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## The New Heroism

“I don’t have PTSD, but I guess her thinking that I did is part of the weird pedestal vets are on now.”

Phil Klay, *Redeployment*

Phil Klay is half right. Vets are on a very weird pedestal now, but this pedestal is older than PTSD. Kathryn Bigelow, director of the academy-award winning film *The Hurt Locker* (2008), ponders the current idea of heroism from the soldier’s perspective: “War’s dirty little secret is that some men love it. I’m trying to unpack why, to look at what it means to be a hero in the context of 21st-century combat” (Bigelow). If loving war is a secret, however, it is one everyone knows. It is not just “some men” but the general public that loves war. Even anti-war narratives glamorize combat. Neither Klay nor Bigelow approves of the war each represents, yet their political views do not prevent them from finding the men who fight heroic. World War I may have discredited the rhetoric of patriotic sacrifice, but heroism is still admired. Studying soldiers’ memoirs from the Renaissance to the present, the military historian Yuval Harari argues that our idea of war and heroism emerged after the Enlightenment. As patriotic reasons for fighting became weaker, being a soldier became meaningful in itself. In contrast to Horace’s call to arms, “Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori,” modern soldiers are asked to fight whether or not they believe in the national cause. As a 2006 recruiting ad states,

“Every soldier has a reason. What’s yours?” (US Army). Although this ad is aimed at today’s all-volunteer army, Harari argues that personal reasons for fighting are based in the ideology that war is a crucible for the development of the self. Pacifists like Paul Baumer in Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* as well as gung-ho fighters like Buzz Morrow in John Hersey’s *The War Lover* and Sergeant James in Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker* display exceptional courage and skill, but these virtues serve individual goals rather than strategic objectives.

The pedestal Klay finds so weird was erected in the mid-eighteenth century, Harari argues in *The Ultimate Experience*. Until then, soldiers recounted their feats in pursuit of honor. After the Enlightenment, however, they began to write about their feelings rather than their deeds. Harari correlates this change with the erosion of communal belief in causes like patriotism and religion as well as the post-Enlightenment epistemology of sensationism. In contrast to the Enlightenment’s trust in the validity of empirical observations that could be replicated, a new confidence in the truth of inner experience made each observer’s personal experience valuable. Sensationism shifted the foundation of knowledge from perception to reception, from empirical observation to personal response. The general’s comprehensive perspective became less authoritative than the individual soldier’s experience.

Harari introduces the term “flesh-witnessing” to emphasize the loss of confidence in the authority of eye-witness testimony. He takes the term from a French World War I veteran who said that a man “who has not understood *with his flesh* cannot talk to you about it” (“Scholars” 215). Whereas eye-witness reports provide information that can be communicated to others, the knowledge of the flesh-witness can never be known by anyone else. Harari explains:

Henceforth, a central tenet of the new stories of war was that those who did not undergo the key experiences of war cannot understand these experiences and cannot understand war in general.

Two stock expressions repeat themselves in Romantic memoirs: “It is impossible to describe it” and “You had to undergo the experience yourself in order to understand it.” (*Ultimate* 232)

Such phrases have become a refrain in accounts of twentieth-century warfare. The soldier’s incommunicable yet incontrovertible knowledge is enviable. Only those who were there can know what he knows; others know nothing.

Yet this truth is incommunicable. Although soldiers tried to write about how they felt, they repeatedly said that they could not convey their experience. This inability to describe combat is now considered a symptom of PTSD, but Harari's survey of military memoirs suggests a different explanation. He argues that combat is indescribable for the same reasons that the eighteenth-century considered the sublime inexpressible: only those who have experienced the terror and awe of battle can describe it. Although *sublime* has become a synonym for *superb*, Edmund Burke defined the sublime as the antithesis of the beautiful. Whereas the beautiful is a source of pleasure, the sublime is a force to be feared, as gods had been feared. Harari argues, "The sublime was the Romantic counterpart of religious revelation. It was, however, secular in essence, for it depended on encounters with immanent reality in the shape of mountains or storms, rather than on encounters with a transcendental reality" (*Ultimate* 154). Burke's example of the sublime is the ocean because it evokes terror and awe (Burke 97-98); Harari's example is war. Warfare provides the essential conditions of the sublime in abundance: "It is particularly noteworthy that Burke, Kant, and Schiller grounded the sublime in the sense of self-preservation, arguing that terror and fear of death are at the bottom of the sublime experience" (*Ultimate* 155). The sublime is to be dreaded, yet a person who encounters it gains life-changing knowledge. From this perspective, the soldier is silent because civilians are incapable of understanding him, not because he is incapable of remembering or confronting his experience. He is not damaged but exalted.

Surely, one might think, this is not true of World War I, the war known for disillusioning a generation. Wilfred Owen denounced the Horatian motto "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" as the "old Lie." In *All Quiet on the Western Front* Remarque also disavowed Horace's patriotic ideal. When the novel was published in 1929, it was hailed as "the greatest of all war books" (Eksteins 354), and the film version made the following year won two Academy Awards. In the film, Paul Baumer (Remarque's narrator) confronts the teacher who urged him to enlist: "I heard you in here, reciting that same old stuff. Making more iron men, more young heroes. You still think it's beautiful and sweet to die for your country, don't you?" (Anderson). The novel's unprecedented sales—more than 2.5 million books worldwide in the first eighteen months (Eksteins 353)—suggest that Remarque spoke for soldiers on both sides when he debunked the rhetoric of heroism.

The novel strives for verisimilitude by describing the misery of the front: the fear, the hunger, the cold, the stench, the rats, the mud. Recognizing the anti-war intention of Remarque's raw account of the empirical experience of battle, Harari

calls this argument “Materialist Pacifism” (280), but he flatly rejects it. He claims: “Twentieth-century pacifist memoirists are simply wrong in their belief that war was never reported realistically in the past, and that a realistic report of war is enough to destroy its heroic allure” (75). Another critic observes that instead of presenting an argument against war, Remarque’s vivid account of the horrors of the battlefield enhances the heroism of the soldiers who endured these conditions (Pois 11); in fact, there were “soldiers on both sides who seemed to have adjusted to war as being a crucial, and positively meaningful, part of their lives” (Pois 12). Paul Baumer is one of these soldiers. His experience of war makes him feel superior to civilians. He knows more than they do. In the film he tells his former teacher, “We used to think you knew. The first bombardment taught us better. It’s dirty and painful to die for your country. When it comes to dying for your country it’s better not to die at all! There are millions out there dying for their countries, and what good is it?” (Anderson). Combat has transformed him: “I am no longer a shuddering speck of existence, alone in the darkness;—I belong to them and they to me; we all share the same fear and the same life. . . .” (Remarque 212). He derives meaning from the terror and awe of combat.

Paul belongs to a brotherhood that excludes non-combatants. He respects the diverse views of the men in his unit (203-207), but when he is home on leave, he is contemptuous of the opinions of civilians like his former teacher and his father’s friends. Non-combatants lack the knowledge of flesh-witnesses, and they are not entitled to speak about the war. Paul’s views progress from patriotism to skepticism, and he eventually becomes a pacifist. He resolves that if he survives he will devote himself to the international effort to prevent war. He addresses the corpse of the French soldier he has killed as “comrade”:

“But if I come out of it, comrade, I will fight against this, that has struck us both down; from you, taken life—and from me—? Life also. I promise you, comrade. It shall never happen again.” (226)

His disillusionment with one set of beliefs leads to other convictions. Only his comrades can understand them, and he is eager to return to his unit at the front. Civilian life “repels” him: “it is so narrow, how can that fill a man’s life, he ought to smash it to bits. . . . They are different men here, men I cannot properly understand, whom I envy and despise” (169). He turns his thoughts to his comrades at the front: “I must think of Kat and Albert and Müller and Tjaden, what will they be doing?” (169). At the end of his leave, Paul says,

Out there I was indifferent and often hopeless—I will never be able to be so again. I was a soldier, and now I am nothing but an agony for myself, for my mother, for everything that is so comfortless and without end.

I ought never to have come on leave (185).

As another soldier says, “The war has ruined us for everything” (87). Paul tries to imagine life after the war, but he can only express his generation’s rejection of prewar ideas and ambitions: “We believe in such things no longer, we believe in the war” (88). He wants to return to the front, awful as it is, because it is the only place that corresponds to his perception of reality. The front is the only place he feels at home.

This terrible comfort can be hard to give up. In *The Soldiers’ Tale* Samuel Hynes points out how often men describe their combat experiences in positive terms:

Yet it seems true, on the evidence of many men’s narratives from many wars: most men do feel war’s high excitement and romance, and even its beauty (to which there are many testimonies), and not only *before* they experience war but *after*.

Some soldiers never lose that excitement. They are the war lovers, and we must acknowledge that they exist and always have. (27)

Hynes’s survey of war stories, like Harari’s, shows that soldiers find meaning in war not because of its political purpose but because it transformed them.

Although *All Quiet* seems to be an honest account of the typical soldier’s experience, historians now argue that Remarque expresses the disillusionment of 1929 rather than the attitudes of 1914 or even 1919. The novel portrays not the war but what Hynes calls the “myth of the war”:

... a generation of innocent young men, their heads full of high abstractions like Honour, Glory, and England, went off to war to make the world safe for democracy. They were slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned and embittered by their war experiences, and saw that their real enemies were not the Germans, but the old men at home who had lied to them. They rejected the values of the society that had sent them to war, and in doing

so separated their own generation from the past and from their cultural inheritance. (*War Imagined* xii)

Modris Eksteins argues that this myth replaced the public's memory of the war itself. Since Remarque's view of the war was shared by so many, readers accepted it as the "truth" about the war: "The novel became enormously successful not because it was an accurate expression of the front-line soldier's war experience, but because it was a passionate evocation of current public feeling, not so much even about the war as about existence in general in 1929" (362). For this reason, Eksteins writes, "Remarque's supposedly frank portrayal of human responses to war and the depiction of a pitiful dignity under suffering were praised with gusto" (354). Eksteins concludes, "For many the war became absurd in retrospect, not because of the war experience in itself but because of the failure of the postwar experience to justify the war. For others the same logic turned the war into ultimate experience, again in retrospect" (362). Like Harari, Eksteins acknowledges that for many the war was the "ultimate experience."

The promise of revelation, of "ultimate" experience, of the sublime, sustained widespread support for World War I, even after the initial war aims were discredited. At first, Eksteins observes, each side was fighting for its beliefs: "The war had been presented on one side as a struggle for civilized values against tyranny and aggression; and on the other side it had been seen as a war for *Kultur* against enslavement by materialism" (347). Similarly, Daniel Todman argues that nations had good reasons for fighting, that participants accepted the heavy cost, and that the Allies achieved their objective of stopping German militarism, at least temporarily. He notes, "Across the country, local war memorials interpreted the war in traditional terms of national identity, loyalty, bravery and personal sacrifice in the service of justice, liberty and dignity. They ascribed a positive meaning to the war" (131). Not Wilfred Owen but Rupert Brooke was the war poet who spoke for most soldiers and civilians. By 1929 Brooke's collected poems had sold 300,000 copies, compared to the original printing of 730 copies of Owen's collected poems in 1920 (162). Owen became the voice of the First World War only after the Second World War (163).

Contrary to the myth of the war, it was not only the old men at home who welcomed hostilities. Avant-garde artists and writers were also caught up in the general enthusiasm. In the first decade of the century, the Expressionist generation had embraced violence as an agent of change. War was a way to fight bourgeois complacency and materialism and to throw off social restraints. It was also a way

to affirm new absolutes after the earlier religious consensus broke down. By 1909 the rhetoric of absolutes and violence reached the front page of *Le Figaro* in F. T. Marinetti's Futurist manifesto: "We already live in the absolute since we have already created eternal, omnipresent speed" (1, my translation). Violence was the basis of art: "For art can only be violence, cruelty and injustice" (1). The extremity of war caused it to signify more than the empirical experience of combat; war became an ideal: "We want to glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for woman" (1). A list of values that includes war and militarism as well as anarchism, beautiful ideas, and contempt for woman conveys the need for absolutes, the more extreme the better.

This embrace of violence was not merely rhetorical; many avant-garde writers and artists rushed to enlist when war was declared. Thomas Mann recalled: "War! We felt its coming as a purification, a liberation, and an immense hope. This is what the poets spoke of, only of this" (cited in Cohen 25). Poets as dissimilar as Rupert Brooke and T.E. Hulme, one critic writes, considered war "the ultimate test of a nation's manhood, the ultimate proof of its vigor and of its right to exist; it was the generation that felt that brute force is manly" (Bonadeo 421). Although such statements are easily vilified as proto-fascist propaganda, they express the period's widespread longing for a bedrock of meaning, whatever the particular meaning might be. The ideology of war as the ultimate experience answered this longing.

If the myth of the First World War was that no one believed it was worth fighting, the common view of the Second World War was that everyone believed in the national cause. John Hersey challenges this assumption in *The War Lover* (1959), a novel about American fighter pilots based in England. Daring to question the motives of men who served in a "good war," he argues that some men, as Hynes says, love war. Hersey wrote more than a decade after the war ended, and, like Remarque, he expresses a postwar mood. The novel argues that traditional military virtues can be pathological, but it fails to make them unattractive. Although several characters critique the hero's psychology, they succumb to the allure of his courage and prowess.

Hersey's hero is Buzz Marrow, an ace pilot who loves combat. The novel is narrated retrospectively by Marrow's co-pilot, Charles Boman, a competent, by-the-book flier. Boman portrays himself progressing from naïve admiration to mature judgment of his idol. At first, Boman sees Marrow as "the big man. . . . He handled all that airplane with his finger tips, and his movements were gradual, and the ship's were smooth. He was a powerful figure, an impressive organization

of flesh and cloth and leather and fur and rubber, yet he handled the plane not with power but rather with tender, sad care" (5). Marrow's skill makes the plane seem to be an organic part of his body. He names his plane *The Body*, suggesting a parallel to controlling a woman: "Just seeing that thing makes me feel horny. I can't wait to get my hands on her" (67). The plane symbolizes military and sexual power: "*The Body*," he said, "is my body. And when I fly I'm just pushing along with *The Body* sticking out in front of me. It's part of me" (376). The obvious Freudian themes undermine the rhetoric of patriotism, as Hersey suggests that personal gratification is a stronger motive than patriotic sacrifice.

The title of the novel also has military and sexual meanings. Hersey creates two kinds of war lover—Marrow who loves combat and Boman who loves a woman he meets during the war. The woman, symbolically named Daphne, is pursued by both men, but she chooses Boman because Marrow reminds her of her dead RAF lover. Like Marrow, her lover "had grown more and more daring, or suicidal, until, it was said, he had led his entire squadron in pursuit of German bombers" (156). In contrast, Boman sympathizes with the victims of his bombing raids, persuading Daphne that he has a wider emotional range than Marrow. She is Hersey's voice of authority on the motives of fighter pilots. Anticipating Kathryn Bigelow's question, Daphne has a theory to explain why some men love war. She tells Boman that war gives aggressive men an acceptable outlet for their antisocial desires:

"For some of them war's a license," she said.

"Like a hunting license?" I said, meaning to be ironic.

But she said, "Exactly. Makes what they want to do legal and even respectable." (193)

Although Daphne disparages the motives of men like Marrow and her former lover who enjoy combat, this kind of man is as alluring to Boman as he is to Daphne. Marrow inspires Boman's "admiration, envy, some feeling of having to hand it to him" (43). Boman and Daphne discuss Marrow whenever they are together. He is a bad-boy hero who drinks, brags about his sexual conquests, and disobeys orders, but his courage and prowess captivate both of them. The initial rivalry between Marrow and Boman for Daphne turns into a contest between Boman and Daphne to master their attraction to Marrow.

Even though Daphne denigrates Marrow's motives, she responds to his glamour. He is the epitome of bravery and skill. Everyone on the base cheers when he is awarded a medal "For Gallantry in Action" (294), and he interprets

the “hullabaloo” (293) to mean “that he was the best aviator in the Group” (294). But he takes risks for personal rather than patriotic reasons. After the ceremony, he comes to Daphne’s room uninvited. He shows her the medal and tells her that “he liked to fight for fighting’s sake” (376). Combat missions thrill him: “‘To hell with leadership! I get my bang out of flying’” (377). He seems to expand, as if “his head was bumping the ceiling, and his arms were tensed and huge, and he said, ‘O.K., baby, take your clothes off’” (377). Instead of laughing or making him leave, she undresses, and so does he. Later she tells Boman what happened, minimizing her compliance by analyzing Marrow:

“Why do you men have a conspiracy of silence about this part of war, about the pleasure of it?” . . . She said men pretended that battle was all tragedy—separation, terrible living conditions, fear of death, diarrhea, lost friends, wounds bravely borne, sacrifice, patriotism. “Why do you keep silent about the reason for war? At least, what *I* think is the reason for war: that some men enjoy it, some men enjoy it too much.” She said she didn’t mean just the life of campaigns, getting away from everything humdrum, from responsibilities, from having to take care of others. “More than that,” she said. “I mean the pleasure your pilot gets.” (382)

Boman understandably asks, “If he’s so horrible, why did you undress for him?” (383). Her response further undermines her critique of war lovers: “A funny little smile curled Daphne’s lips. “I want to be fought over,” she said. “*I* want to cause a war” (383). Attracted to Marrow in spite of her convictions, she wants to make herself a battleground. The glamour of the danger-loving, selfish, show-off, hate-filled, bragging, womanizing, crude, highly skilled and courageous Marrow is irresistible.

Hersey generalizes his critique of patriotic motives by minimizing the differences between the First and Second World Wars. He argues that false heroic ideals were as strong in 1941 as they were in 1914. As Boman says,

There’s too much idiocy at large about how we were disenchanted young men who’d been wised up by *A Farewell to Arms* and *Soldier’s Pay* and *Three Soldiers*. We were up to our tallywhackers in illusions, slogans, shibboleths, belief in magic—mostly out of ads. We were ready to die to the last man for Dinah Shore, rare sirloin, a cold beer, and a Caribbean cruise. (225)

Marrow is a “self-deluded glory-boy” who believes “all the crap about the chivalry of the air” (224-225). In World War I the “chivalry of the air” differentiated airmen from trench soldiers. Like knights, pilots could determine the outcome of a battle. Hersey links them to World War II pilots when one of Boman’s friends uses the base’s loudspeaker to broadcast W.B. Yeats’s “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death.” Yeats’s airman disavows all political reasons for fighting. He affirms the value of risking his life for the “lonely impulse of delight” that is worth more than “this life, this death.” He claims a personal meaning in combat apart from its political purpose. But if the World War I analogue is intended to diminish Marrow’s heroism by showing that it is more individualist than patriotic, the parallel has the opposite effect. Since Yeats allows his speaker the self-awareness that Marrow lacks, the analogy lends Marrow the stature of the reflective Irish airman. The “lonely impulse of delight” is a positive response to the sublimity of warfare.

Like Paul Baumer and Buzz Marrow, Sergeant James in *The Hurt Locker* would rather be in a war zone than safe at home. The political issues of the war in Iraq are secondary to Bigelow’s study of what makes men want to fight. Where Remarque contrasts soldiers’ knowledge with civilians’ ignorance, Bigelow emphasizes the difference between military duties and domestic routine. If trench warfare seemed mechanized, in Iraq the battle is even more impersonal, as highly trained technicians try to disarm hidden explosive devices. Technological expertise replaces physical strength, and suspense replaces action. In this kind of warfare, defusing a bomb requires as much courage as wielding a spear. As in so many war stories, exceptional prowess exempts the hero from the rules and sanctions that apply to others. The other men consider Sergeant James “reckless” for flouting protocols, yet they admire him for his skill and self-control.

Bigelow pits Sergeant James against two clocks—the ticking bombs he disarms and the countdown of days left in his tour of duty. When he completes his tour, he returns home to his wife and son. Instead of the joyous reunions of TV news, however, Bigelow portrays the difficulty of leaving his unit. The shooting script describes the confident sergeant as “awkward, less sure of himself,” explaining, “He’s home but this is clearly not where he lives” (Boal 111). In a grocery store, he is disoriented by “rows and rows of cereal boxes, a medley of different brands all containing the same sugar and coloring and starch” (Boal 111). He is at a loss as he faces “the abundant choices after the starkness of Baghdad” (Boal 111). At home he cleans the gutters and helps his wife chop vegetables. The contrast between the tension of the bomb squad and the monotony of home could not be clearer. The tedium of ordinary life is deadening, if not life-threatening.

Even being with his young son does not make him glad to be home. He plays “the awkward dad to his adoring child” (Boal 112). Looking “into his son’s unconditionally loving eyes,” Sergeant James explains why he wants to leave:

But you know what buddy, as you get older some of the things that you love might not seem so special anymore. . . . And the older you get, the fewer things you really love. (beat) By the time you get to be my age, maybe it’s only one—or two—things. . . . With me, I think it’s one. (Boal 113)

And the film cuts to his return to Iraq. In Baghdad his courage facing danger and his prowess dismantling bombs have a life-or-death meaning.

In *The Hurt Locker* Bigelow reinforces Harari’s argument that the value of war increases as other sources of meaning become weaker. War may be hell, but some men love it. The early twentieth-century avant-garde idealized World War I as a source of meaning, and being a fighter pilot in World War II could be gratifying in itself. It is too easy to attribute these positive feelings to fascist politics. The ideology that war is “the ultimate experience” is deeper than the differences between pacifists and militarists, socialists and fascists. Whether war is perceived as painful or exhilarating, degrading or ennobling, it is sublime. It produces terror and awe that transform the lives of all participants. It reveals truth that others cannot apprehend. It makes everything important, including the individual soldier. This transformative experience constitutes the new heroism that emerged in the eighteenth century and continues today. We regard soldiers as heroes because they have faced more than we have, they have done more than we have, and they know more than we do. No wonder we put vets on a pedestal.

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