

THE ETHICAL IMAGINATION AND THE ANATOMY OF CHANGE: A PERSPECTIVE FROM SOCIAL ETHICS

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Historically there has been a gradual but unmistakable evolution in the moral sentiments of human beings, and, over the centuries, one can see that there has been a pronounced expansion of moral concern. Its social and political effects are visible in the manner in which societies have evolved from being feudal to being democratic, and in the manner in which traditional social systems that were premised on ethnic or caste-based inequalities have ceded to more egalitarian forms of social organization. The expansion of moral concern has come about, in the main, because of the gradual acceptance of the conviction that all human beings are equal, a conviction that has been promoted variously by religious traditions and by secular philosophies. This recognition of equal dignity has broadened the circle of equity to include more people. Moreover the inclusion of different groups or categories of people (e.g. serfs, slaves, women, etc.) has itself given rise to new understandings of the nature of human dignity, of the vulnerabilities of people, and of the substantive nature of moral concern.

It is recognized, however, that religious traditions and secular philosophies alike have compromised their commitment to the fundamental equality of all human beings in various ways in practice. Within the Christian tradition the values of equality and social justice have been prominent from the beginning. Indeed the earliest texts of the tradition stress the radical nature of these teachings, even as the early Christians absorbed and developed elements of the ethical traditions of Greece, Rome, and Israel. Notwithstanding the centrality of these values, however, the church was rarely an early advocate for social change, although individual Christians were often to the fore in promoting the cause of equality and justice. In the 19th century one thinks of Elisabeth Cady Stanton and Sojourner Truth (Isabella Baumfree)—women who, motivated by their religious beliefs, were trailblazers in making the case for human dignity and equality. While even earlier one thinks of a woman like Christine de Pizan (1365–1430) who produced one of the first feminist biblical commentaries and which highlighted the essential message of equality contained therein. Each was a strong advocate of what we would now call gender equality and of social justice, and each made her case explicitly on religious grounds.

However, as we know, the story of Christianity in this regard is a complicated and often contradictory one, since there have also been many instances of exclusion perpetrated and promoted in the name of the tradition. Indeed, over the centuries one can observe an ambiguous legacy when it comes to social change premised on justice and equality. The churches have occasionally been to the fore in persuading society at large to reassess its values and practices. At other times however they have staunchly resisted change. Within Catholicism the moral tradition has evolved and changed with the societies in which it became embedded. The church reinterpreted its teachings in the context of new challenges and drew on developments in the human and natural sciences to capture more fully the central message of the tradition. Indeed John Noonan, more than any other, has helped us understand this dynamism inherent

in the moral tradition of Catholicism, and has reinforced the view that the church is always in a symbiotic relationship with the surrounding culture and its prevailing values, norms, and practices.

So how does the language of conversion, with its deeply personal resonance, fit in this context? In this paper I am interested in conversion as it is played out in socio-political contexts, especially at moments of significant moral and cultural change. I am especially interested in how individuals and communities come to be persuaded about the need for a fundamental transformation in their expressed moral values. Although moral reasoning and argumentation play an important role in making and establishing the case for change, I intend to focus on the role that the moral imagination plays in the context of such change. In particular I will discuss the ways in which the arts can make unique contribution to the task of creating an imaginative space in which the established parameters of moral concern can be challenged and expanded. I will demonstrate this by focusing the moral questions raised by violence and will suggest that the arts can articulate registers of truth beyond the philosophical or theological, and thereby play a unique role in the transformation of our moral sensibilities.

The Anatomy of Change

Although we speak frequently and often casually about effecting change, it can be difficult to understand precisely how it is or can be achieved. Indeed value change can be especially difficult to effect, and it becomes even more so when certain values are perceived to be under threat. Anthony Kwame Appiah's consideration of moral revolutions is especially instructive in helping us to think about what might be called "the anatomy of change." In *The Honor Code* Appiah asks the question, "what can be learned about morality by exploring moral revolutions?" With the term moral revolutions he has in mind occasions when societies or groups underwent a fundamental change in respect of what they valued or regarded as good or right. He examines three moral revolutions that occurred in the nineteenth century, namely the end of duelling, the dissolution of foot-binding in China, and the end of the Atlantic slave trade, and argues that in each of these instances of radical change there occurred a fundamental alteration in the way the society determined what was to be regarded as honorable. Although the language of honor may not have as much purchase or salience today, all moral systems do tend to have analogous concepts of and synonyms for honor, and in this regard Appiah's essential point is particularly insightful.

Appiah notes that when a society or a group undergoes a major transformation of its values and alters its sense of what is good or right in certain circumstances, it tends to do so by drawing on existing values and reinterpreting them, either by extending their remit, or expanding the range of their application or by changing the grounds on which they are determined. Rarely if ever is there a fundamental repudiation of an existing value, but rather there is an attempt to protect that existing value, albeit in a different guise, or to reinterpret its meaning and significance in light of changed circumstances or beliefs. Indeed, as his analysis demonstrates, in each of these moral revolutions, what Appiah calls "the motivating power of honour" was

channeled, not challenged.¹ He acknowledges that there are many different ways in which honor can function in moral revolutions; however, he suggests that each of these instances of moral transformation teaches us something important about how change can be effected. In particular they reveal that cultural and religious values and practices invariably invoke and depend on codes of honor which are typically being challenged long before any transformation occurs, and that these codes of honor ultimately need to be recruited to the side of change, or progress, if a moral transformation is to occur.² Moreover, as Appiah points out, notwithstanding the fact that the transformation in a particular community's practice may initially be experienced as unsettling and unfamiliar when existing codes of honor can be harnessed in the service of change, a moral revolution can come about with "astonishing speed."³

There is no doubt that the internal critic also plays an important role in this process of social transformation. All traditions understand the subversive and prophetic potential of the critic, and especially of the internal critic. Indeed great innovations in cultural and religious life have come about because of the courage and determination of individuals who have challenged their inherited traditions to live up to the idealism contained therein, or to dispense with the evasions and hypocrisies that may have become embedded in its practices. Michael Walzer calls this "the subversiveness of immanence" and remarks on its significance, not only in calling into question but also in overturning certain fundamental values to which a group may hold fast.⁴ A critical and often overlooked insight of Walzer's is that, whereas the story of "the critical enterprise" is usually told through the prism of what Walzer calls "the heroic moments," in fact such criticism is best understood as a reiterative activity in which the case for change has to be made again and again, in and through the language and narratives of the particular tradition,⁵ something which is also confirmed in Appiah's discussion of the role of honor.

The analyses of Appiah and Walzer each suggest that when we look closely at any moral revolution we see that the arguments for change have usually been well rehearsed and that the impetus for change rarely comes from the development of new, more convincing arguments. Rather it comes about through the persuasive appeal of the existing ones. So how does it happen that at a certain point the case for change becomes convincing? Of course each situation is different. In the context of our discussion of conversion, however, I wish to consider the role that the moral imagination plays in the context of such change, and especially the work that the arts can do to create an imaginative space in which established parameters of moral concern can be challenged and expanded. Indeed it is my contention that the arts can

¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 169.

² Appiah, *The Honor Code*, 161.

³ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁴ Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Arguments at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 47. See also his discussion in *The Company of Critics, Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), in which he looks in detail at the lives and works of eleven public intellectuals and from there draws a number of important insights about the nature of social criticism.

⁵ Walzer, *Thick and Thin*, 52.

create a level of understanding that is qualitatively different from other more theoretical forms of discourse, and can thereby become a catalyst for change in ways that rational argument can never accomplish.

Expanding the Moral Imagination: The Role of the Arts

In considering the role that the arts can play in developing the ethical imagination, the poet Seamus Heaney's concept of "the redress of poetry" is a rich source of insight. In using this phrase Heaney is referencing Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*, where Weil observes that, "if we know in what way society is unbalanced, we must do what we can to add weight to the lighter scale."⁶

(i) A Glimpsed Alternative

For Heaney, at its most fundamental level, the possibility of poetry as redress emerges "from its being a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances."⁷ Of course this idea of poetry being "a glimpsed alternative" is deeply embedded in the way poets through the centuries have thought about their work. Heaney draws attention to this through his commentary on particular poems that speak about "crossing from the domain of the matter-of-fact to the imagined"⁸ and which allow him to reflect on what he calls "the frontier of writing," namely the line that divides "the actual conditions of our daily lives from the imaginative representation of those conditions in literature."⁹ In his commentary on Robert Frost's "Directive," in which the remains of a farmhouse (which we learn was the site of lives lived in sorrow and anger) have become a children's playhouse, Heaney insists that poems such as this are "a showing forth of the way poetry brings human existence into a fuller life."¹⁰ Poetry and the arts have the potential to transform the familiar into something rich and exotic, but can also enable us to absorb and even re-experience loss (what Virgil called *lacrimae rerum*)¹¹ in such a way as to fill the reader with a momentary sense of freedom and wholeness. The evocation of a sense of what is possible, beyond the actual conditions of our daily lives, the transformation of the experience of loss into "a fleeting glimpse of a potential order of things beyond confusion," these are at the heart of Heaney's conviction that poetry can be an important enabler of redress.

Heaney also speaks about his sense of poetry as being "the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality, quoting Wallace Stevens' phrase about the nobility of poetry being a violence from within that protects us from a violence

⁶ Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), 3, quoting Simone Weil *Gravity and Grace*, with an Introduction and Postscript by Gustave Thubon, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁷ Heaney, *Redress*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xvi.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xv.

without.”¹² The poetry of the celebrated English poets of the First World War exemplifies this ability of poetry to press back against the expectations of reality. During that war, as in many wartime situations, there was a tremendous, often unspoken pressure on all citizens to accept and support the government’s account of the causes, objectives and progress of the war. Moreover it is clear that many of the war poets themselves went to war without questioning the official view. Yet, through the writing of their poetry they pressed back against the pressure of reality. They refused to dehumanize the enemy, and instead captured the intensity of the suffering of all those on the front, enemy and ally alike. They resisted the ideologies of empire and repudiated the state for exalting the idea of dying for one’s country. Instead, and with great effect, they revealed the folly and barbarity of such expectations. Thus Wilfred Owen tells us that if we could hear, “at every jolt, the blood /Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,/ Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud/ Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,” then we would not tell “with such high zest /To children ardent for some desperate glory/ The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori.”¹³

The glimpsed alternative that poetry allows is achieved also through its unique ability to give voice to that which has hitherto been unexpressed. Indeed this has also been a fundamental dimension of artistic expression through the ages, and it is clear that the critical moments in the expansion of moral concern would likely not have happened without the poets and painters whose work gave voice to those who previously had been silent or silenced. In the contemporary context we have become very familiar with this testimonial dimension of art, so that its ability to effect redress is both well understood and routinely referenced. For example Gayatri Spivak promotes this view through her conviction that humanities education can be a vital resource in addressing the itinerary of silence that still besets contemporary life. In this regard however Heaney urges us to be attentive to the hazards of replacing one simplification with another. Thus, while Heaney acknowledges that it is possible to have a poetry that consciously seeks to promote political or cultural change, while retaining its artistic integrity, he insists that the redress of poetry cannot serve any reductive ends, and in fact is “at its most exquisite” when “the spirit is called extravagantly beyond the course that the usual life plots for it.”¹⁴ Poetry must not simplify. Rather through the encounter with a work of art, “personal force is being moved through an aesthetic distance, and in a space where anything can happen the longed-for may occur by way of the unforeseen, or may be balked by the limitations of the usual.”¹⁵ The glimpsed alternative therefore, even as it is tracing the itinerary of silence, is inevitably one of heightened complexity, rather than of simplification.

¹² Heaney, *Redress*, 1, quoting the Wallace Stevens essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” published in 1942.

¹³ Wilfred Owen, ‘Dulce et decorum est’, in *Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by C. Day Lewis and with a Memoir by Edmund Blunden, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963), 55.

¹⁴ Heaney *Redress*, 16.

¹⁵ Heaney *Redress*, 11.

(ii) *An Imaginative Identification*

One cannot underestimate the power and resonance of “the glimpsed alternative” in the work of the moral imagination. It has been and continues to be a critical factor in the expansion of our moral concern. Its transformative effect is particularly evident throughout the history of moral change and is also attested to in contemporary life. Moreover, as has already been discussed, the arts, perhaps more than any other artifact are the primary means through which this glimpsed alternative is articulated. Equally important in the history of moral change, however, is the formative role that the arts have played in what might be called “the education of the moral sentiments.” Over the last three centuries in particular, there has been a gradual, but unmistakable expansion of moral concern. Indeed the philosopher Richard Rorty has argued that it is this unprecedented growth of moral concern, or empathy, more than any other factor, which accounts for the establishment of the contemporary culture of democracy and human rights. Rorty’s argument about the centrality of empathy is both a philosophical and a historical one. Philosophically he follows Annette Baier in endorsing Hume’s claim that “corrected sympathy, not law-discerning reason, is the fundamental human capacity.”¹⁶ He augments this philosophical point by insisting that, historically, the establishment of this culture of equality and social justice “seems to owe nothing to increased moral knowledge, and everything to hearing sad and sentimental stories”¹⁷ or what Baier calls “a progress of sentiments.”

Thus Rorty insists that the durability of this culture of equality and justice depends, not on the sophistication of our arguments, but rather on our ability to answer the question about why we should care about a stranger, a person who is no kin to us, a person whose habits we find disgusting,¹⁸ with an answer like “because this is what it is like to be in her situation—to be far from home, among strangers, or because she might become your daughter-in-law, or because her mother would grieve for her.” In short he argues, “such stories, repeated and varied over the centuries, have induced us, the rich, safe, powerful people, to tolerate and even cherish powerless people—people whose appearance or habits or beliefs at first seemed an insult to our own moral identity, our sense of the limits of permissible human variation.”¹⁹ In fact one sees this at play in many different historical periods. For example the mid-eighteenth century saw the advent of the novel and with it the beginnings of a level of psychological and moral identification across social boundaries that, in time, transformed the moral landscape. In *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, Lynne Hunt illustrates the crucial role that literature has played in the articulation of new kinds of individual experiences which in turn made possible new kinds of social and political concepts.²⁰ These new kinds of individual

¹⁶ Baier, “Hume the Women’s Moral Theorist?” in Eva Kittay & Diana Meyers, eds. *Women and Moral Theory*, (Ottawa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1987), 40.

¹⁷ Richard Rorty, “Human Rights Rationality and Sentimentality,” in *The Rorty Reader*, ed. Christopher J Voparil & Richard J Bernstein (Oxford: Wylie-Blackwell, 2012), 355.

¹⁸ Rorty, *Ibid.*, 362, quoting Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume’s Treatise* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 312.

¹⁹ Rorty *The Rorty Reader*, *ibid.*, 365.

²⁰ Lynne Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 34.

experiences were focused primarily on autonomy and reciprocity (empathy), and although they had a long gestation in the philosophical and theological traditions of the West, it was not until the second half of the eighteenth century they gained a cultural significance which eventually transformed the moral landscape. Since then, most, if not all, of the critical turning points in the history of equality and justice have been accompanied by a flowering of literary and artistic expression that has given voice to those who had previously been marginalized, creating this imaginative identification, “frustrat[ing] common expectations of solidarity”²¹ and expanding the circle of moral concern. More recently, one has seen the extraordinary literature, visual art and music that has expressed the traumatic remembering of the Holocaust, and which has been crucial in reshaping the way we now understand the inalienability of human dignity.

The literary and artistic reflection on the Holocaust has also shattered our confidence in human goodness and progress in profound and unique ways. Through the imaginative identification with the victims of atrocity the depth of the depravity of this particular period has come to be better understood. One of the most powerful legacies, moreover, has been the manner in which it has captured this shadowy side of humanity. So in addition to the imaginative identification with the victims, which allows us to glimpse the debilitating and detrimental impact that torture and violence has on those on whom it is visited, some of the most powerful and challenging art has required us to confront the prospect that in certain circumstances one may be the perpetrator rather than the victim of atrocity. Bernard Schlink’s *The Reader* demands that we face this prospect, as does Robert Lyons and Scott Straus’s extraordinary *Intimate Enemy, Images and Voices of the Rwandan Genocide*.²² As Seamus Heaney insists, art must not simplify. The glimpsed alternative therefore is of a world of heightened complexity. Thus whereas our popular culture allows us, in fact encourages us, to distance ourselves from this shadowy side of our humanity, poetry and the arts require that we face the prospect that we too could be a Speer or an Andrea Yeates, or one of the many public officials in Bosnia who facilitated and sometimes organized the torture and killing of those who had previously been their neighbours.²³ The imaginative identification which the arts occasion may draw us into a world of extravagant possibilities, but it may also draw us more fully into the world of depravity and pain. Each is a dimension of the ambivalence of the lives we live and of the choices we make, and neither can be ignored as we seek to understand more fully the nature of our moral concern and challenge its limitations.

For Simone Weil the greatest sin is “obedience to gravity.” That the arts enable us to resist gravity’s pull affirms their centrality for the work of the ethical imagination. Indeed in this, to paraphrase Heaney, the arts can come to represent “something like the exercise of the virtue of hope” as it is understood by Václav Havel, since for Havel hope “is not the conviction that something will turn out well,

²¹ Heaney, *Redress*, 3.

²² Robert Lyons & Scott Straus. *Intimate Enemy, Images and Voices of the Rwandan Genocide* (New York: Zone Books, 2006).

²³ I am grateful to my friend and colleague James Keenan for drawing attention to this point.

but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”²⁴ The glimpsed alternative, the imaginative identification, each is essential for the construction/articulation of the creative spaces in which established parameters of moral concern can be challenged and expanded. And it is through the arts, more than any other artefact that the “imaginative transformation of human life” is accomplished, moreover, as Heaney rightly insists, this “imaginative transformation of human life is the means by which we can most truly grasp and comprehend it.”²⁵

Expanding the Moral Imagination: Problematizing the Nature of Violence

In this final section of the paper I wish to draw on my own experience in order to demonstrate how the arts can challenge the established parameters of moral concern, can push back against the weight of reality, and can effect a transformation, a conversion in how the ethical dimensions of certain issues are understood. The example on which I draw relates to a course I teach on the ethics of political violence and war, and which is a course that I find particularly challenging. One of my main concerns in this course is to try to get students to consider why violence presents itself to us as essential, why we have accepted it so definitively as a means of effecting justice, why it has captured our ethical and political imagination. The subtext, I suppose, is that I want to challenge the dominance of the just war paradigm in Christian theology, to push back against its weight, and make the case for Christianity as a tradition of nonviolence and pacifism.

In this context I have concluded that the most challenging issue for teacher and student alike involves gaining some insight into the nature of violence itself. It is undoubtedly difficult for those of us who have never endured physical violence to understand the havoc that violence creates. Yet those of us who are concerned about the ethical questions raised by war do need to gain some proximity to the perspectives of those who have experienced and perpetrated violence. I find it surprising, therefore, that most theological discussions of the ethics of war seem to bypass the question of whether and how the nature of violence can be understood, and seem to assume that its nature can be appropriately represented and communicated. Ethical analyses of war rarely keep in view, however, the individual acts of violence which cumulatively become the object of *in bello* assessments of proportionality. And while these texts may be adept at debating the merits of the principle of double effect in determining the moral limits of collateral damage, they frequently fail to attend to the particularity of the brutality that stands at the heart of any war. It is nonetheless vital that ethical evaluations of war are clear sighted about the nature of the violence through which war is defined. Moreover, it is essential that they be able to communicate as fully as possible the multiple meanings that the violence of war carries. Ultimately, if an ethical analysis is to be an honest one then it must begin and end with questions about the moral significance of the particular, with the experiences of those who enact and those who experience the horror and brutality of war.

²⁴ Heaney, *Redress*, 4, quoting Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, Translated from Czech and with an introduction by Paul Wilson, (London: Faber & Faber, 1990) 181.

²⁵ Heaney *Redress*, xv.

With this consideration in the foreground, I bring my class to The Hague, to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia where the case of the supposed evacuation of a hospital in Vukovar is being tried.²⁶ Before we take our places in Trial Chamber II we read over the indictment against the individuals whose case we were about to observe. It makes for chilling reading. The accused²⁷ are charged on the basis of individual criminal responsibility²⁸ and superior criminal responsibility²⁹ with five counts of crimes against humanity³⁰ and three counts of violations of the laws or customs of war.³¹ The indictment relates to an incident that occurred on November 19, at eleven o'clock in the morning, as Vukovar's crisis headquarters tried unsuccessfully to make contact with the outside world. The JNA (the Yugoslav people's Army) entered the hospital complex. To the terror of those inside they arrived ahead of the international monitors who, it had been agreed the day before, were to supervise the evacuation. In fact the ICRC truck, carrying medicine for the sick, arrived at six in the evening. By then the JNA had begun to evacuate the sick-and-wounded, without international supervision, and in

²⁶ Laura Silber and Allan Little, in *The Death of Yugoslavia*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995) 179–80, describe this event in detail.

²⁷ See the Case Information Sheet "Vukovar Hospital" (IT-95-13/1), The Prosecutor v. Mile Mrkšić, Miroslav Radić & Veselin Šljivančanin, prepared by the Communications Service of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and available on www.icty.org (accessed on July 23, 2013). According to the indictment, the accused held the following positions during the relevant period:

- Mile Mrkšić was a colonel in the JNA and commander of the 1st Guards Motorized Brigade and Operational Group South. After the fall of Vukovar, he was promoted to general rank in the JNA and became the commander of the 8th JNA Operational Group in the Kordun area in Croatia. Following the withdrawal of the JNA from Croatia in 1992, he returned to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and occupied several posts in the VJ General Staff. He became the commanding officer of the army of the so-called "Republic of Serb Krajina" ("RSK") in May 1995.

- Miroslav Radić was a captain in the JNA. He commanded an infantry company in the 1st Battalion of the 1st Guards Motorized Brigade

- Veselin Šljivančanin was a major in the JNA. He was the security officer of the 1st Guards Motorized Brigade and Operational Group South and as such was de facto in charge of a military police battalion subordinated to the 1st Guards Motorized Brigade. After the fall of Vukovar, Šljivančanin was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel and was placed in command of the VJ brigade in Podgorica, Montenegro. Mile Mrkšić was convicted of murder, torture and cruel treatment, Miroslav Radić was found not guilty and Veselin Šljivančanin was convicted of torture.

²⁸ Article 7(1) of the Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia describes individual criminal responsibility as pertaining to a person who planned, instigated, ordered, committed or otherwise aided and abetted in the planning, preparation of execution of a crime referred to in articles 2-5 of the Statute. Article 2 refers to grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, article 3 refers to violations of the laws or customs of war, article 4 refers to genocide and article 5 refers to crimes against humanity.

²⁹ Article 7(3) of the Statute.

³⁰ Article 5 of the Statute refers to crimes against humanity including persecutions on political, racial, and religious grounds; extermination; murder; torture; inhumane acts.

³¹ Article 3 of the Statute refers to violations of the laws of war and include murder; torture; cruel treatment.

contravention of the previous day's agreement...The JNA began to separate the men from the women and children³² and loaded the men onto buses. The buses left the hospital and proceeded to the JNA barracks from whence some of the detainees were then transported to a farm building in Ovčara, where soldiers beat them. Soldiers then transported their non-Serb captives in groups of about 10 to 20 to a ravine in the direction of Grabovo where they killed at least 264 Croats and other non-Serbs from Vukovar Hospital. After the killings, the bodies of the victims were buried by bulldozer in a mass grave at the same location.³³ The indictment we hear alleges that the three individuals before us were present in the Vukovar Hospital, and were involved in the commission of murder, torture, cruel treatment, extermination, and inhumane acts. It further alleges that 2 of the individuals (Miroslav Radić and Veselin Šljivančanin) personally participated in the selection of detainees who were to be loaded on buses.

As we listen to the testimony, on this particular day it is the then Mayor of Vukovar justifying his decision to allow the so-called evacuation prior to the arrival of the international monitors, we struggle to comprehend how the three men before us have come to be charged with such heinous crimes. The historical and political texts we have consulted in advance of our trip help to explain the context. Tim Judah explains how different historical narratives impact on the current political situation³⁴ and Slavenka Drakulić,³⁵ though she expresses her incomprehension at the speed and ferocity of the killing, illuminates for us the political culture that helps explain the collective passivity in the face of rising threats. Psychological studies too form part of our picture as we contemplate what it might mean to have committed these crimes. And yet, notwithstanding the cumulative weight of this analysis, our questions persist. Moreover, as the human faces of this atrocity appear before us our conversation turns to whether one can ever really understand the nature of violence and, more particularly whether the difficulties of understanding and communication are properly appreciated among those who discuss the ethics of war.

Perhaps it is because violence is so pervasively and persistently represented, and because we effectively live in a “society of spectacle,”³⁶ that we assume we know what we are talking about when we come to assess the violence that is at the heart of

³² This paragraph paraphrases the account in Silber & Little., 179–80.

³³ MRKSIC et al., Case IT-95-13/1 available on the ICTY website <http://www.un.org/icty> (DATE ACCESSED?)

³⁴ Tim Judah, *The Serbs History, Myth & the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

³⁵ Slavenka Drakulić, *They Would Never Hurt a Fly, War Criminals on Trial in The Hague*, (London: Abacus, 2004).

³⁶ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 109. “These dead are supremely uninterested in the living: in those who took their lives; in witnesses—and in us. Why should they seek our gaze? What would they have to say to us? “We”—this “we” is everyone who has never experienced anything like [what] they went through—don’t understand. We don’t get it. We truly can’t imagine what it was like. We can’t imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can’t understand, can’t imagine. That’s what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time under fire, and had the luck to elude the death that struck down others nearby, stubbornly feels. And they are right.”

war. Yet ethical assessments of war rarely pause to ask what violence requires of the person; what being a perpetrator of acts of violence does to the person; how violence impacts the victim; to what extent the nature of violence can be communicated; how legitimizations of violence function; and how the hazards of idolatry and self-legitimization in the creation of justifications for war can be mitigated.³⁷ Even when these questions do get an airing, the focus of the enquiry tends to be a rather narrow and truncated one that is primarily concerned with its intellectual aspects. In fact we need to adopt many modes of engagement if we are to begin to understand more fully the nature of violence. Over the years, however, I have come to believe that, irrespective of the sophistication of our analysis, reason alone will not deliver an understanding of the nature of violence and its impact on victim and victimizer alike. Indeed it is precisely here that we confront the limits of reason. Rather our questioning needs to leave room for, indeed needs to enable, encourage, and even to prompt us to cast ourselves (however imperfectly) in the place of the other, in the hope that we can to begin to comprehend the nature of the ethical questions that recourse to violence raises.

Yet how can one imaginatively inhabit the world of an other who has lived through a genocide and seen family and friends tortured and killed? Can one ever begin to understand the mind of one who has committed atrocious acts, one who has rounded up the non-Serb male patients in a hospital, led them onto buses and arranged for the disposal of their bodies after they had been murdered? In these contexts there are only partial, faltering answers to such questions. In my teaching I have found that the visual and literary arts are invaluable as I attempt to capture the texture of the ethical questions that are at stake. Indeed I have concluded that it is the works of the photographers and the poets, even more than the political theorists and theologians, that best illuminate the ethical sensibilities in question. In particular I want to mention some visual pieces that I use, in part because they are so rarely reflected on by ethicists, but more importantly because as they attempt to represent the unrepresentable, they create a climate in which the emotional, intellectual and ultimately the ethical aspects of the enactment of violence can be more fully captured.

Representing the Unrepresentable

In a world where visual representations of violence abound, and in which the sheer volume of these images can lead to the desensitisation of our critical and emotional capacities, it is easy to dismiss the moral power of such representations. Indeed Susan Sontag is correct to insist that the viewer ought to be aware of the limits of what can be expressed and communicated with respect to the enactment of violence. And yet, as *Regarding the Pain of Others* recognizes, particular photographs and video installations can indeed capture those aspects of violence that are not amenable to easy representation, and as a result can create a context in which

³⁷ Gerhard Beestermöller "Eurocentricity in the Perception of Wars," *Concilium* (2001/2): 33–42; and Irina Novikova, "Lessons from the Anatomy of War: Svetlana Alexievich's Zinky Boys," 99–116; and Rada Drezgic, "Demographic Nationalism in the Gender Perspective," 211–35 both in Svetlana Slapšak, *War Discourse, Women's Discourse Essays and Case-studies from Yugoslavia and Russia* (Ljubljana : TOPOS, 2000).

the moral questions can be raised in a different register. Moreover this is the case regardless of how graphic or otherwise the representation may be. Of course constantly in one's mind are questions about how the line between voyeurism and glamorization on the one hand, and truthful communication on the other, can be drawn. Despite the ambivalence of many visual images, they often prompt us to ask questions that rarely surface in discussions about the ethics of war most especially when they force us to think about the enactment of violence in its totality and in the context of the impact it has on victim/survivors and on victimizers.

WarningSHOTS!, an exhibition of contemporary art that explored conflict and violence, and that toured a number of cities in Great Britain in 2000, included an array of visual pieces that, without resorting to melodrama or sentimentality, conveyed an understanding of some aspects of the nature of violence that are unusually difficult to represent. The pieces by Monica Oechsler, Willie Doherty, and Christine Borland were especially striking in terms of challenging the viewer to connect with particular aspects of violence. With her four-and-a-half minute video entitled *Strip*, played in continuous loop, Monica Oechsler creates in the viewer an escalating sense of foreboding and terror as girls as young as eight strip down and reassemble handguns, singing nursery rhymes as they do so. The girls belonged to the only British gun club licensed to have members as young as eight years old. We only see the girls from the neck down as they expertly strip their guns and put them back together again. Our foreboding arises because, having initially been soothed and somewhat mesmerised by their rhythmic singing of nursery rhymes, it gradually begins to dawn on us that they do not understand the power they have with the loaded weapons in their hands. We wonder what they intend to do; who they are; whether they can be trusted not to shoot; whether they are damaged or traumatized in some way. Of course their youth and the juxtaposition of the nursery rhymes with lethal weapons accentuates the sense of foreboding, yet it is the fluency with which they handle these weapons, the fascination that their power holds, and most of all the sheer arbitrariness of the decision to use them that creates the sense of menace. In another exhibit Willie Doherty's photograph *At the Border V (Isolated Incident)* presents us with an image of a stained and torn mattress dumped by the roadside somewhere in Northern Ireland. Of course the context imbues this not uncommon sight of a discarded mattress on the roadside with a particular significance since we know that the holes in the mattress are most likely bullet holes. In this image the pitiless isolation of both victim and victimizer is vividly and unbearably on show. The viewer is immediately prompted to ask what it would mean to have this as one's last encounter in life, one's final experience and memory. One is forced to ask, moreover, what it would mean to be the one who walked away from this scene, having inflicted lethal violence on another person who was most likely a neighbour, a colleague or even a friend. The shocking finality and absurdity of violence is expertly evoked in Christine Borland's installation, *The Quickening, the Lightening, the Crowning*. The viewer enters a dark walled space (a womb?) in which is displayed anatomical models of childbirth one listens to a soundtrack of a fetal heartbeat running continuously. Overlaid is another soundtrack, this time of gunfire created with the guns that were handed over to the police during the amnesty that followed

the Dunblane killings.³⁸ The juxtaposition of the protective space and the strong, rhythmic fetal heartbeat with the roar of the gun expresses better than the most subtle of arguments the beauty and preciousness of the individual life and brings us face-to-face with the radical destructiveness that such weapons bring.

Sontag may well be correct that those of us who have not experienced war “can’t imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can’t understand, can’t imagine.” Yet Oechsler, Doherty, and Borland in their respective ways hold our gaze and require us to look again at the practice that is war. The arts, visual and literary, enable the viewers to raise the ethical questions in a different way. They help us think about what it means to participate in acts of brutality, they prompt us to think about the lure of violence, about the nature of accountability, about the vulnerabilities of ordinary people, about complicity, and about the abdication of responsibility. Most of all, perhaps they issue a summons, a summons to abandon the fictional realities about war that we have created and ultimately a summons to acknowledge head-on the horror that is war. In her magisterial *Foundations of Violence*, the late Grace Jantzen argues that we will only be able to resist what she calls the “necrophilic *habitus* of modernity” once we have begun to construct alternative political, ethical, and religious discourses,³⁹ that is, discourses that no longer valorize, sacralize or justify violence.

There is no doubt that the arts can make a distinctive and unique contribution to the construction of alternative discourses, not least in what they teach us about the nature of violence. They can insist on the imagined identification, articulate the glimpsed alternative, allow us to resist gravity’s pull, and call the spirit beyond the course that the usual life plots for it. In this imagined transformation of human life the hope and the promise of pacifism becomes possible. And this above all is what the grammar of conversion entails in Christian social ethics.

³⁸ In 1996 a Mr. Hamilton entered a primary school in Dunblane, Scotland and killed sixteen children and a schoolteacher. In the aftermath the police declared an amnesty for those who held illegal handguns.

³⁹ Grace Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence* (London: Routledge, 2004), 10.