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Language and Violence: From Pathology to Politics

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The Bullet's Song: Romantic Violence and Utopia, by William Pfaff, Simon and Schuster.

In 1965, George Steiner asked, "Is there any science-fiction pornography?" Mostly rhetorical, the question was a typically Steinerian prompt to a typically Steinerian rumination on the relationship between sex and language. With its ability to alter "the co-ordinates of space and time," to "set effect before cause," science fiction would seem the natural workshop of pornographic invention. But it wasn't. "Despite all the lyric or obsessed cant about the boundless varieties and dynamics of sex, the actual sum of possible gestures, consummations, and imaginings is drastically limited," Steiner wrote. "There just aren't that many orifices." These limits necessarily meant there was precious little, and certainly nothing new, to say about erotic arousal. "The mathematics of sex stop somewhere in the region of *soixante-neuf*; there are no transcendental series"—and thus there could be no science-fiction pornography, at least not in the sense of "something *new*, an invention by the human imagination of new sexual experience."

Yet, here we are, more than thirty years later, swimming in porn, with the pool growing larger—the images more startling, the words more fanciful—by the day. Cybersex has probably not altered the coordinates of time and space, but the union of telephone and computer has certainly introduced new dimensions to an old experience. Far from exhausting the capacities of language, porn now seems to occupy entire continents of discussion; the blogger's "money quote" is only the most recent outpost. Steiner may be right that all this talk is doomed to be repetitive, but repetition does have its pleasures, not all of them the same. Ironically, Steiner may have anticipated this

verbal plenitude in his own essay: whatever his misgivings about the possibilities of a public language about sex, the title of his piece, "Night Words," not to mention its fevered pitch and prose, did hint at a coming Esperanto of eros.

It should be no surprise that violence, sex's Siamese twin, should inspire a similar performative contradiction from our leading intellectuals. How many times have we been told by writers that violence is a nullity about which there is nothing interesting or new to be said, only to discover, from these very same writers, that there is much that is both interesting and new to be said about it? Throughout her career, Hannah Arendt spoke at length, often imaginatively, about violence, without ever questioning her notion that "mute violence" was sheer redundancy. Elaine Scarry began *The Body in Pain* with the claim that pain's "resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is"—and then spent more than three hundred pages demonstrating, sometimes inadvertently, that that was not the case. Perhaps Robert Paul Wolff expressed this contradiction best when, in his 1969 essay on the topic, he opened with the following disclaimer:

> Everything I shall say in this essay has been said before, and much of it seems to me to be obvious as well as unoriginal. I offer two excuses for laying used goods before you. In the first place, I think that what I have to say about violence is true. Now, there are many ways to speak falsehood and only one to speak truth. It follows, as Kierkegaard pointed out, that the truth is likely to become boring. On a subject as ancient and much discussed as ours today, we may probably assume that a novel—and, hence, interesting—view of violence is likely to be false.

With due respect to Arendt, it is difficult to accept her proposition that violence is mute when philosophers expend so many words trying to figure out what it is. When, after all, is the infliction of pain an act of violence as opposed to an exercise of force, power, coercion, or punishment? Must violence be intentional? Must the pain it administers be physical? Does violence require a perpetrator—and a

specific act—or can it be the damaging effect of a faceless system? The debates over whether what happened at Abu Ghraib was "torture," "abuse," or "misconduct"—and who or what was ultimately responsible for it—suggest that these language games are not wholly academic. And though jurists and civil libertarians may object to the conflation of language and violence entailed by the notion of hate speech, that conflation probably expresses a commingling of categories we simply cannot escape.

How can we square this notion of violence as a linguistic nullity with the riot of talk that surrounds it? The example of pornography might prove instructive. The sexually forbidden naturally provokes a sense of titillation and curiosity, which, when satisfied, is succeeded by feelings of mute depression—whether because it is only the taboo that makes the sexual act in question exciting or because a proper acquaintance with the act reveals that it is not all that one imagined it would be. Perhaps violence operates in a similar fashion: when we hurt or destroy a feared or hated object, we experience a sense of loss because the object that aroused such passion within us is now no more or is sufficiently subdued to claim our attention no longer. As Forster wrote in *A Passage to India,* "The aims of battle and the fruits of conquest are never the same; the latter have their value and only the saint rejects them, but their hint of immortality vanishes as soon as they are held in the hand." And so we drift—from dirty talk to silence, from violence to the void.

But there may be a less exotic explanation for our contradictory attitude toward violence, particularly political violence, which is what most concerns writers on the subject. On the one hand, we like to think of violence as the antithesis of civilization, law, morality, and rational discourse. On the other hand, political violence requires, as Arendt herself acknowledged, organization and planning among men and women, who must be in agreement about what they are attacking and how they will attack it. It requires instruments of hurt and pain, which are the products of written if not spoken design. It is regulated by law and structured—some would say constituted—by social mores. It must be justified by reference to some higher purpose:

God, the Revolution, the State. No wonder we talk—and talk—about violence; the only wonder is that we think we don't.

It is this confusion—or the refusal to recognize it—that makes William Pfaff's *The Bullet's Song* a disappointing book. A series of profiles of various left- and right-wing European intellectuals who flirted with violence, from celebrants of the Great War to the Baader Meinhof Gang, Pfaff's essays would seem a natural occasion for deep reflection and scintillating exposé. But they are not, in part because they are haunted by a puzzle that is really no puzzle at all: Why did intelligent, even humane, men lend their good names to such beastly activities? This, of course, is one of the most enduring questions of twentieth-century intellectual history. Everyone from Julien Benda to Paul Berman, with descending degrees of success, has asked and answered it. I say it is no puzzle because it rests upon two false assumptions: that violence is abnormal and that intellectuals should not defend it. Violence, of course, needs justification. But that hardly means it is abnormal—any exercise of political power requires justification—and by virtue of their mental and verbal facilities intellectuals would seem well positioned to provide or deny it. Outside a small circle of anarchists and pacifists, no one claims that political violence can never be justified. So it will remain, at least for the foreseeable future, a vocation of intellectuals to provide the credentials, if not the actual license, for political violence.

Pfaff's book may be disappointing, but it does give us an opportunity to learn something—not about violence or even the writings of intellectuals on violence, but about the writings on those writings. He begins with the First World War and the generation of intellectuals who rallied to its early charms only to be disillusioned by its grinding end. Focusing on T. E. Lawrence, Ernst Jünger, and Gabrielle D'Annunzio, the book's opening chapters plot the war's lethal effect on the idea of chivalry. Though ambivalent about chivalry, which he curiously calls "a code of national and personal conduct" (with its roots in feudalism, chivalry is usually associated with a prenational ethos), Pfaff generally believes that it had a tonic effect on persons and states.

> This code acknowledged the individual Western nations as legitimate powers inhabiting a shared moral universe, and imposed implicit limits on the conduct permissible in international relations. . . . it also considered war as a national recourse which was limited, tolerable in its employment of violence, a legitimate if extreme instrument of national policy that nonetheless posed no threat to the existence of states or to the nature of society.

Such a fastidious code could never survive the murderous absurdity of trench warfare, when "it wasn't worth aiming" at individual soldiers, as Jünger put it. Reeling from the nihilism of the slaughter, bored by the ensuing peace, and longing for the sweetness of the war's opening salvos, writers on the political right characterized violence as a redemptive and rejuvenating force, what Mussolini called "the revenge of madness against good sense." Violence—not the indiscriminate fire of the Somme but daring, even reckless, acts of personal predation—came to be seen as a form of individual artistry, a heroic refusal of the nostrums of peaceful settlement. Through acts of bravery and brutality, men could assert themselves against the tedium of the age, declaring their emancipation from the safe and the secure. Even Harold Macmillan, wounded three times during the war, got in on the act: "I enjoy wars. Any adventure's better than sitting in an office." From sense to sensibility—that is the road of fascism, Pfaff argues, and "romantic violence" (the subtitle of his book) is the mortar between the paving stones.

On the left—and here we come to Pfaff's middle chapters on Willi Münzenberg, André Malraux, and Arthur Koestler—the road from the Great War led not to romantic but utopian violence, a kind of higher realism. While fascists saw violence as an end, communists saw it as a means, but that did little to limit or restrain it. Beguiled by a series of ever-receding utopias, the proletarian Eden always in reach but never quite there, leftists sanctioned more and more atrocities, if for no other reason than to prove the legitimacy of the first atrocity and the possibility of the last. "What vileness would you not commit to exterminate violence?" as Brecht put it. Though communism was a secular religion, it differed from its traditional

counterpart in that "religion awaits the end of time" while communism did its best to speed things up. That desire for transcendence, for justice in the here and now, is its original sin.

Pfaff closes the book with a brief tour of the last four decades, traveling with—or, more precisely, flying thirty thousand feet above—jungle adventurers like Che Guevara, urban terrorists in Germany and Italy, contemporary campus radicals ("revolutionary utopianism enjoys a residual half-life on university faculties"), and the Bush Administration, whose recent efforts in the Middle East he sees as the successor to failed utopias of the past. None of these figures, Pfaff believes, has added to the twentieth century's sorry storehouse of political wisdom; they are given an appropriately brief coda.

Pfaff's is a familiar tale: even he seems bored by it. But his temporal choices make for a peculiar, and potted, history. Focusing on the effects of the First World War, Pfaff ignores the warning signs that had been accumulating throughout the nineteenth century. As early as the 1820s, one could hear the discordant notes of a growing ennui—"I am bored," Stendhal complained, to which Fourier replied, "All men are bored"—a discontent with the moneyed classes and parliamentary procedure (Tocqueville dismissed the July Monarchy as a "little democratic and bourgeois pot of soup") that sought and found release in warrior violence. Hoping to unfasten the ties of commerce and democracy, a generation of dispirited but militant souls cast their eyes on foreign lands. As the British prepared to fight the Opium War, Tocqueville wrote, "I can only rejoice in the thought of the invasion of the Celestial Empire by a European army. So at the last the mobility of Europe has come to grips with Chinese immobility!" Upon the conclusion of the Treaty of London, which threatened to diminish France's role in the Middle East and aroused cries for war, Tocqueville confessed that he was reluctant to "chime in with those who were loudly asking for peace, at any price." Not because peace jeopardized France's interests or security, but because "the greatest malady that threatens a people organized as we are is the gradual softening of mores, the abasement of mind, the mediocrity of tastes." More farsighted imperialists gazed heavenward for relief: "I

would annex the planets if I could," sighed Cecil Rhodes, always searching, it seems, for some new way to get off the sceptered isle.

Ignoring the imperial itch, Pfaff overlooks the double standard it inspired: civilized states, particularly in Europe, were subject to the restraints of the laws of war; other communities, particularly in the colonies, were not. "The rules of ordinary international morality imply reciprocity," wrote John Stuart Mill. "But barbarians will not reciprocate. They cannot be depended upon for observing any rules. Their minds are not capable of so great an effort." The peoples of Africa and Asia who took up arms were criminals, the unlawful combatants of their day. Lacking a state, the only legitimate or recognized belligerent of the modern world, they had no right to make war—and thus no right to be protected from its excesses.

Pfaff pays no attention to these voices of the nineteenth century because he wishes to associate the chivalric ideal with the belle époque of "bourgeois civilization," which he claims was "respectful of the social value of individual human relationships, and of practical tolerance, common sense, and compromise in the common life of a community." What he forgets is that chivalrous and bourgeois values have usually been enemies rather than friends and that the former fell victim to the latter long before the First World War. It was Machiavelli, after all, who first imposed the calculating virtues of the bourgeois upon the cavalier ways of the warrior. And as early as *Coriolanus* we find evidence of revulsion for that prudential economy of violence: "Let me have a war," one of Aufidius's servants cries. "It exceeds peace as far as day does night; it's spritely, waking, audible, and full of vent. Peace is a very apoplexy, lethargy; mulled, deaf, sleepy, insensible; a getter of more bastard children than war's a destroyer of men." This tension between the spirit of commerce and that of war is one of the driving energies of modern history, making the First World War and its aftermath less a break with the past than its fulfillment. One might even argue, as Pfaff suggests in a throwaway line on Jünger, that in their refusal to accept the constraints of this world, the romantic and utopian celebrants of violence were attempting to recreate the chivalric ideal—laid waste not by the Great War but by

the bourgeois and the bureaucrat.

What seems to underlie some of Pfaff's errors and omissions is a desire to separate the normal and the civilized from the abnormal and the barbaric. Whereas other writers on the violence of the twentieth century sought to locate its roots in the soil of the nineteenth, if not earlier—one thinks of Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism,* Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity,* Steiner's *Notes on Bluebeard's Castle,* or Lukács's *Eclipse of Reason*—Pfaff refuses to dig at all. Instead, he consigns his subjects to some faraway precinct of the inhuman, erecting the highest walls between them and us.

Though Pfaff admits that he has felt the pull of romanticism and utopianism in his own life, he insists upon viewing his protagonists as aliens. The communist, he says, did not share "the common sentiments of ordinary men and women." The inspiration for his violent career—unlike that of the professional soldier of state—"was personal" and thus uncanny, even pathological. In this regard, the communist stands in for every troublemaker the world has seen:

> Whether the cause is metaphysical revolution, Maoist revolt, nationalist revindication, Palestinian liberation, or the creation of an Islamic society free from the taint of Western corruption and the influence of Western power, the individual willingness to sacrifice self, as well as others, is and remains an inextinguishable political force. The individual militant gains cause to believe that violence demonstrates his triumph over ordinary life: over common cowardice, common human ambitions. . . . His or her steely inhumanity is a pursuit of the higher humanism that success eventually will validate.

To comprehend such a foreign sensibility, Pfaff urges us to explore the "psychological reality" of its bearers rather than the political, economic, or ideological context of their utterances. For that, in the end, is all that Pfaff finds in his subjects: a psychic residue, the tangled failure of an inner life. Of course, what Pfaff says about the "political force" of the "individual willingness to sacrifice self" could be said of any soldier who willingly risks his life for the sake of the nation: it

is his penchant for self-dramatization through self-destruction that gives meaning to his life. Pfaff acknowledges this similarity, but in the soldier's case he finds the results more to his liking. The soldier's "capacity for reasoned unreasonableness is capable of redeeming much meretriciousness," Pfaff writes. "The unreasonable life [of the soldier] is a reasonable choice, essential to civilization." Pfaff offers no basis for this happy conclusion, so it is difficult to know what to make of it—except to point out that it is not so far removed from the most chilling passages of Jünger and all the other fascists and proto-fascists who welcomed the Great War and mourned its end.

Why is it that when confronted with extremist violence and its defenders, whether on the right or the left, analysts resort to the categories of psychology as opposed to politics, economics, or ideology? Pfaff is certainly not alone in his approach: consider the recent round of psychoanalysis to which Al Qaeda has been subjected or Robert Lindner's Cold War classic, *The Fifty-Minute Hour,* which featured an extended chapter on "Mac" the Communist. Psychological factors influence anyone's decision to take up arms or to speak on behalf of those who do. But those who emphasize these factors tend to ignore the central tenet of their most subtle and acute analyst: that the normal person is merely a hysteric in disguise, that the rational is often irrationality congealed. If we are to go down the road of psychoanalyzing violence, why not put Henry Kissinger or the RAND Corporation on the couch too?

There is more than a question of consistency at stake here, for the choice of psychology as the preferred mode of explanation often reflects little more than our own political prejudices. Violence we favor is deemed strategic and realistic, a response to genuine political exigencies. Violence we reject is dismissed as fanatic and lunatic, the outward manifestation of some inner drama. What gets overlooked in such designations is that violence is an inescapably human activity, reflecting a full range of concerns and considerations, requiring an empathic, though critical, attention to mind and world.

I was recently reminded of this bifurcated approach to violence by two articles in the same issue of *The New Yorker.* In one, a profile

of Oriana Fallaci, Margaret Talbot tells how Fallaci's father inspired and encouraged his teenage daughter to work against the Fascists in Italy. Roused by her father's example, a pig-tailed Fallaci "carried explosives and delivered messages" and led escaping American and British POWs across dangerous minefields. When Fallaci's mother later discovered what her daughter had been doing, she scolded her husband, "You would have sacrificed newly born children! You and your ideas." But then she softened: "Well, but I had a feeling you were doing something like that." Talbot relates this story without comment, allowing it to serve as the capstone of a charming—and entirely political—tale of one family's idealistic rebellion against evil.

At the back of the magazine, David Denby takes a different tack with a vaguely similar story. This time the setting is the Middle East, and the topic is a new documentary, "The Cult of the Suicide Bomber," a dense political history of suicide bombing. Denby is not interested, however, in the politics of the bombers: "The real center of interest, for me, at least, lies in the families of the young men who died." But his interest is frustrated by the refusal of these families to express their grief in public, leading him to wonder whether they have any grief at all. One Iranian mother says of her son, who died in battle (presumably on a suicide mission during the Iran-Iraq War), "He became a martyr for God." Such statements lead Denby to conclude that the parents "speak as if the boys had attained a purely official identity, as if they were not their own dead children." (How these comments are any different from a Midwestern father telling a reporter, twenty years after the fact, that his son died defending his country in Vietnam, Denby does not explain.) Denby is equally frustrated by the fact that the parents insist on seeing their sons' destruction through a political or religious lens and that "any kind of psychological explanation is ignored."

Now, Talbot is a reporter and Denby is a critic, and they may not share the same opinion about political violence or the proper response of parents to the death of their children. Fallaci, moreover, managed to survive her ordeal while the sons in the film are dead. Indeed, survival and death were their respective goals. But something

tells me that these factors alone do not explain the magazine's opposing accounts of political violence—one emphasizing its humanity, the other its freakishness, one its politics, the other its psychology (or the lack of it).

Every culture has its martyred heroes—from the first wave of soldiers at Omaha Beach, whose only goal was to wash ashore, dead but with their guns intact so that the next wave could use them, to Samson declaring that he would die with the Philistines—and its demonized enemies, its rational use of force and its psychopathic cult of violence. And in every culture it has been the job of intellectuals to keep people clear about the difference between the two. Mill did it for imperial Europe. Why should imperial America expect anything less (or more) from William Pfaff, let alone David Denby?

But perhaps we should expect our writers to do more than simply mirror the larger culture. After all, few intellectuals today divide the sexual world into regions of the normal and abnormal. Why can't they throw away that map for violence too? Why not accept that people take up arms for a variety of reasons—some just, others unjust—and acknowledge that while the choice of violence, as well as the means, may be immoral or illegitimate, it hardly takes a psychopath to make it?