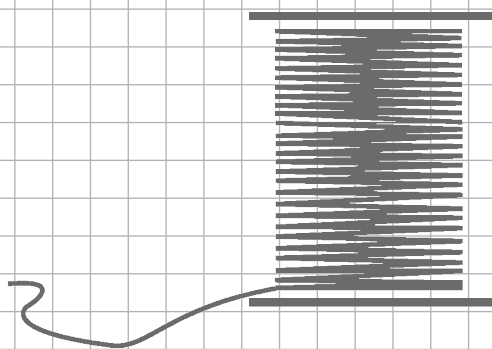


Wounded Unwound

25 Expandable Points Towards a Literature of Violence

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Wounded Unwound is 25 expandable points towards a literature of violence.

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I. Violence is an essential texture in the fabric of human existence. After Vollmann: “If violence is a kind of dust that lies inside the house of the soul, there does not seem to be any way to sweep it out the door. We can only sweep it into one corner or another” (23).

II. The violence that is so preponderant in the contemporary world must be documented, in being documented must be worked up and worked on so as to make amends with an aesthetic, and must be aestheticized in ways that neither promote nor idealize, neither disguise nor diffuse, neither destroy nor ameliorate, and neither imitate nor allegorize violence. Whatever expression it takes, the literature of violence for which this collection of 25 statements calls will demarcate not only what is acceptable but, ultimately, what is possible regarding the presence of violence in linguistic media.

III. For the purposes of the following program, “violence” is to be understood chiefly in material terms. Relatively simple exertions of force (e.g. a punch, a kick, a bite) performed by one individual upon another; systematic aggressions—such as war or torture—that themselves consist of an overarching violence as well as multiple occasions of individuals and groups imposing physical suffering on some other (whether that other is an individual or a group); and many acts that may be measured against and therefore fall in between these two poles qualify as “violent.”

IV. The literature of violence will not confuse violence with pain. This is not simply a matter of privileging effect over cause. Rather, pain and the experience of the same, being largely private and / or “inner” —even when originating in some bodily distress—should not be allowed to overwhelm the larger incident(s) in which it is embedded. We are here interested in the transactional character of violence. Similarly, then, for our purposes, mental / emotional / spiritual anguish are viewed as byproducts of or as secondary conditions following from physical trauma.

V. That having been said, the reality of the power dynamic—“from” and “to” linking what, under better circumstances, would be something other than stereotypical roles—being so exercised in this definition tempts us to refer to violence in largely, perhaps even purely institutional terms (i.e. the conscious and corporeal independence of soldiers is subsumed in a psycho-social and socio-historical matrix that would, through a sort of synecdoche, offer a more true explanation of what transpires in what we term the brutal). But it must be remembered that violence always requires one or more discrete human beings interacting—one dares to say “interfacing”—with one or more other distinct human beings at an interpersonal level, however perverted that intimacy appears to be. Cf. Guyotat’s *Eden Eden Eden*, in which the quantities of blood spilled are equaled only by the numberless spurts of semen that, over the course of that text, never amount to anything like a culmination.

VI. With respect to the violent, then, intentions matter (we are much more concerned here with the deliberate), the moment-to-moment matters (and, leaving the identity and status of the self aside, not just in the matter of individual decisions, but also in terms of the subject’s awareness of violence’s persisting), and, above all, bodies—occupying and displacing spatial as well as temporal coordinates—matter.

VII. We may pause here and ask whether or not self-inflicted violence has been adequately accounted for in this definition. We would answer in the affirmative—and further—argue that, in as much as violence is always marked by the production of an effect, that such violence is misunderstood as self-inflicted. Objections to the contrary may perhaps be best responded to by making reference to the Classical tragic mode. When Oedipus blinds himself, he does indeed injure himself; he plunges Jocasta's brooches into his eyes. While the act occurs off-stage, Oedipus re-enters the action covered in (representations of) gore. But we cannot understand Oedipus' act purely in terms of self-loathing, a desire for self-extermination, or the punitive. We know from earlier in the drama that Jocasta has given up any faith in a natural order or will on the part of the universe itself. Her suicide is consistent with this outlook, for it is an outlook that cannot assign any meaning to suffering. In essence, Oedipus' violent act is meant to be simultaneously salvific and a re-inscribing of boundaries violated by his parents, or more to the point, salvific precisely through this same re-inscribing. Here, in the figure of a bloody, unseeing face—recognizably human in its deformity—is an image of where the pursuit of self-knowledge can end: in a re-assertion of a power beyond the human self. Oedipus cannot die if he is to remain an instrument of the gods' revenge on the House of Laius. As such, his violent act is both free and utterly compelled, and his liberation lies primarily in his silencing, his interrogative self, and in making himself compliant to the moral beings that preside over his cosmology. Oedipus' act is really the act of an interpreting agent, temporarily embodied in the person of a king disgraced by irony. This is a form of authorship which we find reprehensible (see 18 below).

VIII. Tragedy and its introduction of a code by which violence may be justified introduces another problem. Certain revolutionary ideologies would have us make of violence a necessary transformation, or, qua Romanticism (if not all *avant-gardes*), take violence to be the spirit of transformation itself. Notions of historical progress that are the product of Enlightenment teleology, as post-modern thought has long been at pains to demonstrate, are most notoriously egregious in this regard. But they have no monopoly here. In the presence of such philosophy, the violent act is that which makes plain / manifest an inherent—i.e. hidden—broken-ness or lapse, the extent of which requires commensurate repair. Violence as necessary and inevitable shock, as eruption (e.g. Shelley's great phantom), as a rebellion of the real against our perceptions of the same, which, for any number of reasons have themselves grown thick, dull and increasingly insensate. This recognition then reverses the terms: the universe itself (other human beings being both agents and products of that universe) will die out unless violent measures are taken to reform, refashion, and restore it.

IX. Contemporary understandings of violence so informed reveal the degree to which we have taken to framing all human relations in terms of politics (e.g. Canetti's *Crowds And Power* and the observation that "[t]he lowest form of survival is killing" [227]). Whether or not we are mistaken and / or (worse?) misled, and with what consequences, in supposing the primacy of the political is one of the most urgent subjects to be addressed by any future literature of violence.

X. Moreover, under the influence of those early modern thinkers who have donated to us a battery of reactions to sudden and convulsive change, we tend to comprehend violence in terms of human

beings' increasing (inexorable?) instrumentalizing of their world, and in so doing are tripped up by the same notions of "nature" and "material" in which that instrumentalization traffics. What is needed, commensurate to an enriched understanding of how human beings choose to connect with one another, is a better understanding of the reality of the Material.

XI. *An illustration.* To argue in favor of the recognition of his soul—in order to appeal to his estranged daughter as "merely" a man, a father who failed her but is trying hard to own up to those failures, to tell her that he now knows what a life of carefully controlled beating / being beaten, of addiction to a certain triumphal narrative, replayed over and over and over again in acts otherwise physically unendurable—Randy "The Ram" Robinson in Aronofsky's *The Wrestler* speaks into the camera through a face immobilized ("unnerved") by years of abuse. "I'm just a broken-down piece of meat." After violence, this is the shape of eloquence: the sentimental. Re-read: "I separated or split myself, I thought these organs and muscles, bones and veins, this mass barely given integrity by this overly tanned and scarred skin could be the vehicle for the true 'me,' and I didn't realize until you did not swerve in your hatred of me that I subjugated myself to a glory I alone am responsible for confusing with my imagination." He offers her all he has, which is his body. And yet the real recognition in the scene is not Randy's. The real recognition is one that never arrives, for Stephanie, Randy's daughter, has so successfully internalized Randy's neglect that she cannot respond to him as anything but a phantom, impossible either to embrace or hit. Stephanie still sees a hero in photo-negative, the tonalities reversed. She does not see the helplessly composed and recomposing man present (his winter coat is ripped and held together at one seam with staples; earlier in the film, in a almost comically sadistic wrestling match, Randy undergoes trial by staple-gun) in the presence of her pain. Still, we cannot be sure if organicism and a resistance to those spectacles the hedonistic masters of 1980's America served up to the population (and here, like Welles' *Citizen Kane*, Randy is as much a passively receiving audience member as he is the performer set loose) will make Randy whole. More to the point, are we interested only in positing healing and curing vis-à-vis violence? Is ours an argument in favor of a pacified Stoicism? We trust not.

XII. The "literature of violence" we envision will not be a form of coping. Or, a literature of violence will not conflate "language" and "after the fact." Perhaps this is true, if all literature does is represent.

XIII. Contrary to this position, we maintain that literature is experiential. And a literature of violence will acknowledge that violence impacts, that violence both atomizes and fuses (much as a meteorite does as it smashes into the earth), that violence intensifies, that violence creates new "sites," and that violence at least temporarily reorders the human nervous system. Accepting this, we accept that language—a neurological ability and function—is necessarily implicated in and affected by violence. Violence—much like pleasure (again, from *The Wrestler*, Cassidy, Randy's erstwhile love interest: "Like there's something wrong with just wanting to have a good time?")—is felt, but violence is also intelligible.

XIV. The scientific inclination nevertheless remains to cordon off violence as a state characterized by an immediacy of sensation so radical that it does not require representation. Violence is thus consistently

submitted as an experience “outside” of language.

XV. We oppose the above conventional wisdom. We believe that language can do more than stand in for that which is some aspect absent. Language is more than a map. Language is a topology. We believe in the instantiating abilities of articulation—especially an articulation that defies its own norms.

XVI. We hereby take up the challenge of making language and specifically literary applications of language adequate to violence as a human experience that is actual, exists in the present moment, engages the senses, and is capable of being grasped by the faculties.

XVII. “To write violence” and “to reproduce violence” are not synonymous propositions.

XVIII. Specifically, we reject a literature of violence that purports to access the sublime¹ qualities of the violent through some singular structural trope: stylized fragmentation; prolixity, histrionic, diarrhetic, apathetic / numb / numbing or otherwise; mere transgression of social or discursive mores; conjurations of arousal and / or debauchery; the (seemingly) infinite postponement of event, etc. Such textual recreations of violence in fact only reconstitute violence through its already-established grammar (i.e. such textual recreations, because they are so purposeful, fail to activate in a generative sense insofar as they do not summon up any resistance to violence-as-effect). Instead, such texts propose an author (now, the subject) “doing something” to the reader (diminished to the status of a direct object). Therefore, even the most self-bruited of amoral *littérateurs* is, in fact, a prude, a demiurge bent on the possession of a faithful (the reader is here referred back to point 7 of this document).

XIX. With respect to the literature of violence, then, utilitarianism—no matter how complex the motives that animate it—is inherently pornographic.

XX. The literature of violence, if it is to attain the value of truth²—however construed, however

¹ Here, we are relying heavily on Burke’s interpretation of the sublime:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied that the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. Without all doubt, the torments which we may be made to suffer, are much greater in their effect on body and mind, than any pleasures which the most learned voluptuary could suggest, or than the liveliest imagination, and the most sound and exquisitely sensitive body, could enjoy ... When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible, but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience (80).

It should further be noted that, in the work of those who followed Burke, the sublime is often a symptom of their own scopophilia. In such instances, the sublime does not derange the senses so much as subordinate all the other senses to vision / “looking.” It gags certain orifices as it radically widens the one: a preview of the obliteration to come, which has to enter “somewhere,” and like a deluge pouring through a crack in the sky, drowns. A literature of violence does not create a hierarchy of the sensational, in effect molding the head which, once cut off, will spell the death of the larger entity.

² We hold that true practices of inscribed violence exist, but that, because they pose such a threat to the dominant discourse, they are exiled from the cultural spaces. Such language is prohibited in broadcast media, is relegated in cyberspace to a precinct of web sites deemed both suspect (“not authoritative”) and pernicious (“hateful”), is stereotyped for cheap comic or sentimental effect in popular cinema, and is frowned upon in publishing as being “non-literary.” A literature of violence aims to correct or at least complicate this status quo.

apprehended—must instead carefully and conscientiously admit all input, be vulnerable to a multiplicity of points-of-view, and yield to a diversity of self-consciously literary (language-centric) techniques, those both previously enumerated and yet-to-be discussed or devised. Additionally, this literature must be characterized by certain common, if not generic features—even while it maintains a profound sensitivity to the situational.

XXI. *Illustration A*. In John Hawkes' "Western" *The Beetle Leg*, any number of outrages are perpetuated—sexual, racial, familial, environmental (with the land, barren but sly, giving as well as it gets)—in oblique prose that elevates the partial to the poetic.

It moved. The needles, cylinder and ink lines blurring on the heat smeared graph in the slight shade of evening, tended by the old watchman in the power house, detected a creeping, downstream motion in the dam. Leaned against by the weight of water, it was pushing southward on a calendar of branding, brushfires and centuries to come, toward the gulf. Visitors hung their mouths and would not believe, and yet the hill eased down the rotting shale a beetle's leg each several anniversaries, the pride of the men of Gov City who would have to move fast to keep up with it. But if this same machine, teletyping the journey into town, was turned upon the fields, the dry range, the badlands themselves, the same trembling and worry would be seen in the point of the hapless needle, the same discouraging pulse encountered, the flux, the same activity. It might measure the extinction of the snake or a dry finger widening in erosion (67–68).

Hawkes does not simply erect this mode and then ask it to tower over the blasted (lunar) landscape like a smooth, unscalable monolith (after all, the desert is reclaiming the dam and all that is interred within it). In fact, the vertical has little meaning in the universe of *The Beetle Leg*, and the characters that traverse this space stroll past the climactic so briskly it takes the reader a few moments to realize how untenanted those dwellings are.

She was alone. She listened, pulled the sheet across the boy, went immediately to the window and raised the shade. And, breasts half thrust, half fallen against the screen, she found herself unable to move as she stared into a watchful, silent figure pressed close to the other side.

The creature continued to watch. It was made of leather. Straps, black buckles and breathing hose filled out a face as small as hers, stripped on hair and bound tightly in alligator skin. It was constructed as a baseball, bound about a small core of rubber. The driving goggles poked up from the shiny cork top and a pair of smoked glasses fastened in the leather gave it malevolent and overflowing eyes. There was a snapped flap on one side that hid an orifice drilled for earphones. Its snout was pressed against the screen, pushing a small bulge into the room.

The snout began to move. It poked without sight toward the flattened slippery flesh of Camper's wife. And with that first sound of scraping she turned her back, swayed, stepped quickly from the room (53).

These open, empty spaces engineer important collisions. The anonymous, even android-like Red Devils are a motorcycle gang, but it is not entirely clear whether they are true marauders, parodies of cowboys, or figments of a collective imagination. Whatever their motives may be, they do roam, and in doing so, drag a subtly different kind of language—one familiar to readers of old "men's" and "adventure" pulp magazines (*True*, *Argosy*, etc.)—like a fetish through the text.

By a terrible application of brakes and a violent twisting of accelerators, the heavy engined motorcycles ground into a tight, whirling, dust-churning circle in the center of the street as the drivers threw down one heel and lay the machines of their sides, jerked Indians. They made three revolutions, knocking stones against the gymnasium walls. The Red Devils worked and struggled in their glistening saddles to brake and then explode the engines as the silver ornaments, the enormous tail lamps, the sleek black gas tanks ending in their crotches blazed in the light from the doorway. Their gauntlets grasped and pilled on the widespread steel horns.

Several of the light cycles were doubly ridden but in the speed, the smoke, the clamor, it was impossible to tell which were men and which women. At the end of the last circle the lead machine and its small tightly belted driver cut off in a straight line toward the south and in a thin, flashing column the Red Devils disappeared into the black country and the exhaust flares clipped out one by one (62–63).

The paradox, of course, is that the violence the enemy Red Devils ultimately perform is one against “plot, character, setting and theme,” those elements of fiction which Hawkes himself is bent on discarding. But their roots penetrate deep and tenaciously into the scarce, which may here be a metaphor for the affectlessness of the protagonists and their “friends.”

XXII. *Illustration B.* Anna Deveare Smith in her *Twilight: Los Angeles*. Here, in the wake of the riots that followed from the Rodney King verdict in 1992 is an embodying that goes far beyond imitation. For to speak someone else’s words in one’s own voice is not to have understood, much less encompassed, that person. By inserting herself between the audience and her interviewees—the witnesses to specific instances of violence—Smith actually creates a seam that both amplifies and shortens important distances. Everyone who lived through this turmoil feels wronged in some form or another. And everyone is a doppelganger, everyone is capable in certain urgent or extreme circumstances of creating and inhabiting a double of oneself, identifiable if not always recognizable (perhaps there is something essentially Baroque about Smith’s method, in that she is performing social performances). Yet *Twilight: Los Angeles* does not traffic in mere dialogism. Yes, there are constituencies that are given equal time at Smith’s podium, but never does Smith seem to be treating the individuals unified by unburdening here as representative. Nor does Smith’s animated text feed us with one subjectivity replacing another after another after another (as in Hawkes, sequence here is a matter of continuity-in-discontinuity). What Smith displays through her own “assumption” of personal systems of signing (vocal inflection, diction, kinemes) is the coexistence of subjectivities, with all the uneasiness that obtains with that proximity³. Hybridity and violence are intimately if not necessarily related. Because make-up and costuming are kept to a minimum throughout the production, Smith consistently appears as who she is, she highlights the fact that she cannot simply un-skin herself—or anyone else—and put them on (both meanings of that phrase are operable here) as a way of forgetting her own role in spreading the contagion of violence. That is, she continues to talk about it. Smith understands that certain false inviolables regarding the silence and respect appropriate to any stance towards violence, pieties upheld by the guardians of violence as we have defined it, must themselves be ignored or, better yet, driven out of from that position from which they dominate any perspective by being driven through. Only such an approach will make possible the necessary magnification of those linguistic relationships that link those caught up in matrices of violence. For example, sometimes certain words or idiomatic expressions, especially those with racial connotations, are used synchronously and not as a matter of deliberate appropriation (often motivated by a sick conscience hoping empathy is the cure) or

³ In an age where seemingly all information and the agents responsible for generating it seem to be available to us from any point on the network, it might seem quaint to us that we would need, much less benefit from, the kind of mediation Smith provides. With a little forethought given to the construction of our search and a few keystrokes, we are furnished apparent confirmation of

our belief that, yes, we now have direct access to eyewitnesses and those who are enduring / have endured violence. If the Internet is the ultimate reification of the dialogic, then the Internet must accommodate all potential cases of speaking for and “as” oneself. Internet diversity has its limits, of course. Not everyone is online and especially absent are those most helpless in the face of violence: the refugee, the murder victim, the impoverished and oppressed. Beyond demographic considerations, however, we would argue Smith’s method still holds by virtue of the fact that it is opposed to gentrification and market-inspired ideas of how rights of imminent domain should be exercised. There is no pretense in *Twilight: Los Angeles* towards showing off a whole and biased yet somehow impartial perspective: a minimalist spectacle of what is said into the webcam, what can be recorded through a window or from a rooftop, what can be published with the click of a button ... but a spectacle all the same. “Linking” becomes not collaborative, not about the creation of an otherwise impossible and self-sufficient tissue. “Linking” becomes rebuttal, refutation, ridicule. Shouting, not listening of the sort Smith performs and of a kind the literature of violence will practice, rules the day. And listening should never be conflated with retreat.

“culture jamming.” A literature of violence acknowledges such important, binding differences and works to preserve those distinctions.

XXIII. We are therefore committed in our literature of violence to an investigation of the diachronic: vernaculars, idiomatic expressions and slang—the great moving target of lexicographers—as all these bear the marks of and themselves become instruments of violence⁴.

XXIV. *An illustration.* David Jones' *In Parenthesis*. In the author's own modest words, which cannot prepare us for the richly adorned text they introduce: “This writing has to do with some things I saw, felt, & was part of. The period covered begins early in December 1915 and ends early in July 1916. The first date corresponds to my going to France. The latter roughly marks a change in the character of our lives in the Infantry on the Western Front.” Encrusted with allusions to everything from Welsh mythology to popular song, *In Parenthesis* is loyal throughout to a documentary aesthetic—but one that does not pretend that the real is stable, a crystallization, always integral, and to be liberated from the tyranny of telling by a heroic “realism.”

Peg sprawled tentacles, with drunken stakes thrust up rigid from the pocked earth. And to his immediate front, below the shelving ramp, a circular calm water graced the deep of a Johnson hole; corkscrew-picket-iron half submerged as dark excalibur, by perverse incantation twisted. And then, where the wire was thinnest: bleached, swaying, the dyed garment—like flotsam shift tossed up, from somebody other's dereliction (50).

Give the poor little sod some char—that's what the corporal had said (75).

After that there is only the Big Ship (93).

And the first beginnings of light cold on them by the time they were back in yesterday's billets; and men so tried chatter overwroughtly, & blame the management, till sleep holds them, freed from their care, or the cares of Corporal Quartermaster-Sergeant Higgins, who has no sleep at all, considerate of these new-fangled states, what make a man spit blood; bolt upright in his straw, as fated Brunswick in the niche, with ears wide for the distant drum-fire: Worst 'un first Wipers—be a long chalk (124).

XXV. The literature of violence is not the literature of confusion or chaos. The literature of violence, as it is exemplified, becomes its own glossary, its own etymology, its own syntax, and, consequently, its own traumatic synaesthesia as it propagates through personae⁵, encountering both assistance and resistance. A literature of violence is the wound itself—not the wounding.

⁴ We acknowledge that, in this venture, euphemism is always hovering on the horizon. Euphemism here not construed as attempts to disguise violence or normalize it, per se, but euphemism as a strategy elected to render violence more seductive by deceiving us, leading us to accept that violence's consequences are mitigated by violence's prevalence. “It happens anyway.” A catholic violence, and Euphemism as its propaganda arm.

⁵ In Jones, the soldier and officer and poet and King and ...

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