

LIAM CORLEY

Achilles Among the Maidens

Despite a carefully rehearsed script, I knew my conversation with the dean was fraught with dangers: “I’ve come to ask for an unpaid leave because I’ve received a fully-funded federal fellowship to Afghanistan next year. I won’t be teaching literature, but I will be learning about an essential theme of literature—war.” Casting mobilization orders as academic opportunity was as much an attempt to make light of a significant disruption in my personal life as it was an effort to put a positive cast on the implications of this pre-tenure absence for my academic career. There was also a degree of hopefulness in my script. Were there connections between my work as a literature professor and my erstwhile profession as a soldier? How would ten months serving full-time as a Navy officer in a ground war in Afghanistan impact my teaching, research, and aptitude for university service? Uncertain as to the specifics but confident that my colleagues would be gracious as I figured it out, I hammered out an agreement with my dean that put my tenure-clock on hold and eased my reintegration into academic life when I returned.

Two years after my tour, I find the questions posed at its outset to be just as intellectually urgent and emotionally vital as when I discussed them with my dean. Like any sabbatical, my plans for deployment were more ambitious than I was able to accomplish. Academics tend to over-plan every break in our routines, idealistically expecting that writing and research will simply flow when we are freed of the daily grind of giving lectures, grading, and attending committee

meetings. I didn't anticipate having only eight to ten hours a day for sleep, exercise, eating, hygiene, and family correspondence, so naturally I overestimated my ability to read and write on academic subjects while deployed. The first strike against the "sabbatical" was my plan of staying current or getting ahead on scholarship in my field. This was the easiest to measure and lowest priority of my criteria for rating war as means of academic renewal.

The next most straightforward metric concerned my aptitude for university service. Here the university and the military are remarkably similar: bureaucracy and an idolatrous commitment to process often lead to interminable meetings with indeterminate outcomes. Although from the outside one might assume that military organizations can dispense with academic essentials like "buy-in from key stakeholders" and "strict adherence to precedence and policy," these principles are held to strenuously due to the twin fears of the debilitation resulting from poor unit morale and mission failure stemming from unproven innovations. Fortunately, charisma, strong purpose, and the inspiring mix of high expectations and trust which allows for effective delegation can operate within and around the stultifying structures of bureaucratic control and conservatism. There is also the important interior choice we must reaffirm in circumstances where we are opposed by higher powers than me: a self-defined mission may be our only salvation when faced with the devastating torpedoes of confusion and incompetence at the highest levels. More than ever, I was entrenched while deployed in a bureaucratic world, but thanks to an internal commitment to mission over myopia, I was not of it. A single soldier, a single student, a single grade, a single decision—that is enough for today. Upon returning to campus life, I was more apt to be pertinent, pointed, and brief, as opposed to prolix, petty, and purposeless. Combined with a commitment to task completion over caviling, these traits have helped me to be a productive committee member, especially once I unlearned the penchant for profanity which too many in the military equate with candor.

Teaching took a backseat during my deployment, as it often does during a sabbatical. However, I had ample opportunity to give and receive mentoring on an individual basis, and all of my written work while deployed was *de facto* educational for its recipients. Furthermore, I have more than once seen the truth of this observation by Emerson in "The American Scholar":

If it were only for a vocabulary the scholar would be covetous of action. Years are well spent in country labors; in town—in the insight into trades and manufactures; in frank intercourse with many men and women; in

science; in art; to the end of mastering in all their facts a language, by which to illustrate and embody our perceptions. I learn immediately from any speaker how much he has already lived, through the poverty or the splendor of his speech.

My pre-teaching careers have long enriched my ability to communicate the topics and significance of literature and history to my students. In an era of endless war and globalization, my nearer experience of Afghanistan and armed conflict has strengthened my ability to speak directly to students in the language of their fears, hopes, and needs. Apart from this general benefit, I know that my classes will contain a growing number of veterans in the years to come, beneficiaries of a generous revision of the G.I Bill, so needful for service-members now that our economy provides no happy homecoming for those with only the commendation of having done hard work well. With OIF/OEF veteran unemployment rates over 11%, colleges can expect to see more of these hungry warriors crowding their halls.

More significantly, my faith in the ability of 18-22-year-olds was most delightfully refreshed and strengthened by working closely with junior enlisted members of the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines. All-nighters were nothing to these kids, and they weren't working hard for something so inherently meaningless as a letter grade. What they *were* working for was as varied as the individual choices that brought them into the military to begin with, yet I was more impressed by their discipline and bonhomie in miserable circumstances than their largely unspoken values and motivations. This too is often the case in our classrooms. What explains the hardworking student who works two jobs and still outperforms the querulous complainer who finds every grade unfair and every deadline unreasonable? The origin and sustainment of such character remains a mystery to me, and so I am hesitant to criticize too harshly the one who fails to measure up. Though I've never been one to coddle traditional-aged college students, in the years leading up to my deployment I had been losing my optimism and ability to infuse a commitment to excellence in them. Like soldiers, faculty always have complaints: penurious administrators, petty colleagues, and, of course, entitled and unmotivated students. I have enjoyed returning to the classroom with renewed confidence in the capacities of America's youth.

The most difficult impact to assess was the way this deployment affected the intellectual substance and direction of my scholarship. On the one hand, there are stark parallels between the cultural tendencies towards democratic hubris and imperialism which I trace in eighteenth and nineteenth-century American writers

and the contemporary policies which landed me and 37,000 other Americans in a south Asian country that has been the end of more than one empire. Furthermore, the war in Afghanistan is the very acme of transnationalism, both in terms of the country's porous borders and in the global coalitions that compose the varying "sides" of the conflict, and it yields itself to the sort of theoretical analysis I have practiced throughout my years as an academic. These external correlations, however, did not substantively strengthen my work in Afghanistan nor provide fodder for future research when I returned to my early American intellectual milieu. No, the real change, so far as I can discern it, was, as Emily Dickinson says, "internal difference,/ Where the Meanings, are—".

In order to approach these "Meanings," I must violate the military imperative of clear, expository prose and resort to the time-honored academic practice of self-indulgent anecdotes and literary digressions. To begin with, I have never considered my response to duty's call to be particularly courageous or even, considered alongside other worthy callings, unusually admirable. I would, of course, rather have been at home with my family, teaching my students, writing my own articles, and serving in a community I have grown to love. But this was not possible. Much like my twice-weekly runs, I did my duty for the good that it brings and not the innate pleasures of the task. A heroic warrior I am not.

In fact, soon after I learned that I was being mobilized to Afghanistan and wouldn't be on campus in the fall, I invited two of my colleagues (conveniently married to each other) over for dinner, both to enjoy their company and to break the news. As fate would have it, they had a hard time entering our neighborhood due to police barricades. Helicopters were loitering noisily overhead when they finally made their way to our door. Although my wife and I had been oblivious to the maelstrom outside, a brief Internet news search revealed that an armed robbery and homicide had occurred a stone's throw from our house. Two weeks later I was on campus to file paperwork related to my unpaid military leave and a medium-sized earthquake struck. As I calmly counseled the non-California natives in the department halls to brace themselves in a doorway, one of my dinner guest colleagues commented that his first thought upon hearing a rumble at the beginning of the quake was that there had been an explosion. A few days later, his spouse confided in me the thought that I would probably be safer in Afghanistan. Although this was hardly comforting given that I was leaving my family and university behind in this suddenly dangerous place, circumstances proved her right. Though I had my moments of fear, I was perfectly safe during the ten months I spent far in Afghanistan, even on those days when I flew with the Italians.

While I saw death in Afghanistan, no close colleagues were seriously wounded or killed. Death did, however, strike my family, friends, and department with greater force than I could have imagined during my year of absence. The first loss was unheralded: my dissertation advisor, mentor, and deeply respected friend died of a sudden heart attack in the midst of a still busy professional and personal life. I was on guard against death in Afghanistan, but the loss of an advisor with whom I'd freely corresponded as a friend in the years since receiving my degree filled me with a grief that was compounded by my inability to attend his funeral or participate in other memorial events. In addition to my personal sense of loss, much of my professional life has been connected to his investment in me and I feel far less able to carry on his legacy without the encouragement and advice he gave so generously.

The death of my wife's grandmother, while rapid, was not unexpected, but her desire to be buried alongside the remains of my infant son was both sweet and excruciating. SKYPE could not allow me to adequately walk alongside my children and wife as we revisited our unnatural loss with one that came in the more normal course of life. Due to a late-night watch assignment, I was able to phone my wife and hear the graveside service through her cell phone. Despite "being there" in spirit, my tears were shed alone, in uniform, and half a world away. I was further humbled to tears when I learned of two department colleagues whose spouses had succumbed to cancer and another spouse whose vitality was sapped by her long fight against the disease. All of these losses, experienced at a distance, brought home to me how much I wanted to live and return whole to the family and friends left behind. The survivors at home were the true heroes, their daily battle with grief more courageous than my sometimes banal intellectual warfare.

Even Achilles hiding among the maidens cut a better figure, "Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles/ Who would not live long." The 96th fable of Hyginus's collection relates how Achilles hoped to avoid the call to join the army attacking Troy by disguising himself as a woman and joining the community of ladies in the court of King Lycomedes. Could Hyginus's fable have occurred to W.H. Auden when he pictured Thetis's dismay upon viewing the chilling scenes on the new-forged shield of Hephaestus?

She looked over his shoulder
For ritual pieties,
White flower-garlanded heifers,
Libation and sacrifice,
But there on the shining metal

Where the altar should have been,
She saw by his flickering forge-light
Quite another scene. (“Shield of Achilles”)

If it did, then it is all the more disconcerting to consider how much weaker than the warrior Auden considered the artist, whose poems could not shield a doomed and shallow race from its empty wars and causes:

That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
Were axioms to him, who’d never heard
Of any world where promises were kept
Or one could weep because another wept.

I entered my academic career to prevent or delay the ascendance of the soulless world Auden so bleakly depicts in this poem of “Dubya-Dubya Two.” In so doing, I have been thrust more out of civilized company by the content of my lectures than I would have been in most other more practical vocations.

The pen, it seems, is always vying with the sword, if not for victory and glory then at least for the last word. Soldiers and sailors have been authors, and so have their victims. During the year I taught World Literature in a visiting position, much of what was on the syllabus concerned war, defeat, and the fleeting pleasures of a long-sought triumph. Indeed, Achilles’s attempt to avoid the Trojan War by disguising himself as a maiden displays how even the ablest warrior will logically choose (with help from a god-like mother) domestic life and the arts so long as the threat of war remains distant. The time-honored practice of presenting war as defense rather than offense so as to circumvent this logical choice is why clever Odysseus, disguised as a peddler, brought the clash of war into the courtyard of the maidens, relying on Achilles’s courage and instinct to cause him to snatch up the discordant shield and sword in the midst of the peddler’s supplies of scarves, jewelry, and perfume.

Something similar occurred in Willoughby, Ohio, on September 2, 2008. Principal Paul Lombardo and Assistant Principal Jeff Lyons were discussing the day’s affairs in a morning meeting at Willoughby South High School when they heard a loud pop and the sound of breaking glass. While the rest of the school began its emergency lockdown procedures, the two men moved toward the sound that was slowly registering in their minds as a gunshot. Here is how Mr. Lyons described his thoughts in an interview on National Public Radio:

“[Y]ou look at firemen, for example: when everybody else is running out of the building, they’re running in. Well, when we hear a noise like that, as administrators, you know . . . we run toward the noise and say, hey, what can we do to help?”

Lyons and Lombardo moved towards the shooting, instinctually knowing that the shooter was most likely one of their own. When they encountered the suicidal youth, they talked him into dropping his handgun and surrendering to police. While Lyons and Lombardo’s actions were in no way advised under any of the workplace violence training that those of us in secondary and higher education now routinely undergo, their courage and compassion saved lives, even that of the shooter. Their partnership allowed them to go beyond the classroom to caring for the whole person and the environment within which education occurs.

My experience of war showed me that the whole environment of a society—access to food, water, safety, shelter, education, employment, personal and national improvement—is inextricably linked in an ecosystem of hope, courage, and responsibility. What little the warrior can provide—respite from fear, time and space for development—is inert yet essential. Soldiers are only a piece of a much larger puzzle. I find more than ever that I prize the end of an honorable war (whether so envisioned, redeemed mid-stream, or fitfully enacted in moments of courage and sacrifice) and its attendant blessings of individual liberty, personal security, and a functioning economy where even the poor can obtain the means to survive through their own labor. The new austerity of America is revealing to us that these simple fruits are priceless and inalienable rights, goals for which many peoples have understandably fought and too often failed to achieve. The Afghan people are not less entitled to these rights than the American undergraduate, and so I found myself with a gun in a different sort of schoolroom—a lesser Achilles admiring pashminas for sale in the local bazaar.

Such reflections are an outgrowth of two decades given to the study of literature. To my mind, the violence of the world outside academe is always-already present within it as an unspoken *raison d’être*. Hence my study of literature prepared me for war even as going to war further prepared me to study literature. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, reflecting upon a Joseph Conrad seminar he led at the US Air Force Academy, expresses this perspective on the humanities with great clarity:

It struck me on our final day that despite never having worn a uniform, I was now part of the American military mission, part of homeland

defense, even of Operation Iraqi Freedom. My honorarium had been provided by the Pentagon... which expected me to provide professional development for those whose job was to produce soldiers who would kill with an attitude worthy of a morally enlightened democracy committed to the sanctity of the individual. This mission was implicitly informed by the conviction that a conscience with the capacity to be deeply disturbed, even traumatized, is a precious thing, an indicator of democratic principles and ethical values. (82)

Although I am troubled by the Periclean culture of adumbrating war from a safe distance, I cannot deny to myself or others the value of blessings which are worth going to war to preserve or attain. In both quotidian and profound ways, the distance between academic and military pursuits has proven smaller than I anticipated. What literature embodies for this perpetual student is the reward of peace and the fruit of tranquility; its gnarled seed and costly mulch are the ends of war. Inasmuch as war was a sabbatical for me, it drew me closer to my vocation as a teacher and a scholar: the pursuit of truth and the praise of beauty. To such ends, we may all work for peace.

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Emory Elliott (1942-2009), distinguished humanist and noble soul: from West Point to Princeton, Princeton to Riverside, and from Riverside to the world—"he has now become his admirers."

Works Cited

Auden, W.H. "The Shield of Achilles." *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927-1957*. New York: Vintage Books, 1975.

Dickinson, Emily. "There's a Certain Slant of Light." *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1955.

Emerson, R. W. "The American Scholar." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume B*. Ed. Nina Baym. New York: Norton, 2007.

Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. "The Depths of the Heights: Reading Conrad with America's Soldiers." *Profession* (2008): 74-82.

Hyginus. "Fabulae 96." Trans. Mary Grant. *Theoi Classical E-Texts Library*. Web. 11 January 2009.

LIAM CORLEY is Associate Professor of English at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, where he teaches American literature and poetry. His writings on war and literature can be found in *College English*, *Chautauqua*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.