

Enchantment, Disenchantment, War, Literature

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THERE IS MAGIC IN DEATH. BUT THERE IS ALSO EMPTINESS AND finality in death. When death is violent, both its awesomeness and its meaninglessness increase. And if it is viewed as undeserved, it is asked to signify even more powerfully—or to admit its radical lack of significance. Thus, the ultimate story of magical transformation in Christian culture is the Crucifixion and Resurrection story, where unmerited, violent death yields nothing less than the promise of an afterlife, and the ultimate expression of emptiness comes in the extermination camp, where death is indiscriminate and the possibility of apotheosis foreclosed. These polarizing perceptions of violent death as either the fuel for generativity or the emblem of grotesque loss reach far and wide across Western culture. They have penetrated major cultural institutions, and they interfuse the literary field. I will call these two modes enchanted and disenchanting and offer them as central principles around which literary engagements with violence have tended to cluster. Historically, it has been war that most powerfully calls forth these dichotomized understandings of death: violent death as a sign and precipitator of sublimity (in a person, community, or nation) or, conversely, violent death as a sign and precipitator of total degeneration and waste. This dichotomy carried special urgency in the first decades of the twentieth century, in part because of the power of the First World War in shaping aesthetic consciousness, and writers of all political positions tended to filter expressions of violence through the enchanted-disenchanting lens.

This essay provides an explication and reading of enchantment and disenchantment as theories of violence that helped shape the literary output of the modernist years in Britain. The framework I develop here can be seen to organize and subtend a substantial variety

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of aesthetic works. Ubiquitous and flexible, it provided an adaptable structure for conceptualizing the violence that was increasingly understood to drive both psychic and cultural life. I then turn to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), a complex iteration of this structure. Critics have read *The Waste Land* as many things, including, of course, as a reckoning with the war. The poem has been personalized, historicized, and deconstructed, as it asks to be. But it has never been understood as providing a robust theory of violence and art, an intensely considered and sensitive engagement with those dominant cultural approaches to imagining violence I am calling enchantment and disenchantment. What a reading of *The Waste Land* shows, in part, is that literary modernism was fully entangled, in its deepest commitments, not only with the war, but also with a long history of violence, that its works were grouped and polarized around the question of whether violence can stand as the bedrock of a culture's artistic accomplishments.

We might begin with Max Weber. Weber's notion of the "disenchantment of the world," a phrase borrowed from Schiller and articulated in a variety of lectures and essays, refers to the large-scale diminishment of sacredness that, for Weber, was a product of industrial modernity.¹ The rationalizations enacted by capitalism, the ascendancy of mass culture, the practice of science, and the rise of professionalism all contribute to what Weber believed was a denuding of the magical or divine from modern existence. His assessment, which has recently enjoyed a resurgence of interest (though by no means a consensus) across scholarly disciplines, provides a vantage point for critiquing the Enlightenment more broadly, in this case as an indictment of its consequences for spiritual fulfillment. For its part, literature plays an important role in this narrative, in the sense that it has been tenaciously engaged, since the end of the eighteenth century, with the whole question of what kind of inspiring potency inheres in the world. In

the modernist period, when secular realism might seem triumphant, we find a strong spiritualizing impulse driving such phenomena as William Butler Yeats's occultism, D. H. Lawrence's theories of primal sexuality, and surrealism's investigation of the unconscious mind as source of creativity.² As Paul Fry proclaims, "the history of lyric and of defenses of poetry is one long proclamation that poetry is verbal magic" (3). It should be clear, however, that literature works both sides of the line; it can register and promulgate visions of the modern world as divinely inhabited or as exclusively and dramatically human.

When we add violence to this story, the idea of enchantment becomes especially interesting, productive, and surprising. But we need to change the meanings to a certain degree. In the ordinary dichotomy, disenchantment is an emblem of secular modernization and is almost always presented in negative terms, as a signifier for loss. What *disenchantment* means in my configuration is not a passive recognition of spiritual flatness but the active stripping away of idealizing principles, an insistence that the violated body is not a magic site for the production of culture. *Enchantment* refers to the tendency to see in violence some kind of transformative power.³ On the one hand, there is a strong impulse in literary accounts of violence to insist on resonant, elemental, often painful bodily experience: disenchantment. On the other hand, when the desire for spiritual plenitude meets the facts of historical violence, there is an equal and opposite tendency to see violence as the germinating core of rich, symbolic structures. Enchantment in this account may sound like myth, but there are important differences. Myth, even in its loosest usage, requires some kind of iteration; one must have at least the suggestion of a narrative that can be reproduced and extended. While enchanted violence often comes encased in mythic structures and stories, it can be the product of a mere moment, of a fleeting impression or sense.

Enchantment would seem exuberantly aesthetic, disenchantment only unwillingly so; but, as we look at them, we find instead that each draws on an extensive literary tradition and each is ambivalent about its own stance on violence. Enchantment, as we shall see, relies primarily on metaphors of growth and germination; it steers as clear from the violated body as it can. Yet its attachment to the metaphor of blood—to give just one example—draws it back toward the warmth of physicality. Blood, in fact, is a central metaphor for both modes; they come together through its associative magnetism. Elaine Scarry has commented forcefully on the status of blood and the injured body in transforming violence into meaning. War, she argues, relies for its power on

the mining of the ultimate substance, the ultimate source of substantiation, the extraction of the physical basis of reality from its dark hiding place in the body out into the light of day, the making available of the precious ore of confirmation, the interior content of human bodies, lungs, arteries, blood, brains, the mother lode that will eventually be reconnected to the winning issue. . . . (137)

For Scarry, the mysterious quality of the body's displayed interior holds an ineffable and unmatched power, allowing for deeply held beliefs to be developed and changed. Death, killing, even the gruesomely injured flesh: these carry radical authority, which no one attending to the cultural value of violence will be willing to forgo.

In its most stark and direct guise, the notion of enchantment, understood as a form of generative violence, underlies nearly all forms of militarism. Weber himself seems to make an exception to his disenchantment theory when it comes to war:

As the consummated threat of violence among modern polities, war creates a pathos and a sentiment of community. War thereby

makes for an unconditionally devoted and sacrificial community among the combatants and releases an active mass compassion and love for those who are in need. . . .

Moreover, war does something to the warrior which, in its concrete meaning, is unique: it makes him experience a consecrated meaning of death which is characteristic only of death in war. . . . Death on the field of battle differs from this merely avoidable dying in that in war, and in this massiveness *only* in war, the individual can *believe* that he knows he is dying “for” something. The why and the wherefore of his facing death can, as a rule, be so indubitable for him that the problem of the “meaning” of death does not even occur to him. (335)

These lines are striking only insofar as they come from Weber. In other respects, they codify the general premise of war enchantment: that in war, violent death is transformed into something positive and communal, perhaps even sacred. Indeed, throughout the West, it has never been possible to promote war without some promise of transcendence developing out of bodily privation.

Instead of denying its often gruesome bodily ramifications, champions of war in the twentieth century have tended to make the destroyed body itself the fulcrum for militarist and nationalist appeals.⁴ Rupert Brooke's “The Soldier” (1914), with its metaphors of a generative body both constituting and enlarging the national reach, offers a canonical, English case in point:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed. . . . (133)

The poem could galvanize the national consciousness, as it did, in part because it drew poignantly on the generative ideal—the dust of France made “rich” and “richer” by the inseminating English body—at a time when

England was looking not just for an icon (Brooke certainly filled that role) but also for a language that would frame the war's oncoming violence in terms of fruitfulness. In the iconography of sacrifice and revival that underwrote fascism, too, the figure of the fallen soldier held a prominent place; German militarism of the 1920s, in particular, was infused with this imagery (see Mosse). This model of the dead body as fuel for regeneration could be explicitly political and national, as the postwar German example testifies, but it also overlapped with other, less aggressive, theories of culture and violence, such as those developing under the rubric of anthropology.

Both Sigmund Freud and James Frazer, for instance, argued that to understand the beginnings of religion, social hierarchy, and (for Freud) psychic processes, one must return to scenes of violence, which function as the foundation stones for cultural development. Such works as Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1937) propound a surprising sense of immediacy in these imagined origins. For instance, Freud writes in *Totem and Taboo* that "the Christian communion," which he depicts as a pantomimic reiteration of an initial patricide, "is essentially a fresh elimination of the father, a repetition of the guilty deed" (192). Past violence is both dead and alive, forgotten and relived, as Freud sees a strong affective connection between a violent past shrouded in centuries of myth and denial and a present that brings these buried deeds into flourishing presence. The fact that cultures deliberately erase their most shameful violent acts, even as they construct themselves out of the residue of such violence, forms a basic premise of Freud's argument about the creation of robust religions and cultures. Other cultural anthropologists of the period, such as Frazer and his follower, Jesse Weston, similarly located crux features of religion and ritual in the refiguring of symbolic violence.⁵ So, in *The Golden Bough* (1890), the

Eucharist meal and the resurrection it replays exemplify those universal spring rites that Frazer believes ingrain and ritualize narratives of past killing. For all its encyclopedic detail, at its core, *The Golden Bough* makes a direct argument for murder as the primary, inaugurating cultural expression.

If comparative anthropologists like Freud, Frazer, and Weston established their world theories as a ground soaked in blood, many of the classical scholars of the period were equally interested in excavating a violent subtext to the familiar classical tradition. It was, in a sense, the goal of early-twentieth-century classicists to unsettle the benign image of ancient Greece that they had inherited from the nineteenth century: the Greeks as representatives of the pinnacle of civilization—in aesthetics, emblems of symmetry and grace; in politics, of democracy and rationality; in philosophy, of idealism and the quest for perfection.⁶ Jane Harrison and her colleague Gilbert Murray at Cambridge, among others, helped reignite interest in Greek culture and history precisely by offering up a picture of the Greeks as a product of Asiatic and Egyptian influences, comprising matrilineal traditions, chthonic gods, and a certain strange otherness in conflict with the Olympian order.⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche was far from alone in holding Dionysus over Apollo.

Occupying a different place in the cultural landscape from that of late-nineteenth-century classicists and anthropologists—but indebted to similar theoretical models of violence—are a host of revolutionary thinkers, from anarchists to Irish separatists to syndicalists. Here, we might consider just one case, Georges Sorel, who was particularly astute at theorizing violence in mystifying terms. An activist in the French syndicalist movement in the early years of the century, he wrote on a variety of topics, but particularly germane here is his *Reflections on Violence* (1908; first English trans. 1914), a work that sparked the interest of many literary modernists.⁸ An

eventual convert to Mussolini's authoritarianism, Sorel is remembered above all for promoting, as one intellectual biographer puts it, a "cult of violence" (Roth). In the first decade of the century, when *Reflections on Violence* was written, it was the general strike that he most effusively championed. For Sorel the strike has almost mythic connotations:

The conception of the general strike, engendered by the practice of violent strikes, admits the conception of an irrevocable overthrow. There is something terrifying in this which will appear more and more terrifying as violence takes a greater place in the mind of the proletariat. But, in undertaking a serious, formidable, and sublime work, Socialists raise themselves above our frivolous society and make themselves worthy of pointing out new roads to the world. (298–99)

In the overthrow of capitalism, it is violence that transforms the rebellious participants, rendering them "worthy," even "sublime." Indeed, the sublimity and generativity of violence carry over, with Sorel, from left (early-twentieth-century syndicalism) to right (1920s–30s fascism). Pointing forward, moreover, we might note how closely his account of energizing violence in the early twentieth century maps to later, anticolonial visions such as those of Frantz Fanon. As Fanon would write in 1960, "The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence." Or again, "At the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude" (44, 51). The infectious, celebratory quality of Fanon's rhetoric about the power of violence to remake history and the individual might be viewed as a signature not only for Fanon's era but for any theory of generative violence.

If enchanted violence sweeps across a range of contexts and positions, and if it has seeped into the language of wars and other events throughout the twentieth century, can the same be said for disenchanting violence?

Is there also a persistent idea, a cultural crux, around the attempt to strip away from the violated body all forms of symbolic valorization? I believe there is. The general principle is this: that violence—especially the rampaging violence of war—demands a style or technology of representation that pinpoints its experience and consequences without justifying or celebrating it. Disenchantment sets itself up as an ethical alternative, rejecting the ideals of purifying or cathartic violence. As a representational strategy, it cannot answer all the thorny questions surrounding the ethics of violence, such as whether in some cases violence might be necessary—for instance, to prevent further bloodshed. It is less a philosophy than an impulse or a form of bristling, local intervention. To oppose the mystification and mythologization of violence, texts with such a sensibility often home in on a moment of bodily injury, stressing the force of that irruptive violation and intimating ghastly consequences for the future. They thus bring to mind what Hortense Spillers has called "the flesh." In an account of the slave woman's body, Spillers has this to say:

But I would make a distinction . . . between "body" and "flesh" and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the "body" there is the "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography. . . . If we think of the "flesh" as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hold, fallen, or "escaped" over-board. (206)

Flesh, in these terms, effectively comes into being only when the body is ruthlessly travestied, as in slavery. Even in less extreme situations, however, the effort to demystify violence often conjures something like Spillers's zero degree of flesh, which, in its terrible sadness and unmitigated materiality, blots out human civilization.

We might take as axiomatic, in establishing a thematics of disenchanting violence, a passage from Virginia Woolf's polemic against war and fascism, *Three Guineas* (1938):

Here then on the table before us are photographs. The Spanish Government sends them with patient pertinacity about twice a week. They are not pleasant photographs to look upon. They are photographs of dead bodies for the most part. This morning's collection contains the photograph of what might be a man's body, or a woman's; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig. But those certainly are dead children, and that undoubtedly is the section of a house. A bomb has torn open the side; there is still a bird-cage hanging in what was presumably the sitting-room, but the rest of the house looks like nothing so much as a bunch of spilikins suspended in mid-air.

These photographs are not an argument; they are simply a crude statement of fact addressed to the eye. . . . When we look at these photographs some fusion takes place within us; however different the education, the traditions behind us, our sensations are the same; and they are violent. You, Sir, call them "horror and disgust." We also call them horror and disgust. And the same words rise to our lips. War, you say, is an abomination; a barbarity; war must be stopped at whatever cost. And we echo your words. War is an abomination; a barbarity; war must be stopped. For now at last we are looking at the same picture; we are seeing with you the same dead bodies, the same ruined houses. (10–11)

Woolf's assumptions in this passage are manifold: that photography provides unmediated access to truth and reality ("a crude statement of fact addressed to the eye"); that war is a special category of horror against which such technology might effectively be marshaled; that the effects generated by this kind of photograph in a viewer will always be consistent with those of Woolf herself (condemning war rather than, say, encouraging the thirst for revenge); that there are no interesting aesthetics

at issue in the photograph, in the viewing of it, or in its depiction in her prose. The passage, in other words, invokes the core contradictions that virtually define the medium of photography: its realism versus artifice, transparency versus manipulation, objectivity versus ideology. These challenges are only magnified when we consider that the most famous photograph from the Spanish Civil War, Robert Capa's stunning *Falling Soldier* (1936), was immediately attacked for its alleged staging. More recently, Susan Sontag led the field in evaluating photography's limitations as a direct or value-free conduit to truth and pointed to the problem that has dogged theorists of photography since the medium was first invented, of aesthetic objects' emerging from the photographing of war and other human tragedies (*On Photography* and *Regarding*).

But is there really an insuperable contradiction between beauty and the representation or viewing of other people's suffering? In the passage from *Three Guineas*, Woolf seems to be aware of an aesthetic sensibility even in these pictures. The parallels she suggests between human bodies and houses (both with sides ripped off) suggest as much, as does her focus on the birdcage and her use of simile; and if we move deeper into *Three Guineas*, whose first edition included a number of cheeky pictures of military and other public figures, we find quite a complex and knowing account of photography. What distinguishes the Spanish photographs is not that they are free of aesthetics but that their form of realist, shock-inducing representation elicits a distinct response: "our sensations are the same; and they are violent." Awful violence (war) creates desirable violence (outrage), and this sequence comes out of the process of "looking at the same picture"—or, we might add, "reading the same account." Disenchantment relies on an aesthetic that forces violence into a certain kind of view. Its claim on horror and also on form is neither contradictory nor expendable.

If Woolf articulates a mixed reaction to those representational forms that make the flesh viscerally present, others took a more severe stance, dismissive of the aesthetic altogether. Perhaps most radical in this regard was the French literary critic Jean Norton Cru, an interesting figure in the debates about how to remember and canonize the First World War. A combatant in the war, Cru spent the better part of the following decade reading every word that had been written about it and compiling a massive report on these works, which he titled *Témoins* (1929). "On its appearance, *Témoins* raised a storm of controversy and received more than two hundred reviews throughout Europe and the United States," write the editors of the English reprint (1931). In part, the controversy was caused by Cru's willingness to criticize high-profile literary works like Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Marchand and Pincetl). Cru seeks an absolute truth about war, which he insists can emerge only from the writings of the purest witnesses. Riddled with practical and theoretical shortcomings, Cru's attempt to replace fiction with testimony is nevertheless worth stressing:

Professional writers, gifted with the mob sense, and aware of the unhealthy attraction exerted by the gesture that kills, the bloody knife, and the mutilated corpse, they have played on these things unconscionably while reshaping them artistically, and have served the sheep-like crowd what it has been reading for centuries but colored now after the fashion of the hour. (49)

Ultimately, it is really artifice that is Cru's antagonist. That Remarque et alia are "professional writers," that they reshape their material "artistically," that they subscribe to aesthetic "fashion": this is what he wants to resist. The issue is not one's stance for or against war; any kind of aestheticizing is dangerous.

In considering the wholesale effort to disenchant violence in and after the war, we

might consider another pacifist figure, Ernst Friedrich. Born to a working-class German family, Friedrich became radicalized largely in response to the war, which sickened and horrified him and in which he refused to serve. His adamant opposition to war and militarism is displayed in his remarkable 1924 book *War against War!* The monograph, written in four languages and published at a time in Germany of remilitarization and a rising tide of nationalist revisionism about the war, makes its pacifist case through shocking documentary photographs. Juxtaposed against sketches of children's toys, propagandist slogans, and pictures of various public figures on holiday, and accompanied by ironic captions, come the startling photographs: horribly mutilated bodies on the battlefield, mass graves, ruined architecture, and the skeletons of starved Armenian children, all in grisly focus. But most distressing are the culminating photos, close-ups of the mutilated faces of former soldiers. These disfigurements seem as far as one can go from the aesthetic on the representational spectrum. Nearly unviewable, they insistently remind us not only of the ghastliness of extreme injury to the flesh, but also of the injured person's humanity.

Friedrich, like Woolf, believed in the power of such visual confrontations, and he felt that to strip away (the metaphor is his) all layers of false ideology from the truth of bodily violation and mutilation would effect real change. "The pictures in this book," he wrote in his manifesto-style introduction, "show records obtained by the inexorable, incorruptible, photographic lens. . . . And not one single man of any country whatsoever can arise and bear witness against these photographs, that they are untrue and that they do not correspond to realities" (22). Friedrich's pacifist agenda strongly marks how a viewer approaches his photographic archive: the strategies for staging and ironizing the photographs, as well as the choice of images (many of them obtained from medi-

cal facilities for maimed soldiers and hence offering a seemingly scientific objectivity) are effective, but they are not neutral.⁹

Friedrich positions his photographs of the dead and maimed as, in themselves, witnesses, and his emphasis on testimony as a counterforce to convention might remind us of others from the First World War generation who criticized militarist culture by exposing the crude realities of war.¹⁰ Most familiar for English readers are soldier-poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, whose lyrics force war's brutality into the spotlight. In the well-known story, Sassoon, Owen, and others attempted to rescript the narrative of the war from one of glorious and heroic self-sacrifice to one of useless and degrading slaughter. The soldier poem is, in other words, constituted by a driving desire to disenchant the war's violence.¹¹ A work like Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," to take perhaps the most canonical of the English war poems, exemplifies the pattern.¹² The poem generates its force from a division of war language into two opposing styles: the generative mode of the Horatian ode, in which war is glorified and made symbolic, and the ruthlessly disenchanted mode of the contemporary poet, in which war is figured through its pitiful soldier victims. When the poet turns angrily on the reader in the final stanza, he gives a name to the ideal of generative violence against which his poem stands: "the old Lie" (117). "Dulce et Decorum Est," along with many other poems in the same family, exposes the betrayal enacted in all such old lies, making the dichotomy between sacralized violence and the ugly reality of war its central object.

Owen mocks and condemns a classical tradition of glorifying and aestheticizing war, but his poem makes its own use of images that powerfully evoke such conventions. We might note several arresting phrases along these lines: "Drunk with fatigue," "An ecstasy of fumbling," "vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues," even the accusatory Latin line,

which includes the lovely word "dulce." At these moments—and throughout the poem—Owen absorbs and reconstitutes figures often associated with the old lie: states of exaltation engendered by war, traditional notions of innocence and purity, soothing rhythms concealing harsh realities. Indeed, the more searing the visual tableau, the more thickly his metaphors are pasted, as for instance when the choking man at the poem's center, the victim of a gas attack, is depicted as "flound'ring like a man in fire or lime." These images do not represent a direct or simple transcription of a body in agony; they require real imaginative reach. Perhaps most significant is Owen's repeated use of drowning imagery. Throughout the poem's *abab* rhyme scheme, there are no repeated words except for the final rhymed pair in the middle stanza:

Dim, through the misty panes and thick
green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
(117)

For all its terrors, the doubled "drowning" adds something muted and consoling. In comparison with "flound'ring," "guttering," or "choking," drowning suggests a kind of peace and is redolent of many literary conventions. Owen may not enchant violence, but his poem exults in its ability to make the language of enchantment do the seemingly contradictory work of exposing and rejecting violence.

One thing recurs repeatedly in poems with a disenchanting agenda: the deployment of carefully chosen images of bodily rupture and pain. From the "muscl'd bodies charred" in Owen's "Miners" (112) to Isaac Rosenberg's "We heard his weak scream / We heard his very last sound, / And our wheels grazed his dead face" in "Dead Man's Dump" (84), and on ad infinitum, the appearance of a body in a state of acute and terrible mutilation is a common feature of these lyrics. Clearly, images of

bodily injury and decomposition are meant to activate the reader, along the lines of Woolf's reaction to the photographs sent by the Spanish government. Just as clearly, they work symbolically—Owen's gas victim has a hanging face, "like a devil's sick of sin" (117), and Rosenberg begins "Dead Man's Dump" by invoking "many crowns of thorns" (81)—even as they are presented as an argument against symbol. Too, critics have voiced a wariness about the impulse to participate in such violent injurings.¹³ The point, then, is not that the famous antiwar poems transcribe violence with pure transparency (we know that is never possible) or that they fail to eschew figurative language (they are poems, after all) or even that the impulse to read them is unqualified by a certain voyeurism (how could one ever prove that?) but rather that they maintain committed to the idea that poetry must expose rather than elevate the violence of war. Violence is meant to linger in the imagination, and from there to compel change, but it is not the germ of culture, the force for national uplift, or the sign of sublimity. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, in many ways a German prose companion to the canonical English war lyrics, Remarque offers his version of this commitment. As the novel progresses in its steady course of death, loss, and imaginative diminishment, the earth—site of nurture and fertility early in the novel—comes to represent a scene of extinctive degeneration: "The rifles are caked, the uniforms caked, everything is fluid and dissolved, the earth one dripping, soaked, oily mass in which lie yellow pools with red spiral streams of blood into which the dead, wounded, and survivors slowly sink" (286–87). We might take that muddy, swallowing swamp as disenchantment's answer to the fecundity and growth associated with generative violence. Its signal mode is devolution, and blood, the mysterious ore, is now just one more garish bodily liquid.

Both the enchanted and disencharnted modes of imagining violence pivot on war, the

most extravagant and devastating expression of violence that most cultures undergo. In Homer's *Iliad*, we find an originary language of war as generator of aesthetic productivity:

He dropped then to the ground in the dust,
like some black poplar,
which in the land low-lying about a great
marsh grows
smooth trimmed yet with branches growing
at the uttermost tree-top:
one whom a man, a maker of chariots, fells
with the shining
iron, to bend it into a wheel for a fine-
wrought chariot,
and the tree lies hardening by the banks of a
river. (4.482–87)

So organic is the intertwining of war's violence with the germinating of culture here as to be almost invisible. The warrior's body is likened to the tree, which in turn becomes part of the chariot, a "fine-wrought" work of art and, in circular fashion, an important war tool. In the early twentieth century, as we have seen, a robust effort emerged to take apart what Homer so exquisitely aligns (war, bodies, art, productivity). Yet we have also seen how interconnected enchantment and disenchantment really are, aligned, especially, when they come close to the magic fluid of blood, or in notions like drowning, which touch both on unredeemable nastiness and on the urge toward creation. Eliot's *The Waste Land* exemplifies all these motifs. To enchant violence is both the product and the subject of the poem, yet, with its famously contradictory style, it cannot easily glory in the tradition of Western literary culture it elicits, for it also recoils from the brutality that sustains that edifice.¹⁴

The Waste Land disperses and disseminates a complex language of aestheticized violence, but the pattern is quietly condensed in one interlude, "Death by Water":

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell

And the profit and loss.

A current under sea

Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and
fell

He passed the stages of his age and youth
Entering the whirlpool.

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to
westward,

Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome
and tall as you. (lines 312–21)¹⁵

Despite its truncated status among the poem's five acts, "Death by Water" has unique features. The powerful, unbroken brevity of these lines (Eliot appended no notes to this section) creates a sense of completeness, which the image of the whirlpool also highlights, a drawing inward, as an antidote to the wild outward spiraling that characterizes so much in the poem's diffuse atmosphere.¹⁶ It is the most meditative section in the poem, a rumination on death, something like a reflective, later stage in the mourning process set in motion by the poem's opening, "The Burial of the Dead." Moreover, even if Phlebas enters a deep forgetfulness—metaphor for death, of course—the water and whirlpool have the effect of reconstituting and recalling, as many of the poem's motifs return here in a softened manner, their edges blunted. The whirlpool acts *in* the poem the way it acts *on* Phlebas, transforming and suggesting, in a calm and gestural way, a paradigm for poetic consolation. To enchant, in this sense, is to imagine the body not in its physical agonies or material decomposition—bones have replaced Phlebas's flesh—but as an agent of the creative faculty. The seas generate a self-perpetuating fantasy of immortality and imagination, a site for the churning of images into aesthetic wonders.¹⁷ That drowned bodies should present an especially grim spectacle, moreover, or that drowning might be seen as an especially horrific form of death, only increases the sense of the poem's flex and magic, its sealike ability to effect transformation.

The sea holds many associations in *The Waste Land*. Not only is it a site of death and longing, and a metaphor for purifying change, but it also represents a set of commercial routes and passages, as suggested by one of its representatives in the poem, the Smyrna merchant (see Peter; Miller; Froula). A place of trade, Smyrna was a great port city in the early twentieth century, as it had been for centuries. In the period when Eliot was composing *The Waste Land*, it also housed intense internal violence. As anyone reading the papers from 1919 until the time of the poem's publication would have known, the fierce fighting between Greeks and Turks, which enveloped the region, reached a peak in the city of Smyrna. Not only was there a Greek occupation and combat in the streets, but Smyrna also became a locus for the policy of forced migration of Greeks and Turks into separate nations. Eliot himself took a keen interest in these events, writing a letter to the *Daily Mail* in 1923 in which he praised the paper's coverage of the war in Turkey. Here, then, was a location that dramatized the chaos and spiraling violence still being unleashed by the First World War, as the old imperial order disintegrated.

And one more thing: Smyrna is the reputed birthplace of Homer, as Eliot certainly knew.¹⁸ For Homer, the presiding genius of Western literature in general and of the poetry of war and the sea in particular, to underpin the fraught city of Smyrna is to hint at what *The Waste Land* wants to promise, that aesthetic potency will develop directly out of real-world agony. In the years immediately following the war, Homer's connection to Smyrna and to Troy must have provided a powerful association, because the notion, widely held among classicists, that the real first world war was the Trojan War suggested an ongoing cycle of violence, in which war was increasingly intertwined with global commerce—but also, for Eliot, with artistic payoff. The Smyrna merchant, holding in his person the explosive and terrible history of

modern nations, simultaneously brings the complex legacy of modern war into view and obscures the picture, as the poem pursues its own goal of erecting new monuments on the site of still-smoldering ruins. Thus the merchant's mutation into Phlebas in the following section, himself soon to be metamorphosed by watery transformation into something rich and strange, seems a willful relief, an aesthetic forgetting of modern calamity. Or perhaps it is a signal that even such intransigent conflicts as those left in the wake of the Ottoman Empire can be amalgamated into the imaginative project of enchantment.

The whirlpool may create an inward spiral, a vast embrace and ingathering vortex, but *The Waste Land* opens with burial in the ground, and it is the problem of the corpse that requires Eliot to invoke the sea as a contrastive death fantasy.¹⁹ In the poem's celebrated opening, Eliot sets the stage for a rumination on the land and the dead. The lines, so different in spirit from the drunken brothel scene that inaugurated the draft version, convey multiple valences on the way death and land conjure each other, including the vegetative structure of resurrection and life worship referenced in Eliot's opening note, in which he invokes Frazer and Weston. Of course, it will not be long before the metaphor of death leading to new flowers takes comic shape:

There I saw one I knew, and stopped him,
crying, "Stetson!
"You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
"That corpse you planted last year in your
garden,
"Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this
year? . . ." (69–72)

Ever since Paul Fussell discussed the trope of the blooming corpse in 1975, it has seemed axiomatic that the red poppies of Flanders's bloody fields underlie Eliot's imagery, a mordant ironizing of the truism that the violence of war can be germinative.

In addition to drowning and burial, several other images in the poem reach out in the direction of enchantment. Most central is color, a riveting site of intensity. There are many colors in the poem—white, brown, ivory, gold, green, orange, black, and red (this last particularly pronounced)—and they are part of the dense sensory pattern that characterizes *The Waste Land* at every stage. But there is something special and unique about one color, and that is violet. The word *violet* is used four times in the poem, twice in quick succession, and each time it describes something ethereal or amorphous in the atmosphere:

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk, when the human
engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting, . . . (215–17)

At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from
the sea,
The typist home at teatime, . . . (220–22)

What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet
air . . . (370–71)

And bats with baby faces in the violet light
Whistled, and beat their wings . . . (379–80)

The hour, air, and light—each iteration attempts to capture something both precise and uncertain in the moment. In the first two examples, the violet hour is twilight, a time of transitions and transformations, literally as day turns to night, figuratively as a hovering between one mode of existence and the next, a thick and tense anticipatory pause, as indicated by the image of the human engine throbbing. Even in the context of the depleted and degraded sexual interaction between the typist and the "young man carbuncular" (231), the violet hour is a time of enchantment, the word "violet" adding luster and shine to the sordid occasion. Its use is partly

mock-heroic and ironic, but it is also real; its beauty and resonance transform the lines, enhancing the sense of anticipation and tragedy in the scene. When air and light and the hour are violet—the color of sorcery in *The Odyssey*, of Mary’s poignant humility in Christian iconography, and of both mourning and royalty in the modern world—they seem piercing, aesthetic, saturated, deepened.

Perhaps most importantly, the word *violet* is so close to *violent* as nearly to become it, and certainly suggests it. This metonymic affinity is further tightened when we consider that each time “violet” is used, it is at a place in the poem when violence impends. The violet air tolls with the apocalyptic sound of bells and the explosions of warfare; the violet light is the light of terror, after and before such reverberations, of burning cities, also of bats and hysterical strains; the violet hour is a time of compressed urban rage, the human energy beastlike in its containment, and of impending sexual assault. For *The Waste Land*, the nature of violet is to usher in violence, to herald or represent it; but it is also to soften and beautify it. Indeed, violetness is an emblem of enchantment at its most enriching. Its transforming energy is all in the direction of the aesthetic; it forges an exceptionally sensitive kind of perception.

Such transformation would seem especially welcome in the case of the swallow and Philomela, two interlocked figures that are deeply embedded in the poem’s language of violence. The Philomela narrative first arises in “A Game of Chess,” where it forms part of a painting to adorn the lady’s room:

Above the antique mantel was displayed
As though a window gave upon the sylvan
scene

The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
“Jug Jug” to dirty ears.
And other withered stumps of time

Were told upon the walls; staring forms
Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room
enclosed. (97–106)

Philomela’s is a terrible tale: lured to the woods by her sister Procne’s husband, King Tereus, she is isolated, raped, and then silenced by having her tongue cut out. That she is ultimately able to communicate her tale by a clever ruse, spinning her story into a loom, and that she and her sister, having taken grisly revenge on the king, are transformed, along with Tereus, into birds—such artistic outcomes seem only mildly reparative after the extremity of her violation and suffering. Indeed, in Ovid’s canonical telling of the myth in *Metamorphoses*, there is no sense of recompense (no “yet”) in the “inviolable voice” of the nightingale. It is Eliot’s proclivity to stress the compensatory nature of song, “the change of Philomel.” The poem emphasizes how art becomes a lingering record and a sensory trace for the violence that cannot be spoken directly—as Philomela cannot speak her own story and must create a form of pictorial art to convey the events.²⁰

Although Eliot shows how the rape and mutilation are, in effect, enchanted into art, the text is not exactly complacent about such an outcome. For one, the transliteration of “Jug Jug,” even before we get to “dirty ears,” is an ugly sound, far from the “ecstatic sound” (Hardy 188) or “full-throated ease” (Keats 279) of Keats’s or Hardy’s nightingale.²¹ And, too, “other withered stumps of time / Were told upon the walls”: these stumps suggest a later literary iteration, Shakespeare’s Lavinia from *Titus Andronicus*, who not only had her tongue chopped off but also her hands (to prevent her from taking Philomela’s route of writing her way to explication and revenge). More generally, the phrase suggests a weariness with the subject matter of art in its most time-weathered manifestations. Those staring forms seem less exalted than traumatized, a painted version of contemporary shell shock.

The stumps can also be read more literally: they evoke amputated arms, bringing the visual spectacle of war's injuries into view. If Eliot's contemporary culture often worked to avert its collective glance from the war's lasting attack on the flesh, here the disenchanting imperative to see those amputated limbs is enfolded into Eliot's larger plot line.²² The stumps have withered; they point to a long future, well beyond the immediate blast of injuring. Art, it seems, continually tells the longest stories of brutality. Its narratives cannot erase, perhaps cannot even fully beautify, the horrors that human beings inflict on one another. On one hand, then, the poem relies on the chain of powerful associations that the history of literature has bequeathed, including the history of ghastly violence; it makes its music from these. The poem is like Philomela herself, another creature of the violet hour, who wove her loom out of the color we might have intuited, purple. On the other hand, the poem hates these stumps, and their repeated appearances have the effect of a sputter or involuntary cough, irruptions that simply cannot be avoided.

The withered stumps of Philomela's rape return on several occasions, always in disruptive, broken phrases, suggesting the kind of abrasive and uncomfortable role in the poem that actual stumps played in postwar civilian culture. These passages (there are only a few in the poem) read like chunks of linguistic jetsam in the midst of the poem's larger sea:

Twit twit twit
Jug jug jug jug jug jug
So rudely forc'd
Tereu (202-06)

These strange sounds hold in their tight, nearly nonrepresentational packages a sense of what the world does not want to be its oldest stories. As such, they cannot be excluded from Eliot's larger poetic project. They are withered stumps of time, but these half-

erased traces of old stories are also resonant little bits of song in their own right, an interesting and important complement to such melodies as the nymphs' chorus ("Wialealaleia / Wallala leialala"), the Augustinian chant ("Burning burning burning burning") and the cry of the desert ("Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop"), which Eliot thought one of the most beautiful parts of *The Waste Land* (277-78, 309, 357).²³ There is power in those repetitions, as there is in the poem's final benediction, the thrice-repeated *shantih*. At the same time, these bursts of language can also be read in the opposite way, as broken echoes of disenchantment, as symptoms of an anti-aesthetic spirit that emerges, side by side with enchantment, from the violent events at the base of the poem. The narratives bound to those repeated words are dense, elaborate, and terrible; what they offer is, in their own way, thick with history and experience.

In *The Waste Land's* final burst of studded lines, Philomela's story reappears in the image of the swallow, solidifying its place at the endpoint of the poem's violent trajectory and returning us to the poem's other primary locus for the aestheticizing of violence, the whirlpool. The swallow represents the way art filters and keeps alive the most detestable crimes. Its language is that of tortured remembering, which forces a withered history into the present. Yet the swallow also represents that burst of song that rises even from the pits of human experience. The whirlpool, too, makes art out of destruction, with its transformative, magical properties. If the swallow combats silence, the whirlpool creates it, its whispering currents a kind of speaking silence. For both, in *The Waste Land*, the central idea is to utilize imagery of change, rebirth, resurrection, and metamorphosis as part of a reflection on the troubling relation between art, with its core commitment to beautiful forms, and the violence that has wrecked human life throughout history, most recently, for Eliot, in the First World War.

The Waste Land can come to no conclusion about this basic contradiction. To recognize that art neither flees violence, nor transcends it, nor merely represents it, but rather that it trades on its power, at times appropriating its force and creating something especially brilliant, at other times succumbing to the sheer waste that violence leaves in its wake: such an insight represents, in poetic form, one of the signal achievements of Eliot's poem. *The Waste Land* offers a way to understand literature as a self-conscious artifact produced out of and within a history of violence, recognizing its origins in a frightful set of half-forgotten tales.²⁴ It is precisely this willingness to offer a poetic of enchantment that at the same time ruthlessly disenchant its own origins, that sets Eliot's work off from many other engagements with violence in the period—especially those that grew out of the war, with its dichotomizing energy. It is one of the poem's accomplishments that it can see in violence the genesis of beauty and form—as Yeats wrote in relation to his own moment of enchanted violence, “A terrible beauty is born”—and can also vivify the human tragedies that are swept into that old, innocuous phrase, “the waste of war” (393).

NOTES

1. See especially “Science as a Vocation” and “The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism” in Weber's *From Max Weber*.

2. For discussion of enchantment and modernism, see Graf; Materer; A. Owen; Surette, *Birth and Literary Modernism*. For a summary of Weber and his influence on contemporary theory, see Gane; Michel. For enchantment as magic in modern culture, see During.

3. My usage is unique, yet I maintain the base term *enchantment* for two reasons. First, there is no real substitute, given its combined aesthetic, magical, and supernatural connotations. Second, in the early twentieth century, the term began to be used in some of the ways I am suggesting. Yet unlike myth, the idea of enchantment in this period was still uncertain and its usage sporadic, hence inviting more critical distance.

4. In the current war in Iraq, the Bush administration decree forbidding journalists at military funerals was an example of the denial strategy.

5. For discussion of competing forms of anthropology in the early twentieth century, see Manganaro.

6. For discussion of ancient Greece in the Victorian cultural imagination, see Jenkyns, *Victorians and Dignity*; Turner, *Greek Heritage and Contesting*.

7. For discussion of Jane Harrison's importance for literary modernism, see Carpentier.

8. Sorel's influence on modernism has been ably demonstrated by Tratner (see esp. 33–43, 135–65).

9. For discussion of Friedrich's text in the context of the competing uses of photography in postwar Germany, see Apel. See also Huppauf.

10. For an argument that witnessing is a product of the First World War as much as of the Holocaust, see Winter.

11. We might note the title *Disenchantment* for a signal memoir of the period, by C. E. Montague.

12. For a dazzling discussion of the poem, see Martin.

13. For discussion of the voyeuristic side of war criticism, see Caesar; Castle.

14. The poem's presiding mode is one of self-contradiction, and much of the most compelling Eliot criticism works to explicate and develop this spirit. Excellent examples of criticism that takes its cues from the poem's self-divisions include Davidson; Froula; Lamos; and Levenson.

15. For a helpful discussion of “Death by Water,” see Brooker and Bentley, ch. 6.

16. These lines were written, in only slightly different form, in the 1918 poem “Dans le Restaurant” (in French). It was “Death by Water” that Pound most ruthlessly sheared, its nine lines a mere snippet of Eliot's original ninety.

17. Eliot refers extensively to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as well as to Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. Both works highlight ache and loss with respect to the sea, but also trickery and magic spells—other forms of enchantment.

18. For centuries there has been debate about Homer's birthplace: Smyrna versus the island of Chios. When *The Waste Land* was written, the dominant theory was that Homer most likely came from Smyrna or composed *The Iliad* there. See Snider.

19. I use the word *vortex* advisedly. If Pound and vorticism belong to the glorifiers and enchanters of violence, the whirlpool in *The Waste Land* suggests a more complex view of these convergences.

20. For discussion of rape in the poem, see Joplin.

21. “Jug jug” is a standard Elizabethan rendering of the nightingale's song.

22. For discussion of this phenomenon of looking and not looking at the injuries of returned soldiers after the war, see Bourke; Cole.

23. For reference to Eliot's praise of the water-dripping lines (in a letter to Ford Madox Ford), see Southam 187.

24. Impacted in the poem's last eight lines are not only the swallow but also the London Bridge rhyme (of which one verse is "Take the key and lock her up"), Hieronymo's murder spree in *The Spanish Tragedy* (a tale of wild, theatrical violence), and the kind of ruined architecture often associated with war ("these fragments," "la tour abolie"). To reach the Eastern peace encoded in the three *shantihs*, we must pass through a corridor of Western violence.

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