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Subjunctive Remembrance—“A Walking Shadow”: A Meditation on War and Love

There is many a boy here today who looks on war as all glory, but, boys, it is all hell — Tecumseh Sherman, 19 June 1879¹

EVERYONE SEEMS TO KNOW the truth of General Sherman's remark, but no one does anything about it, least of all those in positions to do so. What is it about “hell” that keeps us there? There are always reasons of a sort given, of course, from historical injury, geopolitical interests, national interests, racial fear to undeclared greed, but these could be overridden were there sufficient will. Why do we lose the will to live civilly even now, choosing instead the “hell” of violence and militarism—the irrationality of war? It has gone on long enough to make one think, apart from rationalizations of a given time, that there is something deeper in it that makes us like to fight, as if immediate causes mask deeper forces within seeking an unseen goal. Why can we not turn away? One might think of the rush of power, the excitement of mastery, the elation of struggle and survival, but there is, too, something primal, perhaps, something of what is traditionally referred to as “spiritual” in the complex of our inner forces that leads us to overset the control of reason and give way to what amounts to a lust indistinguishable from love—as if doing battle to the death were to see the face of God directly and, therein, to know oneself. In this there is a hunger for ultimate self-realization through violence and destruction, for a wholeness of being transcending temporal causes and rationalizations.

Sherman himself is an acknowledged originator of our modern total war, in effect the “hell” to which he immediately refers (setting aside the horrors of the Old Testament and their place in the justification of

¹ http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/s_z/sherman.htm. All subsequent Sherman references are to this document.

our modern versions) with his scorched earth policy across the American South (1864) and particularly in South Carolina—a policy he followed, too, in the later so-called Indian Wars (1869–78) in which his aim was to destroy utterly the very foundation of the life of the “enemy,” abetting, for example, the slaughter of the immense herds of bison across the West and the consequent indiscriminate starvation of Indian peoples—men, women and children. Sherman’s total war does not distinguish between civilian and military, human and other, for it is war not between armies but between peoples (now, apparently, “civilizations”)—potentially a total “cleansing” of them and all who are with them. Nothing can be left to stand between oneself and the ultimate goal, for, finally, there is only the ultimate goal and, ultimately, the way is Armageddon.

All Indians not on reservations, Sherman is reported to have said, “are hostile and will remain so until killed off.” We all become cannon fodder, therefore, as in Bosnia, Hiroshima, Darfur, Nagasaki, Baghdad, Rwanda, Lebanon, Bali, The Twin Towers, London, etc., and, by those who adopt this perspective, even the hard-won Geneva Convention (developed in the face of total war) is to be dismissed as outdated, naïve and quaint—as any construct of reason can appear to be. Like Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, these lack “restraint.”² For them, Sherman’s “hell” becomes a compelling dark alluring figure of natural “freedom,” thankfully beyond reason and to be had and enjoyed apart from any civil law: “Come in and let me make a man of you” it whispers, drawing us into the dark labyrinthine spaces of our inner mind—and the fantasized experience offered conditions our thinking as a qualifying ordeal in the wilderness necessary for entry to the promised land. It is taken as a coming of age, the sign of manhood. How can a boy resist?³

In this regard, there can be few of a certain age who have not read the glorious lines of Pilot Officer Magee’s “High Flight,” intoning it (internalizing it, indeed, as Conrad’s narrator suggests he does the “voice” of Kurtz speaking of his high ideals [50])⁴ to fly on the sheer joy of rhetorical verse into the pure inane, “the high untrespassed sanctity of space,” as Magee has it, where he would have us conceive his touching “the face of God.” This sonnet has, apparently, become famous among pilots, as if speaking

² Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (London: Penguin Books, 1995) 85, 108; subsequent page references appear in parentheses.

³ Contrast Sherman with Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America’s Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006) 125–26.

⁴ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Gillespie_Magee,_Jr.

to their highest aspirations. Silent in his language, however (and perhaps in pilots' thoughts), there is, on the one hand, the belligerent snarl of the Rolls Royce Merlin engine thrusting his Spitfire Mk V "high in the sunlit silence," and, on the other, there is our knowledge that Magee himself was killed shortly after (and many others in actual combat), simply coming down to land through a cloud over Lincolnshire and crashing into another aircraft taking off—with insufficient altitude, at 400 feet, for his 'chute to open.

Directly and indirectly, therefore, there is more within "High Flight" to know than the lure of those simplicities sketched by a nineteen-year-old son of missionaries—simplicities that would lead him (and the reader) toward the glorious passion of divine ecstasy. The silence of actual space may be "sunlit" and sanctified, as he suggests, but that silence of the "lifting mind" regarding the full situation, supposedly bringing him to "the face of God," leaves a shadowed space for us dark as Sherman's "hell" or the "horror" that Kurtz comes to know (112)—a space parallel or identical, perhaps, with the dark matter of the universe. In any case, it is a construct of the head—of the imagination. It is, of course, the sonnet's surface rhetoric that first tells, and boys of all ages, now and in 1941, think only "Spitfire!" or its equivalent and hear only the garbled cry over their fancied intercom of "Messerschmitt!" before disintegrating it with invincible gunfire. Another clean kill: "Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth."

Magee's fantasy verges on the onanistic as surely as any boy's indulgence in the exuberant verse. Denuded of reference to the actual character of the Spitfire, the lines trace a *faux*-platonian movement toward godhead. Indeed, the Spitfire is not even named, the specific vehicle-type being as irrelevant properly to the ecstatic experience as the identity of an onanist's fantasy figure or, more largely, the earthly lover in Plato's myth of love, particularly as this extended to the beloved in the courtly love tradition—which has permeated even our contemporary psyches. In the absence of actualizing reference, something of the character of Yeats' "Lake Isle of Innisfree" is realized—at least of the moony pap of that piece. Like "Innisfree," "High Flight" offers a dream vision of sterile achievement.

But there is more, for the fantasy element and the concomitant darkness are systemic: even when the true nature of a Spitfire is actualized in reconstruction by an experienced pilot with thirty-eight "kills," the effect is not much different:

A solitary 109 flies below me ... Where are the other two? Is this a decoy, a trap? Or is it my turn now? I yaw the tail of the Spitfire to cover the blind spot, kick a rudder, drop each wing and search the area

below. No sign of his comrades and I drop from the cloud base well below the 109 and stalk him so that I climb towards his soft belly. For here is no armour plate but only a complicated mass of engine and petrol, oil and hydraulic lines. One more look behind. All clear. He is probably flying back to his base at Wissant, but he will never get there, for the stick shakes in my hand as the Spitfire spews the cannon shells into the thin fuselage, and soon only a tell-tale plume of thick smoke marks his fall to the earth below.⁵

A grainier aspect is recorded too, of course, in relation to one R.P. Stevens, whose wife and children had been killed in “one of the Manchester blitzes and it was said that he screamed, like a man demented, at the sight of the enemy bombers ... the hated enemy”:

On one occasion he blew up a bomber, and pieces of human flesh and blood stained his own aircraft. He refused to have these removed ... We have the fondest memories of him.⁶

War is hell? In any conventional sense, that is not alone the informing paradigm here, for it is informed by “glory” of a kind, too, even as Magee’s “High Flight”—here, that of a tough-minded dementia. One is rather closer, despite Johnson’s cover of old-school urbanity and civilization, to something like the tough post-war fiction of a Mickey Spillane (as recalled) writing of someone shot at close range with a shotgun: “He disappeared into a nightmare of blue holes”—which is not so clearly an objective description of an event as it is an invitation to relish another’s human body as properly a species of soft blue cheese, in effect reducing the significance of the action to our own imagined enjoyment of the sensuality of irrational violence: of brutality, death and disintegration. Repulsive or fascinating, the images are riveting.⁷

The Spillane obverse to the murderous scene (the dark alluring figure of “freedom”) becomes: “She came across the room at me in sections. She was bad. She was beautiful. She was my kind of woman.” This is also the “hell” that any boy will come to fantasize about and want (the Spitfire’s power and beauty, the obverse of Kurtz’s “Intended” [107–09, 122]) and, though

⁵ “Johnnie” Johnson [Group Captain J.E. Johnson, D.S.O., D.F.C.], *Wing Leader*, with a foreword by Group Captain Douglas Bader (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956; The Reprint Society, 1958) 113.

⁶ Johnson, 72–73.

⁷ The Spillane reference is beyond documentation, existing not as current text but rather burned into an adolescent psyche. The language is typical of Spillane.

unstated, it is of a piece with the “nightmare of blue holes.” Sherman and Johnson (perhaps not Magee) will certainly have known the connection of the two and of boys’ (of all ages) fascination with both. Sherman is drawing attention to a window in a lit room where naked couples are wrestling—with the ambivalent admonition, “Don’t ever think of what that is like!” Johnson would add, “Is that not glorious?”

The connection of love and war suggested in the imagery of Magee and Johnson has long been established (since Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and no doubt before) and the association of the act of killing with the sexual act specifically has, in recent years, been elaborated by military psychologists. Outside that coterie, one can hardly dare to make the case, but those knowledgeable would surely recognize the significance of ‘Johnnie’ Johnson’s phrasing in *Wing Leader*, particularly in reference to his “climb towards [the] soft belly” of the Messerschmitt: “the stick shakes in my hand as the Spitfire spews the cannon shells into the thin fuselage” (113).

Such a heart of darkness as that tacitly working at the centre of “High Flight” and of Johnson’s reconstruction was rendered brutally explicit in the My Lai massacre in Vietnam on 16 March 1968, directed by Lieutenant Calley. Joanna Bourke summarizes the actions of the 105 American soldiers: Calley and his men “rounded up and slaughtered around 500 unarmed civilians, sodomizing and raping women,” forcing a young mother to perform fellatio on a soldier before he murdered both her and her child. “At no stage did these soldiers receive any enemy fire or encounter any form of resistance save fervent pleadings.” If not actual silence, this, nonetheless, suggests in the soldiers the same fixed mental quietude that adheres to the performances of Magee and Johnson: a dimension of human consciousness, as distinct from technological celebration, is absent, as if, even in the mastery of their tools, they did not register what they were doing. Calley justified the massacre by reference to God’s direction to Samuel: “smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have . . . slay both man and woman, infant and suckling . . . to obey is better than sacrifice . . .”. At My Lai, apparently, Calley, like Magee earlier, also “Put out [his] hand and touched the face of God.”⁸

Significantly those slaughtered were Vietnamese. “Racism in all its forms,” writes Bourke, underlay “the most vicious and widespread atrocities carried out by British, American and Australian troops” in WW II and in Vietnam. Oriental peoples (and certainly the Amerindians in the “cleansing” of the West) were considered other and inferior: Sergeant Camil of 1st

⁸ Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing* (London: Granta Books, 1999) 182. The Calley reference is to I *Samuel* 15:3, 22.

Marine Division at My Lai explained: “it wasn’t like they were humans . . . when you shot someone you didn’t think you were shooting at a human.”⁸ For soldiers, Bourke writes, drawing on the work of William Broyles (a former Marine): “combat was the male equivalent of childbirth: it was the ‘initiation into the power of life and death.’” In language that focuses the composition of both “High Flight” and *Wing Leader* (not to mention boys’ fantasies) Broyles suggests that “a bazooka or an M-60 machine-gun was a ‘magic sword’ or a ‘grunt’s Excalibur’”; further, “The experience seemed to resemble spiritual enlightenment or sexual eroticism: indeed, slaughter could be likened to an orgasmic, charismatic experience. However you looked at it, war was a ‘turn on’.”⁹

Going deeper than the constructs of psychology, those of mythology allow us to see our traditional urges towards “spiritual enlightenment or sexual eroticism” within a larger human context. In his playful but still deadly serious explanation of love, Plato suggests that we are born with a half soul and, then, seek completion through union with the other half glimpsed in the beauty of another person’s form (together an imperfect earthly reflection of that absolute beauty or truth) the One—existing beyond time. The true focus of love is not at all another corporeal person but, rather, the eternal vision that person can allow us to achieve. We are “turned on” by the beloved: the “madness” of love is precisely the passion or self-alienation or ecstasy that we know when the eternal form is glimpsed and we know Unity within ourselves: in love, we put out our hand and touch “the face of God.”¹⁰

This is an experience of “spiritual enlightenment or sexual eroticism” quite disconnected from procreation. Indeed, love in Plato is homosexual, but his idea, mutating into that courtly or chivalric love celebrated in the Provençal song of the troubadours in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (focused on the lover’s pain of self-denial) nonetheless still required that

⁸ Bourke, 204.

⁹ Bourke, 14.

¹⁰ See Plato’s “Symposium,” trans. Benjamin Jowett (<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/symposium.html>). Specifically, see the speech of Aristophanes and his comic myth of love as the result of man’s division by Zeus: “After the division the two parts of man, each desiring his other half, came together, and throwing their arms about one another, entwined in mutual embraces, longing to grow into one.” See, too, the more difficult discussion of the ascent of reason “by the power of dialectic” beyond hypotheses to “the first principle of the whole” in Plato’s *The Republic* 511,b–d: *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, ed. R.M. Hare and D.A. Russell, vol. 4 (London: Sphere Books, 1970) 294. Although not used here, Jowett’s translation of *The Republic* is also available at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>.

even the beloved woman be unattainable. No sex—love, as a “spiritual” condition achieved in unremitting passion, does not allow for it. “Passion,” as Denis De Rougemont notes, “is deepened and releases its energies only in proportion to the resistance it meets,”¹¹ and abstention from full sexual intercourse is the necessary and unhappily happy condition of this exercise (typically the Provençal beloved would probably have been the lady of the local governing knight who would, himself, likely have been off on a Crusade singing to distant ladies and bringing other dragons low). Even the much later Sonnet 147 of Shakespeare, regarding the infamous “Dark Lady,” seems steeped in the tradition as the narrator viciously and hatefully berates her and himself in his frustration: “My Reason, the physician to my Love / . . . Hath left me, and I desperate now approve / Desire is death”:

For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.¹²

In Shakespeare no transcendent vision is achieved, the narrator remaining to the end mired beyond help in the dementia of Love—in the insanity of his own dark quest, as Lieutenant Calley appears to have been. But this is where he wants to be: this is the place of passion and possible vision—whatever he would imply. Both Shakespeare and Lieutenant Calley would have understood their proper unity within the bitter ambivalence of Sherman’s remark. And, by virtue of time and occupation, they both escape the unmanly end figured by De Rougemont:

By too easily adopting and absorbing certain romantic values, by vulgarizing and making them bourgeois, Western society was to succeed in suppressing in large measure the savage energy of passion. It was to begin little by little *to base marriage itself on love*, that is to say that western society was going to attempt to reconcile the two sworn enemies of the original drama, passion and marriage.¹³

Turned away from in our time is that harsh progressive discipline of love conditioned by deliberated sexual frustration and denial, making possible direct visions of godhead on earth. This was identified as a rival hereti-

¹¹ See Denis De Rougemont’s article on “Love,” in *Dictionary of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner, 1973) 101b. All De Rougemont quotations are from this article.

¹² William Shakespeare, “Sonnet 147,” in *The Yale Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Wilbur L. Cross and Tucker Brooke (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1993).

¹³ De Rougemont, “Love” 103b.

cal religious discipline by the Church and its legitimacy was denied, the Madonna probably being introduced for veneration as a safer in-Church alternative to a lonely woman whose “bosom,” like that of Rossetti’s Blessed Damozel, “made / The bar she leaned on warm.” In this line, St Thomas Aquinas, after Aristotle, suggested that love should rather be construed as friendship, not passion, with marriage its proper culmination, a social sacrament joining two separate souls (and their worldly goods) in an earthly conjunction to broaden and enrich each other through actual life—having sex and producing children.¹⁴ There was no ideal of divine completion in such marriage. Regarding the appearance of a notion of spiritually pure love focused on a form of beauty, De Rougemont suggests that it emerges historically as a “congenital union of a rhetoric of love with a religious heresy,” namely the discipline and belief of the Cathars or “pure ones” (practitioners of an ascetic, flesh-denying faith of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) with troubadour songs of love: “The poetry of courtship originated at the confluence of two spiritual currents along the two shores of the sea of civilization.”¹⁵ On the one hand, marriage is an earthly union designed for human procreation and comfort—a trial perhaps but not a progressive discipline; on the other, love is (*pace* Aristotle) properly pure, life-denying, spiritual and forever—i.e., divine.

In this one can see that love joins war in being “hell,” too and, also thanks to the Cathars, it has the proper goal of divine insight, not earthly pleasure. Rigorous, demanding and life-denying, its way is that of imaginative passion and its culmination, total union, occurs with death—a fulfillment necessary to the fixing of the divine vision or embrace beyond time and change. This is true in such an archetypal tragedy as *Romeo and Juliet*, and, of course, it is true of the saint and the soldier as we would experience them—and in popular TV dramas. And their ends are all “glorious,” as it were, signifying achievement—and with Iraq and Afghanistan “heroes” are again becoming many around us. Setting aside the monastery as being popularly passé for the moment and with the discipline of courtly passionate love having weathered into bourgeois marriage—or, at least, “relationship”—the

¹⁴ See David Mendez, “Aquinas View of Marriage” (<http://www.thomisttacos.com/2008/01/13/aquinas-view-of-marriage/>): “Now the form of matrimony consists in a certain inseparable union of souls, by which husband and wife are pledged by a bond of mutual affection that cannot be sundered. And the end of matrimony is the begetting and upbringing of children.”

¹⁵ De Rougemont, “Love” 100a.

¹⁶ Alfred Tennyson, “In Memoriam,” XXVII, 15–16, *Victorian Poetry and Politics*, 2nd ed., ed. W.E. Houghton and G.R. Stange (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968) 52.

only obvious practical way left to experience fully a glimpse of the Eternal One on earth, or godhead, may be through the militarily disciplined passion of war.

Demonstrably, at least, we have not been able to leave it alone, our bourgeois history of some two hundred years being one of increasingly total war. What is our stock view of veterans who have “been there” and how many of them look back to their war experience as the high-point of their lives? What of the haunted look in the eyes of some veterans who admit to not having been sent overseas? What knowledge do they feel they have missed, along with common civilians? There is, it seems, a general tacit understanding of an underlying truth in Tennyson’s lines: “’Tis better to have loved and lost, / Than never to have loved at all.”¹⁶ And we are now raising up generations of children at home and abroad in this passion. How can we keep them down on the farm once they have known this high?

By these lights, it is little wonder that representatives of our Canadian military (and its historians) are frequently heard to balk at mere peacekeeping as not being their proper work, as being, perhaps, unmanly and bourgeois. With Milton’s Moloch they might say, “My sentence is for open war: of wiles, / More unexpert, I boast not.”¹⁷ War may, at least, be a way to appear to escape the bourgeois mundane of the civilian majority and, for civilians themselves, the struggle to “remember them” may generate a notion of transcendent human value within the mundane—an exercise parallel to focusing one’s being inward (where the “spirit” lives) on the unknown, unseen One—mind games in either case.

For several of our political leaders, however, the “way” that is now supposedly defended by the military involves defending the Thomistic marriage of man and woman exclusively, not that tradition of ecstasy and passion of progressive spiritual love with roots far back in our platonic thought and practise—and in the very culture now considered “foreign” or “enemy.” But this disconnect may not be relevant, in fact, insofar as the soldiers themselves are regularly removed from the bourgeois mundane of civvy street and its political constraints, to suffer afar like saints the pangs of celibacy and the passions of battle. It may still be a Crusader’s life.

Of course, as an explanation of our penchant for Sherman’s “hell,” such thinking as this can seem a little off the ground, being itself contiguous with the platonic spiritual quest, for if, unlike that quest, it does not propose to lead one to “touch the face of God,” it would seek, nonetheless,

¹⁷ *Paradise Lost*, Book 2, 51–52, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 6th ed., ed. M.H. Abrams et al (New York: Norton, 1993) 685.

the one true answer in a world of unimaginable differences in motivation and experience. Yet such a search for an ultimately unified and single understanding of “hell” within ourselves, whether in terms of psychological or mythic metaphors, allows us to see beyond the immediate phenomena, even as we have forced upon us the radical disconnect between the explanation offered and the actual brutalities in the world around us. The explanations offered seem existentially preposterous, as constructs tend to be: anyone who has carried a weapon and has shot to kill will know that. Yet, historically, it is just such a quest for a unified stable answer that has offered and allowed us intellectual, cultural and scientific growth—indeed, the very possibility of understanding. Through the quest for metaphors commensurate with our experience we have constructed a sense of direction and stability which the free and unmediated flow of existential phenomena does not allow. Paradigms, as T.S. Kuhn argues, have provided the intellectual structures within which we can think.¹⁸

A very callow youth once asked a veteran WW II Sergeant in the *Winnipeg Rifles* whether the bayonet was used much in hand-to-hand fighting and the youth was shocked to be told that, yes, it was used—or, more often, a plank, a rifle butt, a club, a knife, a shovel, bare hands, finger nails, or anything else one could get hold of and use to kill. (The youth at some level must have thought that fighting in these circumstances should constitute a formal elegant *pas de deux*, with fixed rules and movements—but, then, he was probably more familiar with “High Flight” than reality television.) This same youth, when he complained to the Sergeant that the *Wermacht* (and certainly the SS) shot prisoners, was surprised to be cut off in peremptory fashion: “Of course they did. We did. You don’t take prisoners in the middle of a battle: they are a danger and a burden.” He would not hear any complaint. But this same Sergeant was also deeply disturbed for years by nightmares (he was probably suffering from what would now be termed “post-traumatic stress disorder”) regarding the violence and the hand-to-hand fighting and, particularly, by having had to kill children, namely members of the Hitler Youth: “They wouldn’t surrender and they could fire a rifle as well as any man.” One does not like to imagine what the response

¹⁸Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1970). See in particular his suggestion that paradigms are “universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners” (vii); also the suggestion that “in the metaphorical no less than in the literal use of ‘seeing,’ interpretation begins where perception ends ... what perception leaves for interpretation to complete depends drastically on the nature and amount of prior experience and training” (198.)

would have been had the callow youth suggested to the Sergeant that he had really been indulging in symbolic sexual acts en route to Truth.

... all men kill the thing they love,
By all let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!¹⁹

¹⁹ Oscar Wilde, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," <http://www.bibliomania.com/0/2/57/104/frameset.html>

