Conclusion

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Abstract and Keywords

The brief conclusion looks at several important legacies, later in the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, of the modernist strategies for engaging violence that *At the Violet Hour* has explored. It suggests how powerfully some of modernism's violence protocols have continued to resonate, despite some of the radical innovations in contemporary representation of violence and war.

*Keywords:* 9/11, Holocaust, late-twentieth century representations of violence, Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now*
The cover of the New Yorker on September 24, 2001, was almost completely black. Looking closely, one could discern faint shadows of the twin towers shaded in the dark, just a hint of figuration in the blank, black field. It was a dramatic gesture, and one that answered remarkably well to the enormous public questions about art and culture that circulated in that intense, uncertain, memorable period immediately after the attacks: what kinds of representational statements would, could, or should be made? How would the aesthetic domain be touched by the attacks, and would artists step forward with their own defining visions? How would the responses of local people to the events overlap or jar with reactions from other parts of the country and the world? Of course, these questions have spun and widened in the decade since 2001, and have spread across the globe, as war has followed war. But the immediacy of the New Yorker’s response can be taken as paradigmatic of one primary answer to the shock of massive violence epitomized by 9/11: restraint, blankness, emptiness. These were responses cued to the salient fact of this particular crime, that the bodies themselves were incinerated, crushed, vanished. One of the most sobering and memorable images from the day is of the local hospitals readying themselves, once the towers had begun to burn, for huge numbers of injured people, instead remaining nearly empty. The visual spectacles of 9/11 have been seen by billions, but with the exception of a few stunning photographs featuring falling bodies, which appear as specks against the enormity of the towers, no one has ever seen the bodies of the dead. The violence of the attacks was instantly recognized as historic and transformative, and the absence of flesh made its own imaginative claims.
Or perhaps it is the lost flesh itself that makes patterns. There are photographs from Hiroshima that show geometrical patches against a wall or on stone steps; they look like human silhouettes, or perhaps just blotchy grey shapes. But what they show, it seems, are the remains of annihilated bodies, portraits. It is hard to imagine shadows so full of visceral truth, so meaningful in both historical and physical terms, so chilling as these Hiroshima traces. Absence of bodies, of people, of narratives: this has been the reality of the second half of the twentieth century, determining the full range of imaginative life. The Jews of Europe did not vanish in the same sense that bodies did in the atomic flashes or on 9/11; the attempt to erase them was, rather, the steady work of years, the massive project of a party and an anti-Semitic tradition bent on annihilation. In the memorial culture that has developed all over the world in response to these events—the genocides, wars, targeted attacks, and mass upheavals that have defined the second half of the twentieth century—we find a countercurrent, what Woolf might call “the force which ... oppose[s] itself to the force” of tyranny, an effort at communal, archival, narrative, architectural, and aesthetic levels to combat the erasure of human beings and their histories. There is, in this massive memorial endeavor, no single or dominant style. On the contrary, as James Young reminds us, familiarity is the enemy of memory; if memorials are going to stir and awaken the imagination, they need to be active and disruptive, capable of defamiliarizing what is known and expected.
Nevertheless, in the broad memorial effort, and more generally in the literary and artistic project attached to the mass violence of the second half of the twentieth century, one central principle remains always at the forefront: whatever representation can accomplish, it will never capture the enormity of the violence it is remembering. The problem of excess is greater than ever—the sheer number of the shoes in the landmark Auschwitz exhibit provides searing visual testimony—and one of the most enduring aesthetic responses has been to make visible that very incommensurability. As Tim O’Brien writes, “in the end, really, there’s nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe ‘Oh.’”5 This is not to say that “true” war stories don’t get told (O’Brien’s own body of work is testament to the ongoing, unfinished, intensely fruitful commitment to that project) but rather that they are relentlessly framed according to a consciousness of disequilibrium. One thinks of W. G. Sebald, whose works are built around great funds of absence, tales of postwar migrations and reconstructions that refuse to name or narrate the war’s violence. Or of Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient (1992), which tells its war story in and through breach: in books, in walls, in memory. Or of Toni Morrison, whose narratives are almost always oriented around the foundational traumas of slavery. Or of Samuel Beckett, at the midpoint of the century, writing war and violence into his denuded, bare stages, Waiting for Godot (1952), among other things, readable as an allegory for the violence of the Second World War, including atomic explosion. Or of Kurt Vonnegut, who for decades felt the difficulty (and compulsion) of producing a novel about the firebombing of Dresden; in the end, for all the eccentricity of Slaughterhouse-Five (1969), Vonnegut found the most powerful epithet for mass destruction in the seemingly banal phrase “so it goes,” and the most apt visual markers for the destruction of Dresden to be simple descriptions, marked by metaphors that stress the absolutely elemental: “There was a fire-storm out there. Dresden was one big flame. The one flame ate everything organic, everything that would burn…. Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighborhood was dead. So it goes.”6
All of this spareness, emptiness, void, and geometry is, as we have seen, a deep and important aspect of modernism, which built much of its formal edifice on the grounds of awful violence. Each chapter has illuminated an aspect of the elemental impulse, the desire to purge from the surfeit of physical and psychic overload generated by violence, to find instead an idiom that is lean and sharp—as sharp, perhaps, as the “bright knives” that Betty Flanders’s tears make of her visual surroundings. Modernism looks at violence and finds incredible deformations of human bodies, landscapes, and culture. What it offers are compacted bits of language that express these terrible realities: the shovel, the blood painting, the purple stain, the sudden blow, the withered stumps of time. These markers function as emblems, standing in for something larger and themselves notable as figures, always inviting a deeper look, a historical eye, a desire to uncover whatever grisly brutality the world has fostered and concealed, a willingness to imagine the unimaginable. There is, in these efforts, an ethos of slimness and trenchancy, a desire to create literary insignias that will do at least four things at once, like the story of Philomela layered into The Waste Land or the square of fish in To the Lighthouse: make violence visible through some abstract form; demand, in that gesture, a vigilance in reading the world, so that the raw and painful reality of violence will always be known and felt, that it will shame, that it will be unceasingly alive; nevertheless to contain the spread of violence within the text, mitigating its toxicity, insulating the literary work to some degree from the gruesome power that violence carries, and enabling exceptional forms of beauty to emerge from its violent content; and lastly, to open the text to critique on grounds of these very approaches. One thinks, again, of Tim O’Brien, who makes the body of “the man I killed” into a kind of artwork, with the wound over the man’s eye in the shape of a star, a butterfly resting on his neck, “and even in the shade a single blade of sunlight sparkled against the buckle of his ammunition belt” (O’Brien, 142).
The star over the man’s eye, the butterfly, the sunlight, the man’s “long shapely fingers”—these are only part of the story, however, which is equally infused with a horrendous physical reality that seems to push the literary work away from its patterning impulse, insisting instead on rendering violence’s surfeit directly, without flinching (“the skin at his left cheek was peeled back in three ragged strips ... his neck was open to the spinal cord and the blood there was thick and shiny and it was this wound that had killed him” [O’Brien, 139]). The look is clinical, the facts overwhelming. “So many,” The Waste Land’s Unreal City voice notes in wonder, “I had not thought death had undone so many,” and it is true; the First World War inaugurated the consciousness of vast hordes of killed and wounded, numberless dead, millions and millions, only to be surpassed by the slaughter of the Second—and on from there, winding down the century’s killing fields (TWL, 62–63). Representation has kept pace, with every visual and literary genre contributing to the onslaught of violence in the aesthetic domain. Much in the contemporary world’s fetish for blood, gore, killing, torture, and death seems only tangentially related to what we have been studying in this book, where the hallmarks have been restraint, uneasiness, and often awe at the power of violence (rather than a sense of easy access or manipulability). There is, however, at least one important thread of continuity from modernism to the blood-drenched tide of current taste, namely the disenchanted tradition, which, as we have seen, offers itself as testimony: this is what violence looks like, this is what it does. Here we have Ellen Quinn, crawling in a pool of her own blood, the most salient figure in Yeats’s poetry to stand for the dark vortex of reprisal, thoroughly epitomizing the disenchanted view. Stevie’s exploded remains represent another benchmark; whatever Conrad’s metaphors might scramble to accomplish in the wake of Stevie, there is always the forensic aspect of his fragmented body, that which is gleaned by studying the parts dispassionately, surveying the carnage. To begin with the corpse and end with the crime has always been central to mystery genres, and the motif has been vastly extended into the present—television crime drama, to take the most obvious example, is unthinkable without the detailed examination of the corpse. And yet the terms have shifted when it comes to the immersion in fleshly horror. Where in modernism the anatomical or medical look at the ruined body was kept within tight bounds, a sign of meaninglessness and waste, today it is seen as the initial ground of understanding, a necessary aspect of reckoning with killing, as O’Brien’s accounting for his victim’s wounds attests.
In very sober and real terms, the body’s forensics represent the primary fact of every attack that leaves as wreckage exploded people: the body as tissue, organ, cells. Brian Turner, a combatant in the Iraq War, gives us such flesh in his 2004 poem, “Here, Bullet”: “If a body is what you want,” he begins, “then here is bone and gristle and flesh.” Gristle: it is hard to imagine anyone in fact wanting this rendition of the human body, so alimentary, so revolting (the inverse, in some sense, of Leopold Bloom’s delight in organs). It is a poem of imagined answers and completions, the poet’s language defiantly rounding out the bullet’s damage, catalogued in robustly anatomical terms. From the “gristle and flesh” that conjures a grotesque meat eating, the poem moves to a more biological idiom (aorta, valves, synaptic gaps, adrenaline), suggesting the medical endeavor that stands—perversely and yet humanely—at the other end of war’s violence, the attempts to fix and heal that follow the body’s shattering by bullets and bombs.

Among other extensions and completions the poem addresses is the continuity with modernism, the era that forged the idea of soldier-poet—Turner’s “the barrel’s cold esophagus, triggering/my tongue’s explosives” a direct legacy of Owen’s “incurable sores on innocent tongues.” Owen and Turner are soldiers, yet their understanding of how flesh, war, language, and loss engage and produce one another in the scene of war belongs equally to the civilian world, whose protection from the violence of combat has eroded steadily over the hundred years since the First World War. As Jean Rhys reminds us, it is those standing in the shadows of the traditional historical imagination, the subjects (rather than agents) of war, empire, and injustice, who in many ways are the inheritors of modernism—not of its canonicity, perhaps, but of its insights, that violence lurks and defiles even the stateliest of edifices, the smoothest of surfaces.
The explosion of bodies—in a central market, pizzeria, mosque, United Nations headquarters, anywhere—and the bodiless void of the World Trade Center present two extremes of physical presence and absence in the wake of violent attack in our current era; contrasting with both of these, and in a sense falling in between them, is a configuration we have repeatedly encountered in this study, the moment of touch. It has often anchored these readings, beginning with Stephen Dedalus and the prefect, the touch that can be a sign of healing, or of callous and inhumane brutality, or of the way any intimate violent interaction between two people gestures beyond them to broader categories and narratives. To consider two people touching as a fundamental unit in the story of violence in the twentieth century is to change the scale, back from the numberless hordes, to reestablish the individual’s ordinary imaginative span as the essential one in apprehending violence. The hand, the personal encounter, the closeness of sympathy with grievous violence: these infuse something distinctly archaic, elemental, and universal into the violent encounter. In modernism, as we have seen, there can be tremendous generativity in these conflations, an anthropological energy that fosters a sense of primacy in violent origins. Later in the twentieth century, modernism itself might be asked to help produce such outcomes, as in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which siphons its intellectual and atmospheric fuel from Conrad and Eliot, and which makes a glorious—indeed glamorous—case for the enchanting possibilities inherent even in the ugliest and most venal forms of mass violence. More to the point, the film wants to secure a space, within its expansive war landscape, for the intimate meeting, the moment when violence and touch become one. There are many such expressions in *Apocalypse Now*’s lengthy and extravagant final sequence at the Kurtz compound, culminating in Willard’s spectacularly intimate killing of the colonel. It is an attack very much by hand, the silhouette of man hacking at man with an enormous knife set against the villagers’ ritual slaughter of a bull. Coppola’s elevation of such hand-to-body killing as a sign of relative purity may seem atavistic, heavy-handed, ethnocentric, even a bit insane (and Eleanor Coppola’s memoir of the making of the film presents Francis as having something of a nervous breakdown along the way, himself entering a private world of excess and egomania to match those of his characters), but it is nevertheless astute about its precursor moment, the modernist period, which continued to see in the intimate violent encounter an aura of something vital and primary, if not enchanted or glorified. To be sure, Coppola is engaged in an eloquent and grand project of literary inheritance and supersession, but the larger point is to see how the paradigms we have been studying are carried forward, whether in lavish, highly literate fashion (as in *Apocalypse Now*) or more invisibly, as later writers have sought their own emblematic motifs, fitted to a half century when the garish display of violence has become more and more commonplace.
Violence and touch in Coppola’s film trigger an enchantment response, yet this is not a universal move in the later twentieth century any more than it was for modernists; in fact, to be able to touch without even a spark of sympathy might be seen as humanity’s very nadir. So in *Survival in Auschwitz* (*Ger*, 1947), Primo Levi recalls a moment when touch has been drained of even the dregs of human civility, and sees in that denuding a full expression of Nazi evil:

The steel cable of a crane cuts across the road, and Alex catches hold of it to climb over: *Donnerwetter*, he looks at his hand black with thick grease. In the meanwhile, I have joined him. Without hatred and without sneering, Alex wipes his hand on my shoulder, both the palm and the back of the hand, to clean it; he would be amazed, the poor brute Alex, if someone told him that today, on the basis of this action, I judge him and Pannwitz and the innumerable others like him, big and small, in Auschwitz and everywhere.\(^\text{(p.293)}\)

There is no shortage, in Levi’s writing, of sadism, gruesome inhumanity, or unimaginable indifference; if this story stands out as exemplary in his memory, it is because the structure for engendering feeling is so markedly available and perverted, the possibility of sympathetic or curative touch so entirely abandoned. The distorting of objects and structures that promise security into the most vicious purveyors of violence is, as Elaine Scarry has shown, the hallmark and basis of torture—the use, say, of common household items as mechanisms to impart pain and engender fear.\(^\text{13}\) Or, to return to 9/11, the employment of airplanes as weapons represents the most acute and visible sign of such transformation from the ordinary and benign into the unrecognizable and deadly. We saw a gesture in this direction in *The Secret Agent*, with the Professor’s potential as a suicide bomber extending and intensifying his power (force) across space and into the future. The airplane as weapon, moreover, closes the loop of associations around the airplane that we have seen to form a rich and contradictory part of the post–First World War imaginary, reaching a height in the 1930s, to be followed finally by the Second World War’s obliterative bombing campaigns. Paul Virilio sees such conflations as definitive of perception itself in the later twentieth century, where the camera’s eye and the weapon’s targeting mechanisms express and propel one another, becoming part of one imaginative unit:
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From the first missiles of World War Two to the lightning flash of Hiroshima, the theatre weapon has replaced the theatre of operations. Indeed the military term “theatre weapon,” though itself outmoded, underlines the fact that the history of battle is primarily the history of radically changing fields of perception. In other words, war consists not so much in scoring territorial, economic or other material victories as in appropriating the “immateriality” of perceptual fields. As belligerents set out to invade those fields in their totality, it became apparent that the true war film did not necessarily have to depict war or any actual battle. For once the cinema was able to create surprise (technological, psychological, etc.), it effectively came under the category of weapons.¹⁴ (Emphasis in original)

Virilio is equivocal about when to pinpoint the historical moment where violence and seeing come to inhabit the same intellectual and cultural domain. Here the Second World War is the locus, but elsewhere he will fix the era of the First as the moment when “the target area had become a cinema ‘location’, the battlefield a film set out of bounds to civilians” (Virilio, 11), and in that historicizing he agrees with other scholars, like Bernd Hüppauf, who writes that “the origin of this process of abstraction, which finally led to images of the Gulf War (p.294) devoid of the space necessary for human experience, but highly fantastic and playful, can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. Its period of consolidation and first culmination was World War I, particularly in aerial photography.”¹⁵ Paul Fussell, too, in marking the imaginative transformations ushered in by the war, sees the trenches propelling a rerouting of the entire perceptual and cognitive capacity, to be expressed in literature, in colloquial speech, in the full range of memory and thought.
The early-twentieth-century writers at the center of this book, certainly, have struggled to give a voice to violence that would be adequate to what they see as its overwhelming scale and threat, impinging on structures of epistemology and perception, as of understanding and belief. At the same time, the very idea of adequation, the sense that there can be an imaginative or formal structure to balance and approximate violence, has always come fraught with misgiving. To take, for instance, the inevitable recourse to an economic model (this for that) is, perhaps, to give in to the capitalist logic whose indifference and voracity is responsible for war, empire, and injustice in the first place. This conundrum has provoked many of the writers in this study (most pressingly, Yeats and Woolf), and it does not, moreover, disappear in the later parts of the century. Writing his way from victimization to protest after being badly wounded in Vietnam, Ron Kovic, in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), offers the failed logic of barter as a culminating statement of despair and defeat: “The blood was rolling off my flak jacket from the hole in my shoulder and I couldn’t feel the pain in my foot anymore, I couldn’t even feel my body. I was frightened to death. I didn’t think about praying, all I could feel was cheated … All I could feel was the worthlessness of dying right here in this place at this moment for nothing.” It is the “for nothing” in Kovic’s assessment that clinches his near-nihilism, that the struggle he has chronicled will have had no payoff, no return, no meaning. And indeed Kovic cannot devote the last word of his memoir to this recognition of the complete wastefulness of war, framed in terms of a poor trade. He concludes, instead, in an entirely different idiom, with a hymn to his childhood, an oddly aestheticized mélange of memory and music that harks back not only to his own past in 1950s Long Island, rendered in the haze of nostalgia, but also to a literary past he never mentions, modernism. In borrowing prototypically modernist forms (pastiche, stream of consciousness) as an alternate statement of the ultimate meaning of massive violence and the individual life story, Kovic’s memoir, like Coppola’s film, suggests something other than straightforward influence. What it suggests is that the formal experiments by which many modernists engaged violence retain some of their appeal and power even in these new settings, and even when they are no longer associated with a fixed period in literary history. In part, this appeal comes from the fact that modernist efforts to accommodate violence have roots in much older traditions (with enchantment and disenchantment, especially), reaching back in literary culture all the way to the *Iliad*, where war and art belong to one field, one endeavor. The attraction comes, too, because there is something resilient about the way modernism simultaneously placed violence at the center of its consciousness and found ways to reframe, contain, and aestheticize it, without needing to glorify or valorize it.
At the same time, when set against the stunning technological and representational developments of the second half of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first, modernism itself can feel anachronistic on the subject of violence—indeed, in the case of Coppola, it is imagined specifically as the site of connection to an ancient world, a catalyst for the contemporary to reach out and back from its own time of routinized killing into a zone where violence might be understood, through its affinity with the long past, to represent and confer sacredness, sublimity. More generally, however, literary culture in recent decades has taken its cues from the ubiquity of visible violence that characterizes our era—its dispersal, via technology, into every household, in a seemingly unstoppable expansion. Rushdie’s conceit in *Midnight’s Children* (1980) of a connection among the one hundred at the level of frequency, which brings often terrifying violence directly into their shared consciousness, presages the later emphasis on networks and interconnection that has come to pervade in the digital era. Another later-twentieth-century form to have acquired surprising trenchancy in the conception of violence is the graphic novel; appropriate to the visuality of contemporary culture, texts like *Maus* (1986) and *Persepolis* (2000) have generated a powerful new idiom, fueled by the juxtapositions and abrasions in form and content they create.\(^{17}\) Animated film, too, pried from the preserve of children, has come into its own as a resonant style for considering the range of historical, personal, social, psychic, and aesthetic consequences of violence (as in *Waltz with Bashir*, the 2008 Israeli film). These are new developments altogether; sharing with the modernist works we have studied a serious, ongoing effort to find languages appropriate to the magnitude of the violence they chronicle, but departing in most other ways—in form, tone, sensibility, reigning conceits, imagined audience.
Above all, where contemporary literature seems to have shifted tracks from modernism is in its relation to the globe. As we have seen, technologies such as the airplane led writers in the early twentieth century to see the world, along with other units such as the city, as grimly interconnected by potential destruction, and this understanding of violence as a phenomenon that cuts across and reconstructs (p.296) the lineaments of the globe has been greatly deepened in later decades; one thinks of Gravity’s Rainbow (1973), another epic formulation, which confers on its rockets the principle of potentially universal connectivity. Well beyond America and England, the last fifty years have seen a much amplified exploration of the scales and forces that violence can take, often in the context of colonial and postcolonial deformations of individuals, communities, nations, and ecologies. One explanation for the expanded comprehension of how violence works, at the global and often invisible level, is thus a straightforward one: more and more of the literary world is being shaped by those who would never have been in a position to miss the reality of world violence. With new vistas of writing, communication, connectivity, and narrative opening, the place of violence in determining the contours of imaginative life has come fully out of the shadows. If writers such as Woolf found tremendous challenge in maintaining the integrity of the literary text in the face of a violence understood as geographically unbounded as well as historically extensive, later writers take these conditions as their base and groundwork. They also begin with a fully renovated cartography. As critics have amply discussed, the hierarchies that fix center and periphery have long faltered, and the British Isles have come to inhabit their actual size and scale in a world conceived in global, or even planetary, dimensions.
At the same time, *At the Violet Hour* has noted, over and over, an anticipation of this very shift in scope and authority. For all its sense of artistic mission and cultural power, modernism saw the future as outside of its grasp. In each phase of the violence narrative we have been studying, we have found this idea: that the form and force of violence will always catapult it out of the imagination of the present, so that it will come to stand, instead, as the very principle of an unknowable future. At the end of a novel, or a career, or a national saga of war and loss, what we find is not a curtain falling but one rising, as Woolf makes literal in the last work in this study, *Between the Acts*. “In my beginning is my end,” Eliot would write not long before Woolf’s death, seeing in the temporal collapse of past, present, and future an emblem for the cycles of violence and beauty that had always concerned his poetry, and the works more generally of modernism. In the encounter with violence, indeed, ends and beginnings seem unusually mutual, signs and avatars of one another. And yet, for all this commingling of chronologies, the rising curtain onto a bleak future is, in its way, a decisive image to represent the condition of writing about violence. Something will always exceed the present, the current writer, the instant in time; violence’s defining fact of excess applies also to temporality. The violet hour is, after all, a marker of how time passes. As Capa’s photographs of civilians warily scanning the sky remind us, there is an (p.297) ineradicable imbalance between the present (of bodily integrity, of life) and the future (of destruction, of death). It is a principle of incipience, with the present carrying with it the weight, as it were, of the future. And it is a principle of ignorance, with the present feeling its way toward a future whose violence will, in the end, always find a way to surpass even our worst imaginings. (p.298)

**Notes:**

(1) . For discussion of the invisibility of some of the most troubling photographs from the attacks, see Lauren Walsh, “Ten Years Later: Re-Viewing 9/11’s Suppressed Images,” http://www.nomadikon.net/ContentItem.aspx?ci=208.

(2) . Link to one such image: http://maasmedia.wordpress.com/2008/08/07/hiroshima-day/

A former student, Nicole Trifoletti, brought this photograph to my attention in the spring semester, 2011.


Conclusion

(7) Brian Turner, *Here, Bullet* (Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2005), 13

(8) Santanu Das’s *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

(9) One could also point to *The Deer Hunter* as a canonical film of the same era that took an interest in forms of sacredness that might give meaning to an otherwise ghastly and insane rendering of war’s violence.

(10) *Apocalypse Now*Margot Norris, *Writing War in the Twentieth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 207–33


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