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*War Literature, the Constitution, and
Fostering Reluctant Killers*

LAST SUMMER I HAD THE GOOD FORTUNE of attending a National Humanities Center seminar on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* led by Dr. Geoffrey Harpham, Director of the Center. Throughout the week, and particularly during a discussion on the Robert Duvall character Colonel Kilgore in *Apocalypse Now*, I articulated my convictions concerning the relevance of studying war literature and ethics at the service academies. In essence:

I wear this uniform because I believe that, in the end, our way of life is better than any other at defending the inherent worth (if you will, the sanctity) *of the individual*. And to that end, war is necessary at times. The great paradox of serving *in our* Armed Forces is that we pledge to defend a constitution rooted in principles that value and dignify individual human beings, but in the course of defending that same constitution we're sometimes called upon to take human life—or contribute to such operations. A daunting conundrum indeed. And yet my understanding of history teaches me that violence is always going to be part of human existence, and my moral sense says that managed, informed violence, in the service of just principles, is better than the alternatives. What I try to do here, then, is to foster (how shall I say) *reluctant killers, reluctant killers who nonetheless are willing to kill for a just cause*. We train our cadets, basic enlisted, and young

officers to do some things that will haunt them for the rest of their lives. We ask them to do things they'd never do if the nation didn't ask it of them. And even though the nation asks it, and no matter how disciplined they are, they'll still be haunted by what they've done. And they have to be. If they aren't, then we've only trained Kilgore—killers or potential killers or accomplices of killers, all without a conscience.

But how does reading a poem, memoir, or fictional narrative inform the kind of conscience of which I speak? I hope to detail the various ways war literature can and should figure in the formation of ethical military leaders. Let me begin by stating the most obvious warrant for the study of this type of literature: war literature worth its salt puts a human face on war, an *individual* human face. In other words, war literature personalizes conflict and gives the lie to easy and dangerous generalizations about war, the kinds of platitudes that measure war's cost in terms of ideological pap or the most banal statistical analyses. War poems such as Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump" or Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" reveal the dangerous allure of Stalin's famous quip about the banality of mass slaughter: "One death is a tragedy, a million are a statistic." Statistical accounts of war are lies and insidious because they inure us to war's actual cost. We grow weary, bored, or numb in the presence of antiseptic statistics. The litany of the dead in the two world wars (8.5 million in the trenches and 50-70 million in World War II) contains figures so large that they ring hollow when stacked against, say, 800,000 Rwandans hacked in a matter of weeks, or even 6 million holocaust victims who seem more particular to us.

The best war literature always works to counteract war's penchant for depersonalization. The art of Sassoon and Owen succeeds because these poets value the personal and concrete. Their vatic wisdom spurs them to warn us about the peril of wrongheaded patriotic pap and empty abstractions. In his exquisite sonnet "On Passing The New Menin Gate," Sassoon asks the incriminating question, "Who will remember, passing through this Gate, / The unheroic Dead who fed the guns?" This master of irony knows the answer is that few will remember the 54,889 "intolerably nameless names" inscribed in stone. To what end did these men die? Ultimately, Sassoon dubs this war memorial a "sepulchre of crime." Instead of honoring each name inscribed on the gate, the monument works to obscure the identity and brutal demise of the dead by immolating their individuality in a clean and polished mass memorial. Sassoon is able to speak so authoritatively about war's depersonalizing effects because he himself has been victimized by the atomizing, anonymous nature of modern warfare and he knows what the meat-grinder does to that precious, fragile, mercurial thing called the self.

War literature reminds us that with every uptick in a conflict's casualty or body count, an individual human life has been extinguished or utterly transformed. In the encounter with genuine war literature we must face the fact that people die in armed conflict—each with an individual story. Good soldiers die—some of whom are former cadets. Happily, criminals and thugs who spawn wars so as to profit from them die as well. And, as I repeatedly remind cadets, civilians die too. In the twentieth century, the bloodiest in human history, an average of nearly twenty-one thousand people died daily in war. Ninety percent of those dead were civilians. It can be a sobering experience for a cadet with a top-gun attitude to read *Slaughter House Five* and discuss the effects of fire raids over Dresden and Tokyo. “Was Curtis E. Le May a hero or war criminal?” I ask my students. I tell cadets their primary job now, as they prepare to lead the world's most lethal Air Force, is to perform the moral reckoning of such potential carnage. When is such possible human loss justified? They'd better arrive at viable answers, for they will soon be custodians of the nation's firepower. Indeed, our sometimes-starry-eyed cadets need to consider such issues, especially our cadets at the Air Force Academy who, in their future capacity as pilots or missileers, could easily fall prey to the “morality of altitude”—the kind of ignorance-is-bliss that can ensue as weapon system operators pull triggers from thirty thousand feet above or a continent removed from the flesh-and-blood reality of bombs on target.

War, of course, has always depended on the diminishment, the effacement, the annihilation of the individual. The best of our war poets have said as much for centuries. As Simone Weil notes, Homer makes the Force of war the protagonist of the *Iliad*, and this faceless, indiscriminate two-handed engine thrives on obliterating each soul in its path. But in modern times, the rise of the nation-state and the spread of various cancers such as nationalism, totalitarianism and international terrorism have upped the ante in the assault on the individual.¹ So we read war literature to combat ideas opposed to the basic Constitutional principles we pledge to defend. But this kind of wrongheadedness stems not only from flawed metaphysics or fanatical ideology. In an age of standoff weaponry and intercontinental ballistic missiles, our blind faith in technology can just as easily dupe us into believing new lies about the reliability of the “surgical” strike or the wisdom of “smart” bombs. Perhaps one of the prime benefits of cadets reading war literature, then, is to remind them that war always squanders humans, a fact that complicates our commitment to the sanctity of the individual. Cadets need and desire tools for navigating the moral thicket of war's lethality and destructive force as well its capacity for producing good—tools for coming to terms with their role in the application of deadly force so they can do their jobs with maximum effectiveness and then live with themselves after. Should not our selection of war

literature texts give way, then, to questions about what it means to fight, kill, and die in the name of democracy?

There are other sound reasons and purposes for reading war literature. In his account of the Conrad seminar, Dr. Harpham describes the place of the humanities and war literature in officer formation:

What are the humanities about if not the cultivation of an informed conscience, a habit of reflection in which the flow of thoughtless action and means-end calculation is interrupted by a consideration of historical contexts and ethical considerations, by an imaginative awareness of the character and consequences of action, by a deep investment in the human condition and its possibilities? If those with such knowledge and such capacities do not assume some kind of responsibility for worldly action, including the management of violence, then that responsibility passes to the Kilgores, and the Kurtzes, of the world.

The why and wherefore of violence—its cost and consequences. The conscientious management of violence. These issues inform my scholarship and hence my approach to teaching war literature. Specifically, my research explores the intersection between violence, translation, and poetry in the Irish context. Given my scholarly predilections, I try to foster in my students a deeper understanding of war by allowing them to see armed conflict not simply as a product of irrational bloodlust but also as an outgrowth of what Derrida calls the “violence of the letter.” We thus examine far more than straightforward representations of traditional armed conflict. I want cadets to consider other instantiations and forms of violence that may not fit the tidy rubric of traditional war between nation states.²

This semester I’ve taken my approach to war literature and joined it with Professor Anderson’s expertise. We’ve turned our War Literature course into a learning lab where students investigate war-time violence in various conflicts, spanning multiple historical periods and cultural contexts. My immediate goal in the course is to help cadets earn insight into human behavior and ethical leadership that they can carry immediately into active duty. Over the long haul, I hope our students will become life-long readers of war literature. How do we do this? In the war poetry block, I’ll push cadets to consider moral dilemmas and existential conflicts facing poet-soldiers such as Owen or Sassoon. I ask them to compare these poet-soldiers’ circumstances with the situation of a fictional character such as Antigone. The parallels between the ancient fictive character and the flesh-and-blood soldier are remarkable. While Owen and Antigone are both besieged by overwhelming circumstances of senseless

violence (situations largely stemming from inept and corrupt leadership), I invite my students to draw nuanced comparisons and contrasts between Owen and Antigone. After all, in the post-civil war Theban context, Antigone becomes a kind of paradigmatic nonviolent protestor, pitted against Creon's exercise of force and unjust laws. Owen, on the other hand, willingly and actively participates in a war that he and his friend Sassoon will later condemn.³ I encourage cadets to consider their own potential responses to the moral dilemmas that emerge in times of extreme violence. How would they respond to Creon's order not to bury one's kin? Can they imagine ever finding themselves in a situation where they too would refuse to follow unjust orders? What constitutes sound moral authority, a just war, or legal orders?

If my research emphasizes the status of war and violence as enduring aspects of human experience, I'm equally cognizant that we humans are the only species capable of painting, sculpting, composing sonatas and sonnets. In our War Literature course, then, we also highlight humanity's unique capacity for creating palliative and redemptive works of wartime art. Drawing upon my own special interest in radical shifts in aesthetics that have emerged historically in the wake of war, I relish sharing examples of changes in literary form and content as responses to war (e.g., the relationship between aspects of modernism and World War I).⁴ I particularly like to detail formal and stylistic innovations inspired by the experience of trench warfare. Building upon a study of poetic meter and form, I explore with my students the striking formal and linguistic contrast between Owen's trench poetry and the naïve, saccharine patriotism expressed in one of his pre-war quatrains ("O meet it is and passing sweet / To live in peace with others, / But sweeter still and far more meet, / To die in war for brothers"). Employing their hard-won knowledge of prosody, my cadets are able to articulate the radical stylistic, linguistic, and prosodic differences between the mellifluous neo-Georgian strains of the pre-war quatrain and the hard-driving, unforgiving brutality of Owen's anomalous double sonnet "Dulce et decorum est"—a poem that assails the citadel of genteel English pastoralism even as it explodes the notion that dying in war is "meet and passing sweet." By examining the kinds of formal, stylistic, and linguistic changes in Owen's art wrought by the experience of trench warfare, my students undoubtedly gain a better understanding of the elements of poetry. They also come to know and appreciate the ingenuity and resourcefulness of human beings *in extremis*, ordinary people caught up in deadly conflict who find ways to enlist creativity in the service of survival and transcendence.

Our humanities courses, then, *must be more* than utilitarian workshops for honing critical thinking, argumentative, and literary analytical skills. We should believe that what we do in the classroom can, in some measure, contribute to the conduct of just wars. But there is a more immediate payoff for our work. By sharing our

passion for war literature with cadets, we help them develop a deeper appreciation of the value of human life and culture, an appreciation that can translate into more humane and compassionate leadership. I am confirmed in my conviction that rather than being antithetical to the military profession the humanities constitute an indispensable component of the military professional's formation. Recently, I had such an experience listening to Major General John Borling (USAF, retired), a former fighter pilot and six-year Vietnam POW. When asked to name the most important courses he took as an Academy cadet, Borling immediately responded: "Humanities courses—art history, music appreciation, literature, introductory philosophy." These were the courses, he said, that cultivated seeds of hope and put him in touch with the centuries-long development of an intellectual tradition that contains essential, life-giving wisdom—a body of knowledge that provided a reason to persevere and survive the hell of captivity and torture. And so I strive in my teaching and research to share with cadets the rich trove of existential and moral insight offered by the humanities. The humanities keep us honest and human, reminding us of our capacity for committing unspeakable violence and of our ability to outface brutality through the transformative power of art.

Notes

1. Though Hegel represents an extreme point of view, his assessment of the individual in relation to state-sponsored violence reflects a typical view held by many votaries of violence against the individual: "The moment the State calls, 'Myself and my existence are at stake!' social self-seeking much fall back. . . . The individual must forego his own ego and feel himself a member of the whole. . . . In that very point lies the loftiness of war, that the small man disappears entirely before the great thought of the State."
2. For instance, we consider examples of epistemic violence committed in the name of colonial expansion or postcolonial liberation movements, or the kind of ethnic cleansing and tribal violence perpetrated by Hutu against Tutsi, or the kind of linguistic violence Said details in his theory of Orientalism.
3. As a side note, I always take time to discuss how Sassoon courageously writes a letter of public protest calling for an end to the war and I share the document with cadets.
4. To this end, I have partnered with our musicologist, Dr. Ann Reagan, who developed for me an audio-visual presentation that combines atonal post-World War I music with images detailing the evolution of German expressionist painting between 1908 and 1918.

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