Terrence Malick", *Senses of Cinema*, November 2002, <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/malick.html>.

⁷¹ Richardson, "Forms of Resistance."

place where Heidegger himself was not capable of bringing it: the battlefield," thus developing in an original direction some Heideggerian intuitions.⁷² On the other hand, however, Silverman argues that "Malick's concern in this film is death in general and not war in particular."⁷³ This later remark sounds odd when compared to the former one. If death and not war is what Malick wants to talk about, why should we praise him for having taken Heidegger to the battlefield when he could have chosen so many other contexts where death rules, from a hospital ward with terminal patients to a famine-stricken African region? This is not to deny that death is a central preoccupation in Malick's movie. The theme of mortality, however, cannot be severed from the larger theme of war, lest we reduce the movie's context to a pure, largely insignificant, pretext.⁷⁴

As I try to construct a reading of the movie partly different from both Silverman's and Richardson's, I would like to call attention not only to the elective affinity between Terrence Malick and Simone Weil, but also to other philosophical and literary sources that I believe are useful to arrive at a better, more comprehensive understanding of *The Thin Red Line*. In particular, I think one should not discount the importance of the James Jones novel on which the movie is, however loosely, based. One must be grateful to James Cain for having shown that, contrary to prevalent opinion, Malick's film follows a number of important leads taken unquestionably from Jones's novel.⁷⁵ There are

⁷² Kaja Silverman, "All Things Shining," p. 326.

⁷³ Kaja Silverman, "All Things Shining," p. 328.

⁷⁴ An aspect of the movie that could be explored further is the one that concerns the ties between the fear of death and the world of war—a world that Enzo Mazzi sees as "dominated by the sacred." As he argues in *Cristianesimo ribelle* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 2008), violence and war base much of their power on an "obsession for security" that is in its own turn rooted in anxiety towards death and a terror of the "void." Though developed in a different context, somewhat similar considerations can also be found in Samuel Weber, *Targets of Opportunity: On the Militarization of Thinking* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). See especially his remark on how "the death of the neighbor, as other, particularly when it is deliberately inflicted, can be experienced as one's ability to survive" (p. 55). What makes of Witt an "anti-heroic hero" is, among other things, his way of coming to terms with his own finitude. Based on insights like these, I suppose it would be possible to politicize the "Heideggerian" texture of *The Thin Red Line*.

⁷⁵ James Cain, "'Writing in His Musical Key': Terrence Malick's Vision of *The Thin Red Line*", *Film Criticism* 25 (Fall 2000), pp. 2-24.

of course significant discrepancies between the text and the movie, and some of Malick's characters are best seen as *transfigurations* rather than adaptations of those found in the pages of Jones's novel. It is, however, important to realize that in taking his lead from Jones, Malick had in mind not only the novel after which he titled his movie, but also *From Here to Eternity* (1951), the work in which Jones introduced for the first time some of the characters who reappear in *The Thin Red Line*, which, with the posthumously published *The Whistle*, comprise Jones' "war trilogy." As Cain argues, "it is undeniable that Malick has taken liberties with Jones's text," but "these additions and emendations must not be seen as alien or inimical to the author's vision of combat or to his novel."⁷⁶ The Melanesian interludes, for example, are nowhere to be found in the novel, but in terms of structure both novel and film eschew plot development, preferring a fragmentary narrative in which episodes do not add up to a kind of individual or collective *Bildungsroman*, as many traditional war stories do. What has been noted (often approvingly) of the movie—that "it barely has any narrative at all"—applies to Jones' novel as well, and it may be said to contribute to both Malick's and Jones's success in highlighting "the chaos and contingency of war."⁷⁷ Moreover, in both Malick and Jones the infantry division "C-for-Charlie" stands out as the collective subject of the narrative and both authors shift rapidly from one character's point of view to another's, mixing voices, thoughts, and feelings in such a way that is at times hard to establish who exactly said or thought something. Although some figures are more significant than others, both Jones and Malick do without a narrator. As Terry Southern has written of the novel, Jones seems to take the omniscient narrator "toward a logical extreme, where the narration itself, although faceless, without personality, expresses feelings, both of individuals and collectively, in their own terms."⁷⁸ What Southern says of Jones's text is homologous to what several critics have noted about Malick's narrative strategy. For example, Barbara Grespi emphasizes the fact that the movie "does not have a narrator, but several ones whose voices combine according to a musical logic. These interior voices, fragments of thoughts, prayers,

⁷⁶ James Cain, "'Writing,'" p. 4.

⁷⁷ McCrisken and Pepper, "Saving the Good War," p. 101.

⁷⁸ As quoted in Steven R. Carter, *James Jones: An American Literary Orientalist Master* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1998), p. 98.

letters, are mixed together in a way that hardly ever corresponds to the bodies on screen, thus giving the impression that the one who speaks is 'one big soul.'"⁷⁹ Malick's narrative technique may therefore legitimately be seen as his personal attempt to emulate on a visual plane what Jones was trying to do in writing.⁸⁰

As far as the movie script is concerned, several lines are taken from Jones's novel, and others from the first volume of his war trilogy, *From Here To Eternity*. As Cain carefully shows, both an important interior monologue spoken by Witt (Jim Caveziel) in the opening scenes, and one of the conversations between Witt and sergeant Welsh (aka Top, Sean Penn), are lifted from that novel. In order to understand the reason for Malick's choice, it is necessary to recall that Jones's trilogy was conceived as a sort of continuum, where some of the key characters reappear from text to text under different names. This is also the case with the protagonist of *From Here To Eternity*, Robert Lee Prewitt, who—though he dies at the end of the novel—reappears in *The Thin Red Line* as Witt. As with sergeant Warden, who in the trilogy's second volume is transformed into Welsh, or with sergeant Stark, who becomes Storm, behind these transfigurations there is Jones's interest in both American Transcendentalism (and especially in Ralph Waldo Emerson's work), and Oriental religions and philosophies. In the author's narrative plan, characters were meant to migrate from one text to the next as "reincarnations" of souls who, through suffering and hardships, proceed on a spiritual path where their individual destinies become part of a Karma or "Oversoul" (the "big soul" mentioned by Witt in one of his voiceover comments) much larger and comprehensive than any single human self.

Although this Transcendentalist perspective is also present in Jones's *The Thin Red Line*, it receives more explicit attention in *From Here to Eternity*. There, for example, through the character of Malloy, Jones explores in a rather detailed way a series of philosophical and spiritual issues that seem to come straight out of Emerson, and a great

⁷⁹ Barbara Grespi, "L'altra faccia della nuova Hollywood: il cinema di Terrence Malick," *Ácoma* 29-30 (2004), p. 208. My translation.

⁸⁰ In this respect Jones's novel and Malick's film may be considered as rare attempts to give shape to the "subject without a subject" often evoked by war memoirs—that is, to the feeling of transcendence of one's individual consciousness that is largely responsible for making the experience of war not only a tragic but also a fascinating, at times quasi-mystical, one.

relevance is also given to the Thoreauvian-Gandhian doctrine of “passive resistance,” which Malloy resorts to during his brutal incarceration and which he then teaches to his disciple Prewitt. No reader of *From Here To Eternity* can miss the fact that, in his movie, Malick has fashioned his own Witt after the latter’s previous “incarnation” as Prewitt, a soldier who unconditionally loves his company and shows courage and integrity in rebelling against an inept, often sadist military class. Even though I am not sure to what extent it is possible to describe Witt as the movie’s “main character,” I think Witt should definitely be seen not only as the figure that ideally connects Jones’s two novels to Malick’s *Thin Red Line*, but also as the narrative device—the eyes and the voice—through which the film conducts a quest that is both individual and collective. This quest, as we shall see, draws inspiration from the same Transcendentalist sources that were a major influence on James Jones, beginning with Emerson’s philosophy and Walt Whitman’s poetry.

Kid Galahad and his way of seeing

In remodeling Witt as a figure much closer to Prewitt, Malick chooses to emphasize the latter’s most admirable traits without, however, altogether erasing his contradictoriness. In *From Here to Eternity*, Prewitt promises his mother on her deathbed that he would never hurt anyone “unless its absolute must, unless you jist have to do it.”⁸¹ This is the main reason why, after blinding an opponent in a boxing match, he refuses to continue fighting for his company. This infuriates his superiors and, ironically enough, this morally sound decision will initiate a series of events culminating in Prewitt’s murder of the sadist Fatso. In *From Here to Eternity* the attempt to think and practice non-violence in a martial world ends in utter disaster even though, in the novel’s final pages, Prewitt shows his integrity by refusing to use his gun against the military police, thus facing his own death with a renunciation of violence consistent with what he has learned about passive resistance from Malloy. All in all, Prewitt seems to deserve the nickname of “Kid Galahad” received by his friend Maggio. The latter’s

⁸¹ James Jones, *From Here to Eternity* (New York: Dell, 1951), p. 15.

intentions are ironic—if Prewitt is in some sense “pure,” he is certainly not as chaste as the Round Table knight who succeeds in the quest for the Holy Grail. However, there can be no question concerning Prewitt’s courageous integrity. The independent spirit of this young “bolshevick” fatally puts him at odds with a military institution lacking the honor Prewitt naively attributes to it, thus exalting the tragic as well as romantic traits of this character.⁸²

Malick’s Witt is a further evolution of Jones’s Prewitt. The Witt of the movie is as courageous, loyal, and generous as Prewitt was but, most importantly, he seems to have perfected the latter’s active passivity, a quality we most clearly see in Witt’s extraordinary ability, in the midst of war’s horrors, to observe the tragedies unfolding around him with a calm that has nothing to do with emotional detachment or indifference, and stands out as his peculiar way of relating to the world.⁸³ In this respect it is quite clear that, in reinventing Witt, Malick has chosen to exploit all the prerogatives tied to his name. *Wit* is the root of the verb “to witness,” and is a term whose etymology evokes not only the idea of knowing (*witan*, in Old English) but also the sense of *sight*: the Proto-Germanic *witanan* means “to have seen” and therefore the “mental ability” or “knowledge” implied by the term *wit* is that of someone who has seen an event with his or her own eyes. Witt’s eyes are not the only ones through which the filmic reality is apprehended, but there is no doubt that Malick privileges his visual angle and, furthermore, repeatedly indulges on Witt’s eyes by filming him both as he looks at the world and in the act of looking at the camera, and therefore at us spectators.

Witt’s way of seeing has been the object of a lengthy and sophisticated analysis by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, who argue that “[h]is look is the most haunting presence in the film [... though] it is not expressive as Top’s is.”⁸⁴ Witt’s role as an eye witness is expressed first and foremost by his peculiar way of looking, which at times may even

⁸² Jones would later consider the romanticism of some of the characters in *From Here to Eternity* excessive. Hence his decision to re-present them in *The Thin Red Line* in a more “realistic,” perhaps even “naturalistic” key. See Steven Carter, *James Jones*, p. 63.

⁸³ Critchley’s essay is the obligatory reference point here.

⁸⁴ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (London: BFI, 2004), p. 158. Top is Sergeant Welsh’s nickname.

appear “insensitive,” or in any case “neutral,” and seems unchanged whether he is facing the death of a comrade who by mistake has pulled off a grenade, or focusing on the intoxicating beauty of pristine nature, or on the Melanesian children gathering shells on the beach.⁸⁵ In Bersani’s and Dutoit’s view, the seemingly “unfeeling” reactions registered by Witt’s eyes exemplify a way of relating to the world that has nothing to do with “spectacle”—with the foreseeable emotional response that would confirm the distance between the viewer and the object of their gaze—and, instead, makes for a form of “witnessing identical to total absorption.” Witt’s “is a look that takes in, that abolishes distance.”⁸⁶ It is as if Witt were a nearly *transparent* subject. Even though he obviously has his own visual angle, this soldier from Kentucky seems to rest content with registering what he sees without trying to impose a specific order or meaning on the world he sees. Malick endows Witt with a look that appears capable of seeing “nothing but the world’s visibility.”⁸⁷

Bersani and Dutoit, therefore, consider Witt’s look as playing in the movie a much more significant role than anything he (or anybody else) says. The words he utters either in dialogues or voiceovers, though raising themes of universal importance (from the evil of war to the vision of “another world” and the speculations on the “one big soul” shared by all human beings) are still tied to a “point of view,” no matter how enigmatic. His words offer *interpretations* of reality. Witt’s “wholly receptive gaze,” vice versa, makes of him “a subject divested of subjectivity [...] a subject without claims on the world, who owns nothing [...]. Witt approaches the limit of a subject without selfhood, ideally an anonymous subject.”⁸⁸ Even though Bersani and Dutoit never analyze the relation between the movie and Jones’s texts, it would be consistent with their argument to say that Malick picks up the Kid Galahad image of *From Here to Eternity* and, with no irony attached in this case, projects it into the *purity* of Witt’s gaze.

I find Bersani’s and Dutoit’s reading of the film by and large convincing. Moreover, as we shall in a moment, it is in many ways consistent with the cultural and philosophical traces of Transcendentalism

⁸⁵ Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, p. 159.

⁸⁶ Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, pp. 161, 160.

⁸⁷ Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, p. 163.

⁸⁸ Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, pp. 164-65.

to be found in both Jones's work and Malick's movie, where they are explicitly referred to by Charles Ives's musical score as well as by the numerous voiceovers, especially Witt's.⁸⁹ Before I try to establish a connection between the Emersonian notion of self and Walt Whitman's poetic vision, on the one hand, and Bersani's and Dutoit's analysis, on the other, I would like to point out where I partially disagree with the two critics' argument. Bersani and Dutoit correctly acknowledge that Witt's look—"neutral" as it tries to be—does not altogether eliminate the problem of perspective. They realize, in other words, that his way of seeing cannot be entirely impersonal since it remains anchored to an individual subject. Yet they insist that Malick's film embodies the utopia of a way of seeing that emancipates itself from a concrete individual's personality, to the point that we should accept the existence of a wide gap between Witt's language—which cannot be as transparent as his look—and his eyes, which bear witness to the violence of war with an "inexpressiveness" analogous to that of nature. The questions posed by Witt on why there is evil in the world cannot be answered linguistically. It is only by a certain way of *looking at the world* that Malick thinks it may be possible not so much to answer, as to find a key to articulate the ethical and philosophical problems raised by Witt (and by others). Hence the importance of the several close-ups of Witt's face, in which the character's eyes are turned toward the spectators and "receive" us in the same way they receive the rest of the world, and implicitly ask us to do the same: to adopt, that is, his perspective, his infinite receptivity. "[T]he close-up in *The Thin Red Line* transmits a relational lesson of great simplicity, one that appears to ask us to do little more than *to let the world be*."⁹⁰

The problem, however, is that Witt's look is not always capable of *not* reading the world or, to put it in slightly different terms, his receptivity, however exceptional, interferes with a culturally determined horizon of expectations. An eye that would absorb everything in an

⁸⁹ The "Unanswered Question" by Charles Ives (1874-1954) is one of the musical scores of the movie. This piece, as Ives himself has explained, is inspired by American Transcendentalism in general, and by the work of Thoreau and Emerson, in particular. Of the latter, Ives writes: "Though a great poet and prophet, he is greater, possibly, as an invader of the unknown—America's deepest explorer of the spiritual immensities." *Essays Before a Sonata: The Majority and Other Writings*, ed. Howard Boatwright (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 11.

⁹⁰ Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, p. 164.

undifferentiated way would register only chaos. Even the eyes of “nature,” in fact—the eyes of a bird, for example—may lack ethical and cultural filters as we humans understand them but are by no means void of specific features that make them focus on certain aspects of reality rather than others. Moreover, though it is true that Malick’s film does not have a plot proper and consciously pursues a narrative strategy meant to convey “the confusion and sense of randomness” of war, I believe *there is* a temporal logic in the filmic narration—a logic that is important to understanding the overall meaning of the movie.⁹¹ Witt may be a subject approaching anonymity, but he is inevitably confined to the body and the personality of a specific individual, caught in a specific set of events. While Bersani and Dutoit have duly emphasized Witt’s special status as a sort of Jamesian filmic reflector, perhaps more attention needs to be paid to the tensions that an aesthetic project such as Malick’s inevitably generates. Even though I think it is correct to say that Malick aspires to a mute cinema, where everything would be expressed through visual language, it is unthinkable that what Bersani and Dutoit themselves describe as an aesthetics that is also an *ethics*, may be both accessible and operative at a purely visual level. In short, the friction between verbal and visual language cannot be altogether transcended and reconciled by the purity of Witt’s look. What is at stake here, among other things, is the question of the border between what is natural and what is cultural—a crucial issue in any discussion of war and violence, and one that the movie addresses, in particular, in its portrayal of Witt’s relationship with the Melanesians.

Violence, Nature, and Culture

In *From Here to Eternity*, Prewitt, after killing Fatso Judson, goes AWOL and seeks refuge in the bungalow that his lover Alma shares with her friend Georgette. The house is perceived by Prewitt as “a Spanish hacienda in a fairy tale”—as an alternative, nearly magical space where he dreams of escaping the rigors and cruelty of the military world.⁹² The tropical paradise where, at the film’s outset, we find

⁹¹ McCrisken and Pepper, “Saving the Good War,” p. 101.

⁹² *From Here to Eternity* (New York: Dell, 1951), p. 425.

Witt, may be considered as the counterpart of the Hawaiian hideout in *From Here to Eternity*. When decoding the film's idyllic opening scenes, however, we should bear in mind that, just as in *From Here* it is mainly Prewitt's fantasy that transforms Alma's and Georgette's bungalow into a fairy tale retreat, also what we see on screen are images at least in part filtered through the mind and the eyes of Witt. The beauty and purity of that world (especially as far as its socio-cultural texture is concerned) are not altogether objective, but rather the product of a look that seizes that world's most attractive features.⁹³ The very first words we hear when Witt is on screen are questions concerning a nature that is not at peace with itself: "What is this war at the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? The land contend with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power, but two?" Though these questions would seem to rule out the notion of a pristine, uncontaminated, unfallen state of nature, before he has any direct experience of the battlefield Witt displays a marked tendency to idealize Melanesian society as a happy, playful, egalitarian community, absolutely antithetical to the martial universe.⁹⁴ It is altogether wrong, however, to imagine that Malick's point is to juxtapose an Edenic native world to the horror of Western warfare. Later in the movie, in a sequence occurring after the chaos and cruelty of war has been shown in detail, Witt goes back to the village only to find it radically changed.⁹⁵ Now he is witness to a quarrel between two groups of natives, and for the first time he notices the scars on their bodies. In his wanderings he enters a hut, where he finds a collection of human skulls—a further reminder that not only death, but most probably violence (and war) are not unknown to the Melanesians. In these scenes, the native community of Guadalcanal is shown to be morally compromised and can no longer

⁹³ Silverman too notices that Witt does not see the culture of the Solomon Islands objectively, "but rather the face of his own desire" ("All Things Shining," pp. 335-6).

⁹⁴ It is no accident that when Witt asks a native woman why "kids around here never fight," her answer—"sometimes when you see them playing, they always fight"—clearly suggests the limitations of an exclusively visual perception of the Melanesian world.

⁹⁵ This section of the movie bears a striking resemblance to an episode described in Chapter 32 of Herman Melville's *Typee*. Tommo, the novel's protagonist and narrator discovers a group of natives gathered around three embalmed human heads. The *Typee*'s cannibalism, of which the narrator has heard so much but has never personally witnessed, is a shocking revelation that not only frightens him, but calls into question the Edenic image of the natives he has entertained up to that point.

represent an alternative to the world of strife. It is obvious that if Malick loves to indulge on the beauty of this natural paradise, he also appears reluctant to endorse the image of a primordial peaceful world cultivated by Witt during his first AWOL experience.

Rather than simplistically contrast nature and culture, *The Thin Red Line* tries to rethink this fundamental structural opposition. In particular, the narration shows that the opening question regarding the “war” at the heart of nature is not posed in culturally and linguistically correct terms. It is true that the image of the crocodile in the movie’s first shot would seem to emphasize the violence that is very much a part of the natural, and in particular of the animal world, but we must also note that the term “war” in the film’s first voiceover introduces an explicitly human element within an essentially non-human world. The struggle for survival opposing predators to their prey, or the strife among plants for sunlight and vital space, may be perceived as a form of “war” only by human eyes—only when the metaphorizing gaze of human culture has interpreted certain natural facts as emblems of a social (rather than a natural) activity. The opening question is in this sense marked by the same lack of sophistication that prevents Witt, before the experience of the battle, to seize the contradictory nature of Melanesian society. It is thus significant that, later on, a crocodile similar to the one shown in the opening sequence is captured by an American platoon and loaded onto a military vehicle. This enigmatic scene (we are never told *why* this operation is performed) not only relativizes the concept of predator (also a hunter par excellence, in a world dominated by “force,” may become a prey), but it also signals how human war is by no means the continuation of a presumed “war” at the heart of nature. On the contrary, human war is here shown in the act of cannibalizing what was earlier perceived as a symbol of nature’s own violence, as if to provide itself with an ideological alibi. The idea that the ferocity of the military may reflect the crocodile’s ruthlessness is completely overturned by Malick. The image of the bound and subdued crocodile stages that exploitation—at once cultural and material—of the natural world enacted by men in order to wage war on one another.⁹⁶ This camouflaging of human violence with “nature” is also

⁹⁶ It is no accident that Tall refers precisely to the “war is part of nature” argument (“Nature is cruel, Staros”) in order to convince the Greek captain of war’s ineluctability.

evident in the scene where Witt is killed. The Japanese soldiers who have completely surrounded him are wearing mimetic uniforms and, to boot, have covered their helmets with foliage, as if they were about to officiate one of those "vegetation cults" studied by Jessie Weston and mentioned in T. S. Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land*. In this case, however, Malick stands *against* any mythicization or enchantment of violence. The scene is not meant to provide any "natural" justification for the crime of war and in fact calls once again attention to how humans, in their violent pursuits, dislodge and subdue nature.

At the same time, it would be possible to argue that the problem of the violence at the heart of nature (as suggested not only by the image of the crocodile, but by those of the snake and the owl, too) continues to stick out as a sore thumb. Human beings do not inhabit a peaceful world, and the narrative may well be seen as embracing one of the strongest Western myths: the biblical Myth of the Fall. That is why the narrative timeline becomes important. In the initial scenes of the movie, we are introduced to a world that appears to be a tropical Eden. Later, after the fire and blood of the battle, Witt's look registers the unpleasant realities that make his beloved island, yet another instance of paradise lost. To quote Eric Mottram, at the heart of this, as well as of Malick's previous two movies, we find "an Edenic yearning to recapture a wholeness of being, an idyllic state of integration with the natural and good both within and without ourselves."⁹⁷ This cultural and aesthetic project—which, to invoke the title of Elaine Scarry's book, aims at reconciling "beauty" with "being just"—is almost by definition destined to fail.⁹⁸ Following an American tradition that includes writers like Emerson, Melville, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner—just to quote a few names chosen almost at random—Malick can only play his "Edenic yearning" against a cruel war that mercilessly mocks Witt's dreams and his vision of "another world."

The film, however, resists any one-way interpretation. If it is true that the Witt of the first part misreads the Melanesian community, he is no blind and naive dreamer destined to be abruptly awakened by

⁹⁷ Eric Mottram, "All Things Shining: The Struggle for Wholeness, Redemption and Transcendence in the Films of Terrence Malick," in *The Cinema of Terrence Malick*, p. 14.

⁹⁸ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

the hard facts of life, thus becoming the proverbial sadder and wiser boy. After all, the idyllic opening scenes are also framed by a voiceover raising the question regarding the war at the heart of nature. Immediately after that, we hear Witt reminiscing about his mother's death, wondering what his own death will be like. The scenery is paradisiacal, but Witt's questions and memories mark him as a melancholy character aware of living in a world where the perfection of paradise is already lost. The narrative, therefore, moves simultaneously backwards and forwards: it shows Witt's increasing awareness of the misery of the world but at the same time suggests that his vision has never really ruled out the harsh realities of death and destruction. It is thus no accident that, violating both realism and chronology, Witt's death scene is immediately followed by shots from the first part of the movie, in which the private from Kentucky swims happily and peacefully, surrounded by native children. Malick is obviously suggesting that the quest for harmony, peace, and "another world" cannot stop with the discovery (or, rather, the rediscovery) of the horrors which human beings are capable of, nor with the realization of the inevitability of death.

The narrative structure Malick employs to articulate his own particular version of the Myth of the Fall is also refracted in Bell's (Ben Chaplin) story. The idyllic memory he entertains of his spouse and their relationship can be said to be "mythical" in so far as it wishes to isolate such happy moments from the potentially destructive flux of time. Especially when Bell contemplates the possibility that he may die during the battle, he holds on to these memories as so many gems of shining purity capable not only of feeding his courage, but in some sense even of redeeming the devastation he must face. Later on, however—in a scene that immediately precedes the one where Witt realizes the evil that is also present within the native community—Bell receives a "Dear John" letter in which his wife tells him she has fallen in love with someone else and asks him for a divorce. Even Bell's individual "Eden" goes to pieces, though this does not turn his wife into one of those vampire-like women that some critics claim to find in war writers like Wilfred Owen and Ernest Hemingway. Just as the realization that the Melanesians are not foreign to violence does not ipso facto turn them into barbarous primitives, the letter Bell receives does not make his wife an ungrateful, insensitive woman. The appealing contours of these twin, "demythical" entities are not erased by the Fall,

and not simply because the "Edenic yearning" cannot be extinguished, no matter how ugly reality may turn out to be, but because both the natives and Bell's wife, though imperfect, are in many ways admirable. Malick, in other words, like so many American writers and filmmakers before him, casts a shadow over the Myth of the Fall, without altogether giving it up.⁹⁹ If the downsizing of the objects of desire fueling the "Edenic yearning" went so far as to suggest that they are only a mirage, that would justify an attitude of cynic desperation, leading to the passive acceptance of evil. Malick chooses a different route: he fans the sparks of Utopia while also admitting that the Fall is the irreversible state of humankind. To quote Robert Frost, the question that Malick asks—and we might well say, "in all but words"—is analogous to that posed to the poet by the "Oven Bird" in the poem by the same title: "what to make of a diminished thing." How do we reconcile our awareness that the world in which we live is a world of war with our aspiration to see it transformed, when not even nature can provide us with a "pacifist" ground on which to stand?

Towards a "general education of the eye"

As we have already noticed, the gap between the dream of a New World and a stubborn historical as well as natural universe that resists its realization has been one of the traditional preoccupations of US culture since its very beginning. This theme is central not only in authors obsessed with the problem of Evil like Melville and Hawthorne but is also crucial for writers like Emerson and Whitman, who have been too often described as dreamers with no firm grasp on the horrors of the world. Malick operates within this tradition, though he tries to emancipate it from the nationalist baggage that may be found in many of

⁹⁹ In terms of R. W. B. Lewis's classic study, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1955), I suppose one could enroll Malick in the "party of Irony," which "consisted of those men who wanted to both undermine and to bolster the image of the American as a new Adam [...]. The shared purpose of the party of Irony was not to destroy the hopes of the hopeful, but to perfect them" (p. 193). However, if on the one hand Malick's trafficking with Edenic themes may be a sign of his Americanness, there is no nationalist agenda whatsoever in *The Thin Red Line*.

the texts of these canonical authors. From a specifically Transcendentalist perspective, however, what is most striking about Malick's film is not so much his renewed interrogation of the Myth of the Fall—to which he has of course returned also in *The New World* (2005)—as the way in which his filmic technique, so well described by Bersani and Dutoit, represents the most accomplished and successful attempt to realize an "Emersonian" cinema. The "anonymous subject" capable of a look so pure as to capture nothing but "the world's visibility" mentioned by Bersani and Dutoit is in fact homologous to the self that Emerson celebrated in his essays for its openness to sudden illuminations. Here the mind immediately runs of course to the famous passage in the opening pages *Nature*: "Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God".¹⁰⁰ As elsewhere in his writings, here Emerson theorizes a "subject" that seems miraculously capable of disappearing and yet of "seeing all." The transparency of Witt's look praised by Bersani and Dutoit is therefore also central to an Emersonian poetics eager to proclaim the "vanishing" of the self. The "ontological passivity" of Witt's way of seeing—which is "not the passivity of someone who submits to the will of others, but the active passivity of someone who, acknowledging that he *is* the world in which he lives, makes his self superfluous in order to multiply his being"—is also featured in the transparency of Emerson's eyeball, and in its infinite expansive potential.¹⁰¹ The Emersonian rhetoric of impersonality may go a long way in accounting for the seeming coolness of Witt's look mentioned above. The price to pay for the disappearance of "all mean egotism" is a certain degree of estrangement from the world that renders everything and everyone—including those we most love—equally distant or, perhaps, equally close. In sum, the Emersonian transparent eyeball might be conceived as the instrument of a radical visual democracy in which "all" is simultaneously present, and hierarchies are for a time abolished.

As Barbara Packer has shown in her marvelous study of Emerson,

¹⁰⁰ *Nature*, in *Essays and Poems*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), p. 10.

¹⁰¹ Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, p. 165.

however, the kind of epiphanic vision described in the (both famous and infamous) "transparent eyeball" passage was possible only in fits and starts (just as Witt's look is capable of making the self superfluous only at certain times).¹⁰² In *Nature*, Emerson first leads us to believe that if we are "gods in ruins" this is the consequence of some calamitous Fall that happened long ago, only to change his mind in the final section of his essay where, in what Packer considers the most important passage of the text, he states that the Fall is within ourselves because "The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque."¹⁰³ It is in response to this crisis that, as Tony Tanner has argued, Emerson insisted that what America most needed was a "general education of the eye."¹⁰⁴ This pedagogical project was also enthusiastically endorsed by Walt Whitman, who considered sight at once the most important and the most resolutely *democratic* among the senses. As he wrote in the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*,

Who knows the curious mystery of the eyesight? The other senses corroborate themselves, but this is removed from any proof but its own and fore-runs the identities of the spiritual world. A single glance of it mocks all the investigations of man and all the instruments and books of the earth and all reasoning. What is marvellous? what is unlikely? what is impossible or baseless or vague? after you have once just opened the space of a peachpit and given audience to far and near and to the sunset and had all things enter with electric swiftness softly and duly without confusion or jostling or jam.¹⁰⁵

Whitman's words, besides being consistent with Emerson's idea of the poet as "seer," also provide us with terms useful to articulate Malick's visionary style beyond the peculiarities of Witt's look. Throughout the whole movie Malick's camera explores things "far and near": the grass, leaves, the play of sunlight, the transparency of water,

¹⁰² Barbara Packer, *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982), pp. 22-76.

¹⁰³ R. W. Emerson, *Nature*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁴ Tony Tanner, *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature*, New York: Harper, 1967, p. 27.

¹⁰⁵ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass, The First (1855) Edition*, ed. with an introduction by Malcolm Cowley (New York: Penguin, 1978), pp. 9-10.

the greenness of a pond, the flashing of a snake, the foam of the sea. The camera works as the filmic equivalent of Whitman's poetic "I" in *Leaves of Grass*, which David Reynolds has indeed described as "a kind of *roving* camera eye aimed at the world around him".¹⁰⁶ The "erring" and "nomadic" look of the poet, standing opposed to "classifying, categorizing, analytic eye of the educated man," is reconceived as lacking a specific visual angle, and therefore as a pure receptor ready to absorb almost anarchically whatever is registered by its retina.¹⁰⁷ This is the same "unprotectedness" that Bersani and Dutoit see at work in Witt's way of registering the world, and the similarity also extend to the political and cultural function that Whitman assigns to the poetic gaze:

The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution and is the free channel of himself [...]. I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains [...]. What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me.¹⁰⁸

Here Whitman affirms his wish to disappear, to erase even the smallest residue of a personal perspective so as to leave the world free to come forth in its autonomous brilliance, in the same way that, according to Bersani and Dutoit, Witt's eyes, by registering "indiscriminately [...] the world's appearances" implicitly evoke "a community grounded in anonymity and held together by an absence of both individuality and leadership."¹⁰⁹

By linking Malick's "transparent" camera eye to the cultural

¹⁰⁶ David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman. Lives and Legacies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 60. My italics. I was able to read Lloyd Michaels' important study of Malick only after drafting most of this essay, but I am glad to notice that he shares my sense that Malick's camera tries to replicate the ecstatic perception of Nature described by Emerson in his famous "transparent eyeball" passage, while at the same time being aware of what "renders such instants of ideal perception so tragically transient." Lloyd Michaels, *Terrence Malick* (Urbana and Chicago: Illinois University Press, 2009), p. 70.

¹⁰⁷ Tanner, *The Reign of Wonder*, p. 66.

¹⁰⁸ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁹ Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, pp. 163, 165.

tradition of democratic individualism inspired by Transcendentalism, we are in a better position to grasp also the former's ethical substance. The Emersonian-Whitmanian *modus vedendi* evoked by Malick's filming style is intrinsically anti-militarist as it does not tolerate any hierarchical, authoritarian structuring of the world. It stands out, that is, as the exact polar opposite of a military gaze predicated—as Paul Virilio has shown—on the notion that “the eye's function [is] the function of the weapon.”¹¹⁰ By focusing on apparently irrelevant details—the light filtered by the trees, the birds resting on the branches, the touch-me-not whose leaves close as a soldier's hand barely touches it—Malick's camera provides an alternative to the gun's telescope and evokes intimations of that “other world” that Witt, notwithstanding Top's skepticism, is sure he has seen. If we want to isolate a “pacifist” perspective in *The Thin Red Line*, we must begin with its *aesthetics*—an aesthetics participating in that project of a general education of the eye invoked by Emerson over one hundred and fifty years ago. By inviting us to bring the “axis of vision” in line with “the axis of things” and to “to look at the world with new eyes,” *The Thin Red Line* juxtaposes a rapturous Transcendentalist way of looking at the world to the optical “watching machine” of the army, which is also busy scrutinizing nature, but whose scope is to turn it into a *nature mort*.¹¹¹ Unsurprisingly, whereas Tall tries to convince Staros that war is in tune with the world's ontology since “nature is cruel,” and men cannot help but bend space to the logistics of warfare, Witt's eyes do not try to subjugate the world and are animated by that “wonder” that “the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight “mentioned by Emerson in the last sentence of *Nature*.¹¹²

Once again, however, we must note that it is one thing to call attention to the similarities between, on the one hand, Malick's project of an “ontologically passive” cinema and, on the other, the rhetoric of transparency celebrated by both Emerson and Whitman, and quite another to believe that such aesthetic utopias may be *fully* embodied in an

¹¹⁰ Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso 1989), p.3. For a thorough exploration of how Malick's camera resists the military gaze theorized by Virilio, see Robert Silberman, “Terrence Malick, Landscape and ‘This War at the Heart of Nature,’” in *The Cinema of Terrence Malick*, ed. H. Patterson, pp. 160-72.

¹¹¹ *Nature, Essays and Poems*, p. 47.

¹¹² *Nature, Essays and Poems*, p. 49.

actual film or work of literature. As Bersani and Dutoit themselves notice, that of a cinema or a photography capable of looking at the world “as is” — “without a shred of my composition” (13) to use Whitman’s words — is an “inherently unrealizable” ideal.¹¹³ The same conclusion is reached by Richard Poirier writing on the “the dream of an impossible possibility” entertained by a genealogy of US writers that goes from Emerson to Wallace Stevens. Their “unsatisfiable aspiration” is “to see something without having to name it, without having to think about it, to see it without having to re-create it, to see it as would a transparent eyeball, with no sense of its dependence on the human will. This [...] is Emerson’s dream of ‘genius’: to know a world without knowing it as a text.”¹¹⁴ Analogously, no matter how Malick may try to pursue a “nomadic” and “erratic” cinema, his can only be a conscious attempt to move in the direction of an “impersonal” filmmaking. His aesthetics can only suggest and approximate a utopian transparency; it can *evoke* it but, as Emerson himself was forced to admit, a “perfect vision” comes only sporadically, in the shape of a blessed, sudden moment of rapture. The “other world” Witt speaks of flashes in front of our eyes as a possibility but, like the “New World” Emerson invoked in *Nature*, it continues to elude our grasp.

“Walked into the golden age. Stood on the shores of the New World.” These words, heard in voiceover in one of the scenes that follow the storming of the Japanese camp, echo analogous Emersonian pronouncements (“So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes [...] All that Adam had, all that Caesar could, you have and can do”) but they sound utterly out of place in the context of an infernal war.¹¹⁵ In the last section of *Nature* (“Prospects”) Emerson laments the fallen state of humankind (“Man is a god in ruins”, “man is the dwarf of himself”, “man applies to nature but half his force”), but the “disagreeable appearances” he mentions are no match for the portentous creative energies evoked by the chant of the Orphic poet.¹¹⁶ Malick’s camera eye confronts us with more formidable obstacles: with a devastating theater of blood and fire, death and pain, sheer terror and

¹¹³ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 13; Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, p. 161.

¹¹⁴ Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, p. 210.

¹¹⁵ Emerson, *Nature*, in *Essays and Poems*, p. 48.

¹¹⁶ Emerson, *Nature*, in *Essays and Poems*, pp. 45, 46.

inconsolable misery. If there is an Emersonian scenery that may in some way may come close to it, it can perhaps be found in the mournful and disenchanted opening of an essay like "Fate," where Emerson writes, for example, that "The habit of snake and spider, the snap of the tiger and other leapers and bloody jumpers, the crackle of the bones of his prey in the coil of the anaconda, – these are in the system, and our habits are like theirs."¹¹⁷ Though he insists, with words that are so similar to those of Tall, on the "ferocity in the interiors of nature," Emerson is loath to surrender to the often cruel and bloody tyranny of Fate, insisting that the latter should be seen as "a name for facts not yet passed under the fire of thought; – for causes which are unpenetrated."¹¹⁸ As such Fate is a force that can also be *guided*, modeled, restrained thanks to the energy of an unconquerable, though imperfect, human creativity. If Fate confronts with "immovable limitations" our "hope to reform men," also Fate "has its lord; limitation its limits." Human beings can never be completely suffocated by circumstances. In Fate's "dual world," "power limits and antagonizes Fate."¹¹⁹

The tension between Fate and Power, "Nature and Thought; – two boys pushing each other on the curb-stone of the pavement," can never come to an end.¹²⁰ For the later Emerson the apocalypse—that *unveiling* of another world yearned for in *Nature*—is always projected into the future and even though also in a disenchanted essay like "Fate" he continues to attribute extraordinary powers to human intellect and will ("Forever wells up the impulse of choosing and acting in the soul. Intellect annuls Fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free"), it is altogether clear that the power of "lightning" human beings have, will always have to struggle against the "odious facts" of both History and Nature.¹²¹ The most significant feature of what I am tempted to label "mature Transcendentalism" is not—as the cliché would have it—its lack of a sense of evil but the stubbornness with which it confronts the latter with a visionary will capable of detecting, even in the most trying of circumstances, the contours of a different and better world to come. It is also in this sense that Witt's look deserves to be considered a

¹¹⁷ Emerson, "Fate," in *Essays and Poems*, p. 771.

¹¹⁸ Emerson, "Fate," pp. 771, 784.

¹¹⁹ Emerson, "Fate," pp. 769, 779.

¹²⁰ Emerson, "Fate," p. 790.

¹²¹ Emerson, "Fate," pp. 779, 778.

Transcendentalist one. His predisposition to seeing this world in terms of “another world,” the real as compared to the ideal, does not erase the evil of war but it does refuse to give war the last word.¹²² War is real, but so are beauty, mercy, and love—beginning of course with the love Witt feels for his comrades and that will eventually cost him his life. This unsolved dialectic between good and evil, between the idyllic interludes and the hell of the battle is the underlying narrative motor of *The Thin Red Line*. Malick on the one hand looks at the world with “eyes” that are unmistakably Emersonian and Whitmanian and, on the other, he drags Witt’s Transcendentalist sight to the battlefield, thus repeatedly frustrating its utopian yearning with irrefutable signs of that Fall of Man that also Emerson—at least from “Experience” onwards—had come to accept as “too late to be helped.”¹²³ This tension between an idealistic and a naturalistic perspective provides the philosophical foundation for the spiral-like movement of the narrative, to which I will return in my concluding remarks. First, however, I believe it is worth analyzing an aspect of the movie I have so far left unmentioned and which is quite relevant to nearly all the issues so far discussed. The representation of the enemy offered by the film is indeed a demonstration that on the battlefield it is not enough to have a pair of “new eyes” to cancel its horrors. And yet even the horror can be looked at differently when one’s eyes are capable of opening themselves to the ultimate Other, one’s mortal enemy.

The Enemy

The extreme ferocity with which the war in the Pacific was fought on both sides can be explained to a considerable extent by its *racial* character, as shown by John Dower’s classic study, *War Without Mercy*. The relentless demonization of the enemy—the systematic, implacable negation of the humanity of the Jap “monkeys” on the one side, and of the American “demons,” on the other—turned the Pacific theater into

¹²² On this side of Emerson’s thinking see Kenneth Burke’s invaluable essay, “I, Eye, Ay—Emerson’s Early Essay on ‘Nature’”: Thoughts on the Machinery of Transcendence,” *The Sewanee Review* 74 (Autumn, 1966), pp. 875-895.

¹²³ “Experience,” in R.W. Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 487. For more on this topic, I refer once again the reader to Packer’s insightful study, *Emerson’s Fall*.

one of the most savage and merciless ones of World War Two. In the allies' popular consciousness the notion of the "good German" had somehow survived. In the case of the Japanese, however, nothing of the sort applied and, during the entire war, the soldiers of the Rising Sun were invariably described by propaganda as "a uniquely contemptible and formidable foe who deserved no mercy and virtually demanded extermination."¹²⁴ One of the great merits of the film is to go beyond the mere registering of the hatred animating both armies. Even though the war is essentially seen through the eyes of C-for-Charlie company, Malick manages to emphasize the undeniable humanity of the enemy. Without ever romanticizing the defeated Japanese soldiers, *The Thin Red Line*—as no other movie, to my knowledge, had ever managed to do before—shows with true *pietas* the faces and bodies of men seized by fits of desperation, terror, and shame. The scenes in which, after having vanquished the Japanese fortifications, the US infantry devastates the enemy encampment are in my view some of the most moving and intense ever shown by war cinema. The enemy soldiers' prayers, their folly, their real and metaphorical nudity are sympathetically represented with the same compassion shown before towards the American GIs. The bodies of the Japanese are shown covered with ashes and in grotesque poses, as they mutely ask for mercy and with their hands they caress and console their dying comrades. These scenes powerfully evoke the brutal reduction of human beings to nothing else but "meat" that sustains racial hatred and links the war in the Pacific to the extermination camps and the infernos of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The emaciated, slashed bodies of the Japanese are rounded up, kicked, and tortured: these soldiers who are now the object of such homicidal fury may have well done the same to their American prisoners in the past but, in this scene, they do not represent so much the enemy as the trampled-upon-humanity of *all* war victims, on all war fronts. They become a symbol of how horrendous is any act that deprives one's opponent of his or her humanity—and their significance is heightened by the fact that the madness, the terror, the crying of the enemy mirror in almost every detail earlier scenes in which the American GIs were devastated by enemy fire.

The sequence under examination is probably the one where the

¹²⁴ John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), p. 9.

"Homeric" perspective discussed above is most fully embodied. The words employed by Simone Weil to describe the universe of the *Iliad* are the best commentary for this section of the movie, in which the true protagonists are not the two armies' soldiers, but "the human spirit [...] as modified by its relations with force, as swept away, blinded, by the very force it imagined it could handle."¹²⁵ Even the best, and least nationalistic war cinema has always had trouble in exorcising the specter of "heroism" when shooting battle scenes. A *super partes* perspective, when two armies clash, is hard to maintain both culturally and technically. Malick, however, manages to display an "extraordinary sense of equity" so that, to paraphrase what Weil writes of the *Iliad*, it is hard to realize that these scenes have been filmed by a US rather than a Japanese, director.¹²⁶ Though we are witnessing an American "victory," the human protagonists of this scene are not divided between winners and losers. As Weil writes of similar moments in Homer, "executioner and victim stand equally innocent [...] conquered and conqueror are brothers in the same distress. The conquered brings misfortune to the conqueror, and vice versa." In this sumptuously haunting sequence of *The Thin Red Line* one never has the feeling that men are in control of the violence they exercise. On the contrary, "violence obliterates anybody who feels its touch": the soldiers fight and kill each other, scream and tremble seized by a force that seems exterior to them and dominates, crushes, and humiliates both camps, regardless of their status as "winners" or "losers."¹²⁷ Even a scene of unspeakable cruelty as the one in which the American private Dale jeers at a dying Japanese, whose golden teeth he pulls with a pair of pliers, is shot in such a way that the torturer—his face crazed as that of his victim—is more likely to inspire pity rather than outrage in the spectator. And in a literal demonstration of how also the vanquished "brings misfortune to the conqueror," in a later scene the torturer is shown shaking and crying half naked, under the rain. His pose

¹²⁵ Weil, *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*, p. 3.

¹²⁶ "One is barely aware that the poet is a Greek, and not a Trojan." Weil, *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*, p. 32. The Clint Eastwood diptych, *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* is of course another fine example of how to resist any absolute juxtaposition between friend and enemy. Yet, to my mind, Malick's sequence is still unsurpassed because it manages to see the enemy as fully human even though most of the action is seen through the eyes of the US soldiers, and Witt's in particular.

¹²⁷ Weil, *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*, p. 19.

a virtual mirror reflection of the one earlier assumed by his Japanese victim, Dale eventually throws away with disgust his teeth collection, bending under the weight of a "retribution, which has a geometrical rigor, which operates automatically to penalize the abuse of force."¹²⁸

Malick often imparts to his camera a circular movement: think, for example, of the numerous shots in which the camera eye rotates around the treetops. In the scenes of the attack on the Japanese encampment, however, such technique acquires a specific ethical substance. The point of view from which we observe the battle is constantly shifting—we are thus prevented from privileging one point of view, from observing the clash by looking constantly from behind the shoulders of one or the other army.¹²⁹ Our perspective is inherently unstable as the eye of the camera strives for that "transparency" we discussed above, as if to show that if a pair of "new eyes" cannot erase the horror of war, they can at least help us to read it in a different way, by refusing to turn violence into spectacle. In its frenetic movement, the camera manages to register, however partially, that point of view of the enemy that traditionally escapes both war literature and war cinema. Malick does not only indulge on the physical suffering of the Japanese—he also forces us to listen to their words without providing subtitles that would help us understand. This is a way, I think, to acknowledge that the representation of the enemy, however sympathetic, is still limited by linguistic and cultural boundaries we cannot easily overcome and will therefore always be imperfect. At the same time, there can be no doubt that this section of the movie was filmed with the ambition of imagining a perspective beyond the customary binary one of traditional war narratives.

Once again, I would argue that there are significant similarities

¹²⁸ Weil, *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*, p. 15. As noted by Michel Chlon, Dale's prisoner's subtitled words—"Kisamawa shinundayo" ("You too will die") set the stage for this moment of retribution. M. Chlon, *The Thin Red Line*, tr. Trista Selous (London: British Film Institute, 2004), p. 60.

¹²⁹ As Amy Coplan explains, this scene—like several others—was shot with the "Steadicam" technique. "With Steadicam, the camera itself remains stable as it moves throughout the environment, but the movement of the camera through the story world is minimally controlled, generating a frenetic feeling both on the screen and in the viewers but one which gets associated with the events in the story and not the presentation of those events." A. Coplan, "Form and Feeling in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," in *The Thin Red Line*, ed. D. Davies, p. 78.

between Malick's handling of these scenes and Transcendentalist poetics. I am thinking especially of the identification of the poet's I with the suffering and the wounded in the "martial" sections of *Leaves of Grass*. "Agonies are one of my changes of garments; / I do not ask the wounded person how he feels . . . I myself become the wounded person."¹³⁰ In these battle scenes Witt's look is exemplary, and its significance goes beyond even that of a friendly gesture like that of letting a wounded enemy drink from his canteen. His eyes take in the horror and the devastation. They see "all," as Whitman writes, without privileging *one* perspective. Perhaps nowhere else in the movie Malick manages to represent Witt's look as literally *ecstatic*—non static, moving. "I rise ecstatic through all, and sweep with true gravitation, / The whirling and whirling is elemental with me." The words used by the poet-protagonist of *Leaves of Grass* to describe his pursuit of a shapeshifting, multiperspectival reality, could be equally applied to the incessant mobility of Witt's look, which succeeds in seeing on the same level both friend and enemy. A Whitmanian poetic framework is also relevant to one of the uncanniest moments of this sequence—the one where Witt stares at the face of a dead Japanese soldier, whose body is completely covered with earth. The voiceover seems to interrogate Witt: "Are you righteous? Kind? Does your confidence lie in this? Are you loved by all? Know that I was, too. Do you imagine your sufferings will be less because you loved goodness? Truth?" The way the scene is shot leads us to believe that the voice belongs to a dead soldier. At the same time, however, also if the voice is not Witt's, the language spoken is English. Just as in *Leaves of Grass* the poet argues he can be a vehicle of other people's voices though the reader may suspect that the poet's voice is the *substitute* of the others' voices, also here we are left to wonder whether the voice of the dead enemy is nothing but a projection of the survivor's imagination.

We must observe, however, that not only the choice of a voiceover different from Witt's, but also the questions that are posed, can be seen as an attempt to destabilize the absolute authority of the living over the dead (and of the conqueror over the vanquished). We may consider the lines "spoken" by the dead man as an instance of what Diana Fuss has described as a "corpse poem"—a poem that "grants an insensate

¹³⁰ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 207, vv. 840-41.

figure the power of speech."¹³¹ Unlike the epitaph, which is a poem written on the tomb, the corpse poem "undertakes to bring us inside the tomb." In Fuss's view, the genre of the corpse poem must also be distinguished from the elegy, whose function is by and large consolatory. While the elegy has a commemorative scope—and it is thus no accident that elegiac tones are often struck by so much war cinema and literature—"[t]he corpse poem is not a substitute for loss but a vehicle for it, not a restitution for loss but a means to achieve it."¹³² In our case, the voice of the dead Japanese soldier appears to resist his liquidation as a designated victim and even vindicates a substantial equality with the enemy who has survived him. By suggesting a common destiny comprising the conquerors and the vanquished, as well as the living and the dead, and by admonishing the survivor not to trust the therapeutic powers of his rectitude, the corpse asserts his absent presence. This scene, short but extremely intense, provides an apt closure for a sequence where, without ever evoking the consolation of immortality, Malick traces also the "human" side of war—a human side that is not predicated on the transcendence of war's most cruel traits but, on the contrary, derives from what Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito—commenting on Weil's reading of the *Iliad*—has described as the "identity of a *common* pain [...] the sharing *of* pain [...]. If all men are divided by force, they are at the same time united by the suffering that force generates."¹³³

"All things shining"

The friend-enemy juxtaposition is overcome by neither ignoring nor erasing the scenery of the battlefield, but by plunging deeper and deeper into its darkest and most painful traits. Something similar happens with the nature-culture dialectic. Malick goes beyond a literary convention that contrasts the bestiality of war with the sublime indifference or detachment of nature, and which is practiced, for example,

¹³¹ Diana Fuss, "Corpse Poem", *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Autumn 2003), p. 25.

¹³² Fuss, "Corpse Poem", p. 25.

¹³³ Roberto Esposito, *Le origini della politica. Hannah Arendt o Simone Weil?* (Roma: Donzelli, 1996), pp. 80-81. My translation.

by Stephen Crane in *Red Badge* or by Wallace Stevens in a poem like "Death of a Soldier." Lloyd Michaels, building on Eric Mottram's idea that Malick's cinema "restores the beauty and power of the image as a carrier of meaning," explains "[t]hat meaning may appear persistently undecipherable or unrecoverable, but the camera eye's fixed attention to the sheer gorgeousness or isolated perfection of the imagery it records insists on a resilient significance as it commands in the audience an irresistible awe."¹³⁴ Thus in *The Thin Red Line* the landscape of Melanesia is not so much meant to evoke the silence of the gods as to underline the ethical-aesthetical substance of Nature in a way unmistakably similar to that of Emerson's famous 1836 essay. The movie repeatedly juxtaposes Edenic to infernal images, as if to show how human beings, though so close to the world of peace, are continuously mocked by intimations of what they might have been. The nostalgia for what humankind could have been—and may yet, one day, become—runs throughout the whole movie, and survives even its darkest moments.

This longing pervades, moreover, the dialogues between the hopeful Witt and the cynical Top, even though it is the latter who seems to have the better argument. Top's disenchanted view of things ("What difference can a man make in all this madness?"), his insistence on the impossibility of transcendence ("There is no other world out there where everything is all right. There is only this one. Only this rock."), and his sneering at Witt's ecstatic visions ("You still believe in the beautiful light, are you?"), find tremendous objective support in the hell of war. As Bersani and Dutoit have argued, it looks as if Top "has seen the world as it is, and he is trying to save Witt from a dangerous naiveté."¹³⁵ However, if Top's viewpoint seems to prevail over Witt's, Top is often shown squinting, in contrast to Witt's wide-eyed, all-embracing look. This is not to say that Top's view of things is simply wrong or irrelevant. On the contrary, the "glory" mentioned by Witt ("What's keepin' us from reaching out, touching the glory?") makes sense only when contrasted with Top's objections, just as the utopian longings that animate even the most skeptical of Emerson's essays are paradoxically fed by a universe of "shabby experience[s]" or, more seriously, by the traumatic revelation that "the march of civilization is a

¹³⁴ Eric Mottram, "All Things Shining," p. 14; Lloyd Michaels, *Terrence Malick*, p. 5.

¹³⁵ Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, p. 150.

train of felonies."¹³⁶ There is no need to deny the partial truth of what Top states. However, the acknowledgment of the ugliest and most brutal traits of history should in no way cancel out a desire for beauty, peace, and justice—that same desire on which Emerson insisted even in radically disenchanted essays like the ones he collected in *The Conduct of Life*, or in his essay on Montaigne. Divine providence, Emerson argued, "has shown the heaven and earth to every child and filled him with a desire for the whole; a desire raging, infinite; a hunger, as of space to be filled with planets; a cry of famine, as of devils for souls."¹³⁷ *As of devils for souls*: it would be difficult to imagine a more apt metaphor for these soldiers thrown into the hell of war, in whom Witt continues nevertheless to see the "spark" of a burning desire for redemption.

As indicated above, I do not see Witt's changing perspective on the world as a kind of maturation or initiation story. Despite his initial lack of insight into the less appealing aspects of Melanesian society, Witt is never portrayed as a starry-eyed young man, ignorant of the misery and violence plaguing the world at all latitudes. If anything, the faith he has in the underlying beauty and "glory" of the world, is all the more remarkable once it has been tested by the close encounter with the cruelty, the misery, and the suffering of war. Even Top is forced to confess his admiration for Witt—"you're a magician to me"—and indeed, when in one of the film's concluding scenes he stands over Witt's grave, wondering whatever happened to the boy's "spark," the tears he has trouble holding back suggest that perhaps the "light" is still shining where we would least expect it: in Top's own soul, in the traumatic encounter with his friend's death.¹³⁸ As much as Sergeant Welsh

¹³⁶ "Montaigne," in *Essays and Poems*, p. 709.

¹³⁷ "Montaigne," p. 708. Here I do not think that Emerson is referring to the poor devils' desire for souls to take to hell but instead to their desire for having back their own souls—for the salvation which they have turned their back to.

¹³⁸ Critics disagree on whether Welsh undergoes any change because of Witt's death. Bersani and Dutoit (*Forms of Being*, p. 167) feel that Top's voiceover ("If I never meet you in this life, let me feel the lack. A glance from your eyes, and my life will be yours"), delivered while the company marches next to a military cemetery, sounds like a posthumous acceptance of Witt's "other world." David Davies, on the contrary, argues that it is mistaken to read Welsh's words as a sign that he "has been converted to Witt's way of seeing things." Though it may be exaggerated to speak of Welsh's change as a "conversion," I am not convinced by Davies' proposition that "the 'lack' that Welsh wishes to feel is not the painful absence of others, but the

may desire to “make an island for himself,” he cannot help but recognize the beauty of Witt’s vision, just as, in an opposite direction, Witt confesses that at times he *has* wondered whether the other world he claims to have seen exists only in his imagination. Through these two carefully paired characters, the film appears to stage a kind of tug-of-war between what Emerson described as Materialism and Transcendentalism; between a belief founded “on history, on the force of circumstances, and the animal wants of man,” and one based “on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture.”¹³⁹ Like Emerson’s Transcendentalist, Witt does not turn his back on the world’s “material facts.” On the contrary, he chooses to be wherever suffering and danger are, tending the wounded, consoling the dying, and finally volunteering for the mission in which he will lose his life, because “in case something happens, I wanna be there.” Far from shying away from the most painful experiences, he is ready to take anything that Welsh will “dish out” to keep him in line. Like a true Transcendentalist, Witt “does not deny the sensuous fact: by no means; but he will not see that alone. [...] He believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy” —as shown by what he says, by what he does, and by his way of looking at the world.¹⁴⁰

One may object that, for all its innovative aspects and the considerable attention it pays to issues traditionally foreign to the genre of the

welcome absence of the demand of others that will imperil his defensive strategy” (Davies, “Vision, Touch and Embodiment in *The Thin Red Line*”, in *The Thin Red Line*, ed. D. Davies, p. 54). The phrasing of Welsh’s thought seems rather ambiguous: if he does not wish to be troubled by the demands of others, why should he *need* to feel the absence of such demands? Shouldn’t he simply wish not to feel anything — something that would in fact square with his earlier rejoinder to Private Storm’s observation that the latter doesn’t feel anything anymore: “Sounds like bliss.” A similar disagreement surrounds Welsh’s sudden decision to risk his life to administer morphine to the mortally wounded Tella. Dreyfus and Prince, for example, argue that Welsh’s act shows that “he has no world that can collapse. [...] He is invulnerable” (Dreyfus and Prince, “Dying without Demise,” p. 35). Again, I don’t find this line of reasoning altogether convincing. After repeated viewings of this scene, I cannot help but see Welsh as genuinely moved by his comrade’s sufferings.

¹³⁹ Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” *Essays and Poems*, p. 193.

¹⁴⁰ Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” *Essays and Poems*, p. 196.

war movie, the film follows a tragic plot, culminating in the death of its central character. In other words, like so many war stories, also Malick's film—exactly like Spielberg's—ends with a kind of sacrificial slaying meant to evoke catharsis through the audience's sympathetic identification with the victimized hero.¹⁴¹ However, on closer inspection, it is not difficult to realize that the blueprint of Malick's narrative is not tragic, but comic—"comic" not in the sense of "humorous," of course, but as an instance of what Kenneth Burke refers to as "the spirit of solemn comedy," which he saw as a radical alternative to the spirit of tragic sacrifice. As Robert McMahon has explained in an enlightening essay on Burke's *Rhetoric of Religion*, whereas tragedy is built around the notion of "purification through victimage," "the spirit of comedy requires not sacrifice but charity and humble irony."¹⁴² We have already seen how, displaying the same charitable attitude towards both "friend" and "enemy," the movie prevents a construction of the Japanese as the story's obligatory villains and scapegoat figures. We should now add that Malick is careful to downplay the "tragic" elements of Witt's death by almost erasing from the movie the scene of his actual killing. The camera first shows Witt surrounded by the Japanese squad that has captured him, and then focuses one more time on his face, and particularly on his eyes. Witt betrays no fear, but also no hatred of his enemies. He appears as "calm,"—or, to use the terms employed by Jones in *From Here to Eternity*, as magnificently indifferent—as his mother was on her deathbed.¹⁴³ At this point the camera stands back and in what is almost a flash shows Witt raising his rifle

¹⁴¹ Judged by the standards of classical tragedy—where the audience's catharsis is provided by the violent dispatch of the socially and culturally marginalized tragic hero—this statement may sound puzzling. However, in a culture like ours where tragedy has been to some extent Christianized and in which violence is considered permissible only as a response to a prior victimization, that of the victim is a coveted position. It reaffirms the monstrosity and cruelty of the enemy we are justly opposing, and it provides us with an ideological cover-up for the eventual vanquishing of the enemy, whose cathartic defeat is of course only postponed.

¹⁴² Robert McMahon, "Kenneth Burke's Divine Comedy: The Literary Form of *The Rhetoric of Religion*," *PMLA* 104 (Jan. 1989), pp. 56, 58.

¹⁴³ In a sense, Witt has reached a state of immortality: "It was hard to accept that he, who was the hub of this known universe, would cease to exist, but it was an inevitability and he did not shun it. He only hoped that he would meet it with the same magnificent indifference with which she who had been his mother met it. Because it was there, he felt, that the immortality he had not seen was hidden." Jones, *From Here to Eternity*, p. 16.

only to be instantly gunned down by a single enemy shot. An instant after we hear the shot, the camera aims at the sky, capturing the sunlight piercing the treetops. This scene is in turn followed by shots of Witt swimming with a group of Melanesian children in crystal-blue water, which refer to an earlier moment in the film, and specifically to its Edenic opening. Malick thus not only brackets the “sacrificial” kill; he also undermines the inexorable rectilinear progress of tragedy with “the humble irony” of a circular return to an original moment we may now consider with different eyes. What was earlier an image of Eden is now given back to us as an example of what, in the epigraph I used for this section of my essay, Marilynne Robinson calls “brilliant memory.” This memory acquires a prophetic valence that “pulls us forward”; it transcends Witt’s demise not so much by evoking a spiritual dimension as by encouraging the viewer to counter the destruction of human life at the hands of war with the brilliance of a utopian memory that is connected to an altogether different realm of experience.¹⁴⁴ The underwater shots of Witt and the native children direct our attention away from what could have been easily celebrated as a heroic deed in order to stress Witt’s playful embrace of the surrounding natural and human environment.

The final voiceover of the movie also contributes to the upsetting of any simple, one-way narrative chronology. The voice is Witt’s and therefore, at least in figurative terms, it comes to us from the afterlife. The style is unmistakably the one Whitman employed in *Leaves of Grass* when addressing a soul conceived as both internal and external to the speaker:

Where is that we were together? Who were you that I lived with, walked with? – the brother, the friend. Darkness, light, strife and love, are they the workings of one mind, the features of the same face? Oh my soul, let me be

¹⁴⁴ Indeed, I find an interesting resonance between what, in his fine reading of *Housekeeping*, Ian Gibson describes as Ruth’s (the novel’s narrator’s) “hypotheticals” – passages, in which she “offers up reconfigurations of past events and invites us to ‘imagine’ some alternate reality where everything is forgiven or redeemed,” and Witt’s moments of visionary appropriation of the world. As Gibson insists, “although Ruth’s hypotheticals are in some sense just ‘imagined,’ they do point at the possibility for some unseen reality—some hope for loss redeemed.” I would say that the same applies to Witt’s way of seeing the world. See I. Gibson, “Wishful Thinking: Loss and Overcoming Loss in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*,” *Christianity and Literature* 72, No. 1 (2023), pp. 53–72. Quotations from pp. 59, 64.

in you now. Look out through my eyes, look out at the things you made.
All things shining.

In some ways this would seem to be a reiteration of the inescapably contradictory nature of the film's martial universe and would be consistent with what many have argued about the experience of war. The face of war is not only the ugly one of hatred, but also the beautiful one of love—"an unsurpassing love," as James Hillman has put it, "as if the terror constellates a gentle beauty, another kind of love where one soul's love responds to another soul's terror."¹⁴⁵ In Malick's case, however, love takes on a Transcendentalist coloring. The foreignness of what are presumably Witt's former comrades, who nevertheless continue to be described as "friends" and "brothers," and of the places where they all were together, has something of that sense of estrangement mentioned by Emerson in the first chapter of *Nature* as consequential to his ecstatic illumination: "The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance." As it is about to turn into "a transparent eyeball," the self embraces a community much larger than that of the habitual circle of friends and relatives, and it becomes "the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty."¹⁴⁶ Analogously, by pleading "his" soul to accept him, Witt renounces the desire to possess the world and prefers to contemplate its shining.

However, Witt's final monologue may also be seen as circling back to the opening questions posed by the very first voiceover: "What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself. The land contend with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power, but two?" Even though in the movie's ending the focus is no longer on nature but on "mind"—a mind that I suppose should be identified as a sort of cosmic Oversoul—and the emphasis is on "strife" rather than "war" or "vengeance," one may want to argue that these speculations shift our attention away from war as a cultural, historical, and political fact by preferring to imagine strife as an inescapable facet of universal life. If in the film's first monologue war is to some extent naturalized, here war is spiritualized. All of this would suggest that Colin MacCabe is right when he argues that "Malick [...] has no

¹⁴⁵ J. Hillman, *A Terrible Love of War* (New York: Penguin, 2004), pp. 145, 147.

¹⁴⁶ Emerson, *Nature*, in *Essays and Poems*, p. 10.

interest in World War II. *The Thin Red Line's* C for Charlie company are engaged in a conflict which is as old as time."¹⁴⁷ If war is archetypal, then all wars are only variations of an elemental will-to-destruction embedded in either nature or world-spirit, or both. Wars may be different in their intensity and in the weaponry they display, but they are ultimately the embodiment of a "strife" that, every now and then, asserts itself against the opposite impulse of "love," just as the darkness of night follows, day after day, the light of the sun. Malick would therefore be guilty of replacing "history by nature" and of transforming "World War Two into War itself."¹⁴⁸

In a fine essay, Robert Silberman has taken issue with this line of reasoning by insisting that it is incorrect to see Malick as privileging nature as the object of his filmic and philosophical reflections. "For Malick nature and war are inseparable, so that to meditate on one is to meditate on the other."¹⁴⁹ "Inseparable" does not mean that they are the same thing, but simply that you cannot talk about one without referring to the other. In fact, as Silberman rightly argues, all serious war writing is to a greater or lesser extent also an interrogation of "War itself." Silberman's point can be further developed. Like many of his predecessors, Malick is forced to wonder about the connections between the historical and political fact of war, on the one hand, and nature, on the other. No serious analyst would deny that wars are first and foremost a political fact, and that historical, materialist explanations for them can and should always be provided. At the same time—and as we know, this was particularly true of World War Two, with its genocides, its fire and atomic bombings of European and Japanese cities, its unspeakable acts of horror against the civilian populations—the enormous cruelty of war has always led scholars, writers, and people in general to wonder whether there is something intrinsically wrong with humans. It would be foolish to reduce, say, a historical phenomenon like Nazism to the diseased psychology of one man, but it would be equally mistaken to close our eyes to the possibility that totalitarian ideologies may well intercept, and intersect with, certain more or less perverse dispositions of the human soul—that is, of human nature. In sum, not only there is nothing wrong in seeing war and nature as

¹⁴⁷ McCabe, "Bayonets," p. 13.

¹⁴⁸ McCabe, "Bayonets," p. 13.

¹⁴⁹ Silberman, "Terrence Malick," p. 163.

closely interrelated, but considering how multifaceted all wars are, I would go so far as to suggest that no serious political analysis of war can be advanced without taking into account how war interfaces with nature.

This is not to say that if Malick were indeed arguing that war is not so much a historical as a natural or spiritual reality, he should not be criticized. The point is simply that nowhere in the movie does he suggest that—not even in the opening monologue, and much less in the scenes where the camera focuses on images of predators. If anything, a careful reading of these scenes suggests that the movie is developing the opposite argument: the violence of nature can in no way explain, nor much less justify, human violence. The two are by and large incommensurable—so much so that the movie's juxtaposition of war as a "natural" fact to war as a human artifact may be said to be one the ways in which Malick tries to represent the mystery of the human passions of war. Let us begin with the opening monologue. As I already indicated, the notions of "war" and "revenge" belong to human language and culture: hawks or sharks are not "at war" with smaller birds or fish, just as lions do not feed on gazelles to avenge themselves. The land does indeed "contend with the sea," but how can this compare with the war in the Pacific? The questions suggest that conflict, strife, violence, are certainly a part of the world's makeup, but no viewer should be duped into believing that these are rhetorical questions meant to suggest that "this war in the heart of nature" may easily compare, much less provide an explanation for, the military war that two opposing and equally destructive armies bring into the heart of a sublime natural landscape. If Malick's intention were to stress a continuity between human enmity and the conflicts that are nature's own way of moving forth, he would have chosen something more poignant, I think, than the contention between land and sea. The same huge gap between natural and human violence is also emphasized in all the scenes that are usually accused of naturalizing war. The image of the crocodile with which the movie opens may well suggest that a certain degree of aggressiveness is inherent in nature but, as I remarked earlier, the fact that later in the movie a crocodile is captured by the Army completely overturns the notion of war mirroring the reptilian cruelty of nature. The same goes for the snake that is seen flashing next to the soldiers as the latter advance, snake-like, through the kunai grass. While the snake is at home in his natural environment, and his

movement has a majestic grace about it, the armed men's crawling is awkward and painful. What kind of similarity there may be between a predator going naturally about his business and a bunch of men with rifles, grenades, and machine guns, violently intruding upon nature's own cycles?¹⁵⁰ The difference between the violence of nature and human cruelty is further underscored by the images of dogs preying upon human remains, as well as by those of the vultures described by Dale as ready to feast on the bodies of the slain Japanese. In all these instances, by juxtaposing images of human destructiveness to what one may describe as the ferocity of nature, Malick is by no means stressing a continuity between the two. War may to an extent partake of the indifferent violence of nature, but while the latter is instinctual the former is mostly a cultural phenomenon: a "great evil" that constantly baffles our attempts to understand it.

But what about the film's final monologue? Isn't that an unequivocal evocation of a spiritual realm from which all human endeavors, and in particular "strife" and "love," are imagined as springing from? Isn't that an invitation to resign ourselves to the inexplicability of war by seeking refuge into a vaporous, other-worldly dimension? While I believe there is no question that Malick's film—enveloped as is in Transcendental thought—has some definite spiritual concerns, I would argue that Witt's final words, far from dissolving war into nothing more than a spiritual fact, are on the contrary pointing to a healing path that would be free of the common rhetorical and ethical flaws found in most critiques of war. Unlike the opening monologue—which, by wondering whether there may be "two powers" in nature, contemplates the possibility of a Manichaean universe where opposite forces battle each other—the final voiceover wonders whether "love" and "strife" are in fact "the workings of one mind, features of the same face." Here the possibility being contemplated is that love and hatred

¹⁵⁰ I cannot help but see here another similarity with Melville's *Typee*. When Tommo and his friend Toby first enter the Typee valley, they glide through the grass "much in the fashion of a couple of serpents" (Herman Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* [Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1968], p. 39). In an island that is described as snake-free, and compared to Eden, the true serpents are the two white intruders. Similarly, in so far as the Solomon Islands may be a terrestrial paradise, the true "serpents" are not the snakes, but the soldiers.

are both part of the same human spirit—two opposite ways in which human creativity can assert itself.

The film ends, therefore, by evoking once again "another world." Witt is now dead, and the war is far from over, but for Malick, it would seem, redemption is still a possibility. Light can still reach everywhere and make all things shine. And yet we must note that if with this ending Malick is asking us to transcend—that is, to "look beyond"—the horror and the cruelty of war, he does that without ever abandoning *this* world. The phrase "all things shining" can certainly be interpreted as implying an apocalypse, the "unveiling" or disclosing of a hidden reality, but the world "made" by the soul that Witt's voice urges us to contemplate through his eyes, can only be the world we live in. The world that humans can "make" is perforce our terrestrial one—we cannot escape Top's "rock." But, as Emerson insisted, to the extent that our "spirit" is alert and not passive, we can make the world "fluid" and "plastic."¹⁵¹ Consistently with the Transcendentalist sources feeding his imagination, Malick imagines that, through a visionary capability akin to that of Emerson's Poet, it may be possible not only to grasp the contours of another reality, but to actually create a New World. It is easy to see why the notion that we can change the world by looking at it in a different way must appeal to a film director. Just as writers have often dreamed of changing the world through the power of their words, cinema may well entertain the same inordinate ambition to do so thanks to the power of the image. In Malick's case, this explains not only why his film is packed with implicit or explicit references to Transcendentalism, but, more importantly, why it is animated by a veritable desire to turn his camera into an Emersonian eye. At the same time, it is obvious that, however immanent, Malick's Transcendentalism may well be charged with being just another version of Idealism (something of course Emerson proudly declared to be the case). Throughout his movie, and especially in the last voiceover, Malick seems to suggest that, to quote Emerson again, "A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit."¹⁵² Many, and for excellent reasons, may feel that any abstract belief in the capabilities of the human "spirit" cannot lead us very far if we wish to build

¹⁵¹ It is no accident that *Nature* ends with a pressional invitation to "Build therefore your own world." Emerson, *Nature*, in *Essays and Poems*, p. 48.

¹⁵² Emerson, *Nature*, *Essays and Poems*, p. 48.

a different world. To my mind, however, especially in an age of global war and of a hegemonic capitalist culture that insists in telling us that “there is no other world but this one,” to uphold the notion that another world is possible, and is in fact somehow latent in the “rock” we all inhabit, is an act of both intellectual and moral courage.

Yes, as Colin MacCabe argues, one can charge Malick with being more interested in representing war in general rather than the social and historical context of World War Two. However, it seems to me that it is precisely by virtue of its insistence on the fact that World War Two was first and foremost a *war* that Malick’s film is politically far more radical than a film like *Saving Private Ryan*. MacCabe is absolutely right in suggesting that Malick has little interest in addressing the question of *why war?* and is far more fascinated by larger, often metaphysical ruminations. Witt never asks himself what historical circumstances are responsible for the war he is forced to fight but, much more abstractly, he muses on how “this great evil” managed to “steal into this world.” His words thus play also at the level of language on that myth of a lost Eden so crucial in this as well as in other films by Malick. And yet I wonder whether, in an age like ours, when every war the United States fights is portrayed by propaganda as a replay of an archetypal Good War, it may be politically important to emphasize again and again that all wars—including those that may not be avoided—are always also a betrayal of our shared humanity and *never* a way to realize it. A war is a war is a war.

It has been observed that, before the Vietnam War, it would have been difficult to produce a World War Two movie like *The Thin Red Line*, and that to some extent Malick’s may be seen as closer to the genre of the Vietnam war movie. If that is the case, let me refer once again to Marilyn Young’s words, quoted at the beginning of this chapter: “There are, it seems, only two kinds of war the United States can fight: World War II or Vietnam. Anything that can be made to look like World War II is OK.” By shooting a World War Two movie that feels in some ways like a Vietnam movie, Malick short-circuits this ideological and rhetorical maneuver and reminds us that it is always extremely hard to trace a line between a “good” and a bad war, between a war of conquest and a “humanitarian” war. Lurking behind any “good” or “just” war there is always a dirty “Vietnam” (or a terrifying Hiroshima, to be more explicit).

One blood, one sea

A close comparison between Spielberg's and Malick's movies was beyond the scope of my analysis, but I would nevertheless like to conclude with a brief observation on their respective endings. In both films the protagonists die, giving their lives for the good of others. Both Spielberg and Malick devote some intense shots to their heroes' graves. Miller's tomb becomes the site of a pilgrimage whose ultimate goal is to confirm Ryan's and his nation's "goodness." Witt is not buried in a military cemetery. His grave, instead, is in a natural clearing the waters later submerge, so that a stem comes to replace his helmet and rifle as marker of his burial ground. Witt's "homeland" is not the nation but, Romantically, the world of Nature where—as Emerson wrote in "The Oversoul"—"one blood rolls uninterruptedly an endless circulation through all men, as the water of the globe is all one sea, and, truly seen, its tide is one."¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Emerson, "The Oversoul," in *Essays and Poems*, p. 399.

11. Peace, War, Critique

There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.

—Gandhi

Thousands of essays and books, indeed entire libraries have been written about the matter of peace and war, and yet from at least one perspective, our understanding of the relation between these two equally elusive terms has not advanced much beyond the oft-repeated Latin motto of my Roman forefathers: *Si vis pacem, para bellum*. If you want peace, you must prepare for war. While, like many classic Roman ideas, also this one can be traced back to a Greek root in Plato's *Laws*, its earliest Latin formulation occurs in the *Epitoma rei militaris* by the late fourth-century BC writer Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, commonly referred to as Vegetius. *Igitur qui desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum*, that is, "Henceforth, those who aspire to peace should be ready for war."¹ Now, if we make a huge historical leap over to 1830, we will find Louis Antoine Fauvelet de Bourrienne, Napoleon Bonaparte's private secretary, playing upon this Latin motto in a deliciously perverse way: "Tout le monde connaît l'adage [...] Si Bonaparte eût parlé latin, il en aurait, lui, renversé le sens, et aurait dit: Si vis bellum para

¹ "Si vis pacem, para bellum." *Wikipedia*, https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Si_vis_pacem,_para_bellum. An earlier version of this essay was presented as a talk at a plenary session of the 10th World Congress of the International American Studies Association that took place in 2022 in India, at the Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University. Professor Anita Patterson, from Boston University, was the other speaker. I wish to thank then IASA President, Professor Manpreet Kang, for the opportunity.

pacem.”² “Everyone knows the adage [...] Had Bonaparte spoken Latin, he would probably have reversed it and said, *Si vis bellum para pacem*.” Napoleon, according to de Bourrienne, understood that the best way to plan a war was to have one’s opponent lower his guard, thus rendering him more easily assailable.

Only two years later, another war theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, famously argued in his *Vom Kriege*, *On War*, that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.”³ He too refused to see peace (that is, the world of politics) as truly separate from war. It is hardly surprising, then, that a century and a half later, we would find Michel Foucault cleverly reversing the Clausewitzian formula, by arguing that politics was the continuation of war by other means, highlighting what is already implicit in all these formulations, from Vegetius to de Bourrienne to Clausewitz. There is no such thing as “peace” —there is only war. As Foucault argues, “While it is true that political power puts an end to war and establishes or attempts to establish the reign of peace in civil society, it certainly does not do so in order to suspend the effects of power or to neutralize the disequilibrium revealed in the last battle of the war.”⁴ In short, from Foucault’s grim perspective, we may well delude ourselves that, in the absence of open warfare, we live in a state of “peace,” but the conditions of that peace are largely if not totally dictated by war. Even though in fairness to Foucault it should be added that he considered the lectures collected in the volume “*Society Must be Defended*” (from which I have been quoting) only a provisional and tentative exploration of this topic, what matters here is that his argument has the merit of showing how very close we remain, a millennium and a half down the road, to Vegetius’s formula.

The pressing question that emerges from this cursory overview is, obviously, how can peace be thought of as an alternative to war, if it is always, relentlessly, defined as the product of (or the precondition for) war? In his 1984, George Orwell, as everyone knows, imagined “War

² Louis Antoine Fauvelet de Bourrienne, *Mémoires de M. de Bourrienne, Ministre d’État : Sur Napoléon, le Directoire, le Consulat, l’Empire et la Restauration*. Vol. 4, 1829. Google Books, books.google.it/books?id=4ro8AAAAYAAJ.

³ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 87.

⁴ Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*.” *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*. Trans. by David Macey, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana (London: Picador, 2003), p. 15.

is Peace” as one of the three slogans of the Ministry of Truth, but I think it can be easily proved that while this slogan may be an excellent example of the Newspeak common to all totalitarian states, it is actually also one of the key beliefs of democratic societies (or perhaps one should say, so-called “democratic societies”) all the world over. In fact, as I go over this essay one last time, in the summer of 2024, I must observe that even a crime as heinous, indefensible, and monstrous as genocide, is renamed not only by the Israeli government, but my most “democratic” Western governments (beginning of course with the one that is the key enabler of the extermination of Palestinians in Gaza) as “Israel’s right to defend itself.” Once that is understood, one begins to wonder whether it makes any sense to cry “Hypocrisy!” whenever the Nobel Peace Prize goes to people with a variable quantity of blood on their hands like Henry Kissinger and Barak Obama, Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin, Muhammad Anwar el-Sadat and Menachem Begin. They were all believers in the notion that peace could be secured only using force, faithful followers of the apparently ineradicable notion that, without war, you can have no peace.

I suppose I hardly need to stress that where the distinction lies between peace and war is far from being a merely academic, linguistic, or philosophical dispute. The question of whether peace can ever be extricated from a logic of war, is, literally, a matter of life and death. The current war in Ukraine, is, of course, a case in point. In what follows I will try to be as objective as possible, by presenting how each side constructs rhetorically its own version of reality, and therefore their own *casus belli*. In February 2022 the Russian army invaded a sovereign country but, like all nations that decide to wage war, Russia too claimed to be acting in self-defense. Russia is a peace-loving nation, Putin argued, but at the prospect of seeing a key neighboring country like the Ukraine join NATO—that is, a military alliance that Putin considers inimical to Russia’s geopolitical interests—he had to send in the army to “denazify” Ukraine and to bring peace to the Donbas region, where war between the Russian separatists and the Ukrainian army had been going on since April 2014. Obviously, many would object that what Putin calls “peace” is simply another name for the political goals he pursues.

However, questions must also be asked about how the other side construes its own version of “peace.” Before the Russian invasion, there was nothing like “peace” in the Donbas region. According to UN

sources, between April 6, 2014 to December 31, 2021, over 14,000 people had lost their lives in the conflict, with nearly a quarter of them being civilians. Moreover, an argument can be made, and indeed has been made, that Ukraine’s military alignment with the West, was far from being a gesture of “peace” towards Russia, especially considering that Putin had many times expressed his opposition to the enlargement of NATO to the east. Finally, NATO too, as one can read on its webpage, has as its primary purpose to ensure “peace and security in Europe and North America,” but it aims at doing so by both political and military means. NATO makes no mystery, then, that it firmly believes that if you wish to keep the peace, you must be ready for war. And indeed, even though Ukraine at the time of the Russian invasion was not a NATO member, from the very start NATO provided military assistance to Zelensky. Of course, if that did not happen, the Russian army would have most likely sooner, rather than later, taken control of the whole country. But it is an objective fact that by providing the resistance with more and more weapons, NATO countries are instrumental in prolonging the war, and a longer war means more deaths. Of course, the Ukrainian response is that these regrettable deaths—which at the time of this writing total more than 70,000 on the Ukrainian side alone—are worth it, as the only other option would be to surrender to the aggressor.

While resistance against foreign aggression qualifies as an undisputable act of self-defense (though of course for the Western doxa Ukrainians who fight against Russian occupation are heroes whereas Palestinians who fight against Israeli occupation are terrorists), also self-defense is by and large a use of force that falls within the perimeter of the *si vis pacem para bellum* continuum. In fact, regardless of who may be right and who may be wrong, as I have insisted, both sides claim to be fighting for peace though regrettably, in order to achieve peace, they must resort to war. This is hardly surprising given that the historical record shows beyond any shadow of doubt that nations always go to war because they seek to realize what they choose to call “peace.” This may be especially easy to see in the modern age, when nations need to justify their going to war by construing their decisions not only as acts of self-defense (see for example the Anglo-American war against Iraq, with its never found WMD’s) but as *moral* interventions necessary to secure the peace. No matter how obscene the claim of acting in self-defense might be—as in the case of the current

genocidal attack of the Israeli “Defense” Forces on the population of Gaza—that is what all nations claim to do when they go to war. They claim to be “defending” themselves.

But there is a deeper sense in which the object of war is always “peace.” No country goes to war with the idea of being at war permanently. On the contrary, all wars are fought to bring about “peace,” that is with the objective of forcing the enemy to accept a new social and political configuration. So, while one may take issue with Foucault when he claims that politics is the continuation of war by other means, it would be much harder to deny that historically speaking “peace” is in the majority of cases the continuation of war—its inevitable (though of course by no means permanent) consequence. The fifty-year peace that Western Europe has enjoyed, for example, was the byproduct of World War Two, just as the peace between North and South Korea is the byproduct of the stalemate reached at the end of the Korean war, or the peace reached in the Balkans is the outcome of the wars unleashed by the falling apart of the former Yugoslavia.

Now, to go back to the Ukrainian war, it is obvious that the “peace” sought by one side has very little to do with the one the other side is struggling to achieve. True enough, but what is shared by both camps is the notion that only through war (whether defensive or offensive) peace can be obtained. We are thus completely mired in a rhetorical paradox that perhaps few have analyzed more effectively than Kenneth Burke, one of the most intelligent students of rhetoric, literature, and culture of the twentieth century. As he wrote in his 1945 *A Grammar of Motives*, if the best that people who care about peace can do is to point to the horrors of war, we will continue to be stuck in a situation in which “what we [are] admonished against [would be] just about the only tangible thing there for us to be.”⁵ In other words, we want men and women to become peaceful, but all we can do is marshal written and visual narratives that show them practicing the art of war. Burke was talking about literature and rhetoric, but his point has clear political implications. Wars are fought in the name of peace, but in order to become peaceful we must first turn into warriors—we must, in other words, mimic the violence (real or imagined) we are confronted with by our opponent.

⁵ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945), p. 332.

I know that at this point I could be accused of indulging in sophistry, ignoring that in a case like the war in the Ukraine, where many would argue there is a clear-cut distinction between an aggressor and a victim, there should also be an equally unambiguous difference between a “bad” versus a “good” violence. Or, if you prefer, granting that violence can in no circumstances deemed “good,” one may wish to argue that in the Ukraine war a difference holds between an acceptable versus an unacceptable form of violence. But if, with Judith Butler, “we accept the notion that all lives are equally grievable, and thus that the political world ought rightly to be organized in such a way that this principle is affirmed by economic and institutional life,” it should be clear that, no matter how justified or unjustified they might be in doing so, both sides are equally committed to the violation of what Butler identifies as “the radical equality of the grievable.”⁶

Like Butler, I too believe that it would be a mistake to consider non-violence as an absolute principle and that there may be indeed cases where to defend oneself one may have to resort to violence. However, especially considering the way wars are waged today, the “just cause” (*jus ad bellum*) of a specific war no longer translates—if it ever did—into “just rules” (*jus in bello*). Modern warfare has made any subordination of the immorality of killing to the morality of a just cause increasingly complicated. The clearest example of this is that in contemporary wars the number of civilians killed exceeds by far the number of dead combatants. So, where does all this leave us? It may well be that at the stage we have reached in the enfolding tragedy of the Russian-Ukrainian war, all possible solutions will be unsatisfactory and riddled with several moral and political complications. This, however, should not exempt us from considering the matter from a wider historical as well as theoretical perspective—both for the sake of reaching a better understanding of the current crisis, and in the hope of establishing conditions under which such crises may not occur again in the future.⁷

⁶ Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2021), p. 96.

⁷ In such a brief essay, where my point is to investigate how “peace” continues to be inextricably tied to its purported opposite (war), I cannot discuss at any length what might have been practical, political alternatives, to the defensive war undertaken by Ukraine to repeal the Russian invasion. Was a non-violent, political defense of Ukraine possible? I happen to believe that it should have been tried. If Gandhi had

Therefore, allow me to return to Judith Butler's book, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, from which I have already quoted. One of the premises of Butler's inquiry is that,

To argue for or against violence requires that we establish the difference between violence and nonviolence, if we can. But there is no quick way to arrive at a stable semantic distinction between the two when that distinction is so often exploited for the purposes of concealing and extending violent aims and practices. In other words, we cannot race to the phenomenon itself without passing through the conceptual schemes that dispose the use of the term in various directions, and without an analysis of how those dispositions work [...]. To start down such a path, we have to accept that "violence" and "nonviolence" are used variably and perversely, without pitching into a form of nihilism suffused by the belief that violence and nonviolence are whatever those in power decide they should be.⁸

Butler is responding to a situation analogous to the one I have tried to sketch in my argument so far: stable semantic—as well as, I would like to add, practical—distinctions between violence and nonviolence, war

never embraced non-violence to conduct his anti-colonial struggle, opting for the more traditional armed struggle that nearly all anti-colonial movements were embracing at the time, we would not have an example of what a non-violent mass movement could be like. To break the cycle of violence, a truly "heroic" choice must be made, and I don't think this would entail giving up the fight for freedom. I repeat, I cannot explore this issue here. But I do wish to point out that while NATO countries insist that the Ukrainian resistance must be provided with weapons to fight the Russian occupation, in the case of the more than fifty year-long illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, not only Western powers have never been willing to provide any military assistance to the Palestinian resistance, but they have always insisted that Palestinians should renounce armed struggle and choose non-violence, without, however, helping in even the most minimal way to build up the conditions required for a non-violent alternative to emerge on both sides. Western countries hypocritically choose to ignore that whenever Palestinians have embraced civil and largely non-violent resistance they have met with violent repression. In the "Great March of Return," for example, according to Amnesty International over 150 Palestinians were killed, with over 10,000 injured. But the reason why Palestinian non-violence has failed lies not only with Israel's criminal behavior—it also lies with the Western countries' refusal to subject Israel to the kind of political pressure that would force the country to change its policies. As both Gandhi and King insisted, the moral outrage of public opinion is a *conditio sine qua non* for the success of non-violence—as long, of course, such moral outrage is translated into practical governmental actions.

⁸ Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, pp. 25-26.

and peace are difficult to formulate precisely because they are part of what conflict is all about. As Australian philosopher Nick Mansfield has put it in his *Theorizing War*, “the deployment of the term ‘war’ is inevitably a deployment of something else as well, the ‘other’ of war, something called variously peace, or civil society, or sovereign authority, or love or friendship.” This “other” of war is not “a simple opposite of war, something that we aim to protect from war or retrieve from it somehow.” This other—that is, “peace”—is what war needs to constantly refer to “in order to make sense at all.”⁹

I guess it should be clear by now that while I concede the moral and political complications such a choice entails, the argument I am trying to build here is an argument in favor of nonviolence. In this regard, let me quote Butler again: “In response to the objection that a position in favor of nonviolence is simply unrealistic [one should maintain] that nonviolence requires a critique of what counts as reality, and it affirms the power and necessity of counter-realism [...]. Perhaps nonviolence requires a certain leave-taking from reality as it is currently constituted, laying open the possibilities that belong to a newer political imaginary.”¹⁰ In other words, as far as the war in Ukraine is concerned, if we wish to contribute to the building of a peace that may be truly something else than an extension of the logic of war, we must be skeptical of what is presented to us as reality. Make no mistake, I am by no means suggesting that the killings, the misery, the bombings, the unspeakable cruelties of the war are not real. What I am suggesting is that there is much more that escapes the eye of a viewer conditioned not only by what the media and most politicians construct as reality, but also by a hegemonic way of perceiving war matters that remains rooted in the understanding that only war can bring us peace.

Now, what would happen if we set aside for a moment this often unstated but widely shared ideological premise, and adopted as our guiding principle the slogan launched by *Medecin sans Frontiers* at the beginning of the invasion? That slogan is, simply *Si vis pacem para*

⁹ Nick Mansfield, *Theorizing War: From Hobbes to Badiou* (London: Palgrave, 2008), pp. 2, 3.

¹⁰ Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, p. 32.

pacem—if you want peace, you must prepare for peace.¹¹ Or perhaps, even better, build peace. The etymology of the Latin verb *parare*, in fact, suggests that the verb refers to setting the conditions for something to take place, while another meaning associated with it is “to defend something” (as in the contemporary Italian phrase *parare un colpo*—to absorb a blow). To the question of whether any side in this war has prepared for peace, the only honest answer must be a resounding NO! Both NATO and Russia, in fact, have done just the opposite, because their respective political imaginaries understand military matters only in light of de Bourrienne’s preoccupations. They are both committed to building up their arsenals because they fear that a peaceful stance would render them vulnerable.

This is, however, where we must engage in that leave-taking from reality as currently constituted that Judith Butler recommends. And here, too, is where a very important American tradition of what Albert Einstein would have called “militant,” aggressive pacifism can be of great help. I will not try to summarize my understanding of the important intellectual and political achievements of this tradition that extends from Emerson and Thoreau to William James, Jane Addams, Richard Bartlett Gregg, Martin Luther King, and many, many others. I will only mention that one of the arguments of my 2015 book *Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature*, is devoted precisely to showing that “peacefighting” is anything but the choice of the weak and ineffectual.¹² As Emerson put it, “the cause of peace is not the cause of cowardice.” Rather than repeat what I have argued elsewhere, however, here I would like to call attention to how this issue of failing to build the peace was highlighted as setting the stage for war even before figures like Emerson and Thoreau took the stage. Long before Henry David Thoreau’s impassioned argument on a standing army being only an arm of the standing government, and William James’s warning, in his 1898 contradictory but fundamental essay “The Moral Equivalent of War,” that “the intensely sharp preparation for war” is “the real war,” one of the Republic’s Founding Fathers, James

¹¹ The slogan is just another way to say what the epigraph from Gandhi I chose for this essay says. True peace should be achieved—as much as it is humanly possible—through peace, not war.

¹² Giorgio Mariani, *Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

Madison, stated that, “A standing military force, with an overgrown Executive will not long be safe companions to liberty. The means of defence agst. foreign danger, have been always the instruments of tyranny at home. Among the Romans it was a standing maxim to excite a war, whenever a revolt was apprehended. Throughout all Europe, the armies kept up under the pretext of defending, have enslaved the people.”¹³ Here, not only Madison warned that a standing army was the precondition for what, in another well-known statement, he defined as the evil “most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops every other”—that is, war—but he also stated in unequivocal terms that an overblown military arsenal was simply incompatible with democracy. “In war, too,” he continued, “the discretionary power of the executive is extended; its influence in dealing out offices, honors, and emoluments is multiplied; and all the means of seducing the minds are added to those of subduing the force of the people! No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.”¹⁴

Considering that since 9/11 the United States have been permanently at war, one wonders what Madison would have thought about the state of contemporary American democracy. But there’s more, of course. In 2001, the Pentagon Budget was \$287 billion. In 2021 it had gone up to \$782 billion. This year (2023), according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, it has reached \$801 billion, accounting for 3.2 per cent of the US GDP. Of the 20 largest military spenders in the world, only Saudi Arabia (6.6) and Israel (5.2) spend a larger percentage of their respective GDPs to arm themselves. Russia, interestingly, invests only a tiny 0.1 percent less of its GDP than the US, though in absolute terms, both China and Russia—the two great competitors of the US on the world scene—account for only 14% and

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “War,” in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 11 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), p. 174; William James, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” in *Writings*, 1902–1910, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Library of America, 1987), pp. 1283; Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,” in *Walden and Civil Disobedience: authoritative texts, background, reviews, and essays in criticism*, ed. Owen Paul Thomas (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 224; James Madison, *The Writings of James Madison*, ed. Gaillard Hunt, Vol. 3 (New York: Putnam’s, 1902), p. 317.

¹⁴ James Madison, *James Madison’s “Advice to My Country”*, ed. David B. Mattern (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), pp. 106, 106–107.

3.1%, respectively, of the world's military spending, with the US reaching a staggering 38%.¹⁵

At this point it may be worth recalling the words used by a man who had certainly lived all his life believing that if you wanted peace you had to be ready for war. Dwight Eisenhower—a former World War Two general and US president from 1952 to 1960—in his famous “military-industrial complex” speech, argued that “Disarmament, with mutual honor and confidence, is a continuing imperative. Together we must learn how to compose differences, not with arms, but with intellect and decent purpose.”¹⁶ No wonder this text is featured in all the major anthologies of peace and anti-war writing published in the US over the last twenty or so years. Here, however, I would like to quote at some length a lesser-known passage from his address to the American Society of Newspaper editors: “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.”¹⁷ Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron: if we continue to threaten war—if we continue, that is, to make of Vegetius’ motto the polar star of our thinking about political and military matters, all human beings will be facing crucifixion.

I don’t know to what extent Eisenhower meant what he said or understood the implications of his statement, but let us forget for a moment that these were the words of an Army general, and stick only to what they say, or better, what they *do*. In my view, what they do, is offer us a fresh new “cognitive mapping” of the world. I use intentionally the concept that Fredric Jameson took from urban planner Kevin

¹⁵ All data are from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2022 Fact Sheet (for 2021), as reported in “List of countries by military expenditures,” *Wikipedia*, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_with_highest_military_expenditures.

¹⁶ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Military-Industrial Complex Speech,” Lillian Goldman Law Library, 1961, avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/Eisenhower001.asp.

¹⁷ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “The Chance for Peace,” April 16, 1953, *The American Presidency Project*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/231643.

Lynch, to suggest that traditional military cognitive mapping has always privileged—and in many ways continues to do so—the space of the nation. This is to some extent hardly surprising. As Philip Wegner has usefully put, “It is what Benedict Anderson famously calls the ‘imagined community’ of the nation that unifies and draws together into a coherent ensemble the lived experience of individuals and the abstract economic and political realities of the newly emerging capitalist states.”¹⁸ Military reality could only follow suit. However, in the post-modern, post-atomic age, this older cognitive mapping is no longer adequate. It may still work as far as conventional warfare is concerned, but it becomes useless when a nuclear superpower threatens to use its atomic weaponry. The old maps no longer help us in making sense of the world. We enter a truly global space where there is only humanity and the bomb, so to speak. But here, at this incredibly bleak juncture when apocalypse seems only a few minutes away, “a new and heretofore unimaginable politics” may begin to emerge.¹⁹ The threat of complete annihilation—a reality we cannot perceive unless we take leave from another, outmoded reality—sets the preconditions for a new form of cognitive mapping no longer based on the unit of the nation but on that of the planet. And in this new form of cognitive mapping, the old Latin dictum must be discarded as an old rusty tool of a bygone era.

Since thus far I have hardly said anything about how literature may help us in our search for better answers to allay the sorrows of current wars and prevent those of future conflagrations, I would like to conclude by quoting a passage that has always struck me as one of the most beautiful and poignant moments in twentieth-century American literature. It is a passage from Leslie Marmon Silko’s 1977 novel *Ceremony*, where the protagonist Tayo, a traumatized World War Two veteran from Laguna Pueblo, is finally able to trace a pattern—a cognitive map, that is—in what thus far he has experienced as a series of disconnected and painful fragments.

He had been so close to it, caught up in it for so long that its simplicity struck him deep inside his chest: Trinity Site, where they exploded the first

¹⁸ Philip E. Wegner, *Periodizing Jameson: Dialectics, the University, and the Desire for Narrative* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), p. 72.

¹⁹ Wegner, *Periodizing Jameson*, p. 73.

atomic bomb, was only three hundred miles to the southeast, at White Sands. And the top-secret laboratories where the bomb had been created were deep in the Jemez Mountains, on land the Government took from Cochiti Pueblo: Los Alamos, only a hundred miles northeast of him now, still surrounded by high electric fences and the ponderosa pine and tawny sand rock of the Jemez mountain canyon where the shrine of the twin mountain lions had always been. There was no end to it; it knew no boundaries; and he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth had been laid. From the jungles of his dreaming he recognized why the Japanese voices had merged with Laguna voices [...]; the lines of cultures and world were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting. From that time on, human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate color of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter.²⁰

What the novel identifies as "the witchery" may well be translated into the obscene military budgets of all nations, which not only pave the way to Armageddon, but daily deprive people of food, shelter, education, and medical care—in a word deprive people of peace, in the name of a "peace" that reeks of war. But if we are "one clan again"—as I think we are, though we may not know it yet—it is high time to say goodbye to Vegetius

²⁰ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 245-246.

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The essays collected in this volume were written over the last twenty or so years and were all originally published (with one exception) in a variety of journals and edited collections. The topics covered range from contemporary Native American literature to war literature and cinema, from the revisionist Western film to the prose of Ralph Waldo Emerson and other writers who struggled to think of peace as something different from the peace that can be safeguarded by an unending preparedness for war. As a whole, this book attempts to gauge to what extent both film and narrative can point in the direction of that “one step beyond the hero” which Emerson (in his early years) saw as necessary to becoming true peace fighters. Though *“One Step Beyond the Hero”* shows how difficult it is to imagine (let alone realize) a world free of violence, brutality, and coercion, its goal is not to undermine the Utopian desire for a non-violent future. On the contrary, by calling attention to how writers and filmmakers deal with both violence and war, this study engages in a critical scrutiny of culture based on the notion that peace should be another word for justice.

Giorgio Mariani recently retired from Sapienza University of Rome, where he was for many years Full Professor of American Literature. He is the author of *Waging War on War. Peacefighting in American Literature* (University of Illinois Press, 2015), *Melville: Guida a Moby-Dick* (Carocci, 2022), and of numerous other books and essays.

ISBN 978-88-9377-372-0



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