

AN ESSAY ON VIOLENCE

"But words of reason drop into the void . . ."
Simone Weil, "The *Iliad*; or, the Poem of Force"

Who would have thought that what the sages taught
With such devotion would have gone for naught,
Forgotten in the coils of violence?

Who would have thought that it was all in vain,
That what was wrought would be torn down again,
That nothing would remain but violence?

Who in those distant ages would have thought
That repetition would be still our lot
And echoing laments of violence?

But words of reason drop into the void
And perish there, by violence destroyed,
In ever-widening pools of violence.

We are the playthings of that history,
The instruments of its dominion, we,
And gross materials of violence.

Subjects, we are subjected to the powers
Which have their being in not being ours,
And which we summon up in violence.

System gives way to system, class to class;
Mere transient forms, to nothingness they pass,
Suborning and suborned by violence.

Marx thought that with the bourgeoisie destroyed
True harmony at last would be enjoyed:
The consequence was merely violence.

Christ's admonition, "Turn the other cheek,"
Wrote Nietzsche, is the counsel of the weak:
Must we be martyrs, then, to violence?

And yet we know that to respond in kind
Is to succumb to forces that are blind
And cut both ways – the powers of violence.

Suffering, wrote Sophocles, can drive us mad;

Madness deprives us of what sight we had,
Conferring blessings upon violence.

Jihads, crusades . . . with labels such as these
We demonize our foes and thus appease
With sacrifice the gods of violence.

Whoever acts in concert with God's will
Can abrogate His stricture not to kill:
It is not killing then or violence.

Whoever is the messenger of God
Need not forbear to shed a little blood:
The greater good requires violence.

"The highest wisdom and the primal love,"
Wrote Dante, are the attributes that drove
Our Maker to make Hell's eternal violence.

I beg to differ with the Florentine:
Your violence is yours and mine is mine.
It was not God conceived of violence.

God, if He but existed, would be good!
Would rid the world of evil, if He could,
The imagination of its violence.

He and His utmost seraphim on high
Are utterly unable, though they try,
To solve the antinomies of violence.

We are the ones from whom that seed is sown
And have to bear its burden on our own
And all alone face up to violence.

Read in these repetitions the lament
Reverberating through past ages spent
That we should do or suffer violence.

from: *Without Mythologies: New and Selected Poems and Translations* (Dos Madres, 2008)

DAYS OF 2008

That ancient history, those old and stale
Dead metaphors that tell the same dull tale,
Was once again about to envelop us.

It was a chronicle of greed and war –
We'd read the same thing many times before,
And now we too would be inscribed in it.

We thought somehow, in our fatuity,
That we alone were spared – we, only we,
Among the generations of mankind;

And, in our arrogance, that we could spend
Beyond our means, that it would never end:
We had no limits or impediments.

Our dreams were sordid, and these sordid dreams
Were built on monumental Ponzi schemes
That circulated through the ravaged earth.

We all colluded – none of us was pure:
The rich imposed their image on the poor;
The poor had nothing and were envious.

The artists had been neutralized long since:
They were reduced to insignificance,
And had no genuine authority;

Nor were there poets to apportion rhymes,
Give weight to words and meaning to the times:
They had no weights or measures, ways or means.

Although we craved only reality,
We had no access other than tv,
The Internet, distractions of that kind –

Gadgets by which to allay our boredom; they
Increased it, didn't make it go away,
And so we looked for new expedients.

Meanwhile the monster Caliban, our crude
Caricature, escaped his chains and spewed
Vituperations on the radio.

Increasingly, we fell beneath the sway

Of repetition, platitude, cliché –
And then our enemies enveloped us.

(unpublished)

MY FATHER WAS A WANDERING ARAMAEAN

" . . . you shall make this response before the Lord your God: 'A wandering Aramaean was my father; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.'" (Deuteronomy 26: 5)

My father was a wandering Aramaean,
Bordering upon the Gentile and the Jew.
The promised land was never his to stay in,
He had no church or synagogue to pray in –
Music was the religion that he knew.

My father was a wandering Aramaean,
Enlightened by the darkness that he found.
He never lifted a triumphal paean:
No one is chosen – Hebrew, Greek, or pagan –
The self-same cloud encompasses us round.

My father was a wandering Aramaean,
Not reconciled or reconcilable.
Whether in Egypt or the deep Judaeen
Plain, or Sheol where the shades complain,
The rigor of his refusals rings out still.

from: *Without Mythologies: New and Selected Poems and Translations* (Dos Madres, 2008); originally from a sequence entitled "Hebrew Melodies"

The early Christians were so confident
That they could reconcile opposing views,
They turned the lamp that lit the Occident
Upon the darker wisdom of the Jews.
Their concept was that God could interfuse
The entire universe with His sole plan;
Omniscient and omnipotent, could choose
Miraculously to become a man.
But men are murderers, and all their art
The skin-stretched lampshade of idolatry.
– This bitter knowledge set the Jews apart
Through all their wanderings through history:
Their God was imageless; He had no name;
And though they prayed to Him, He never came.

An Irish boy was piping to a crowd,
As we were passing through a park arcade:
His face was so impervious and so proud,
As if he were the music that he played.
We had been talking of the Jews. You said
That those who were delivered to their doom
Restored the land for which their prophets prayed,
Where they were promised they would find a home.
I said that home is just a metaphor
For everything that we must leave behind;
There aren't any nations anymore
By which futurity can be defined.
Home is the hymn the Angels play on high
Upon the bagpipes of the Irish boy.

from: *Without Mythologies: New and Selected Poems and Translations* (Dos Madres, 2008; originally from a sequence entitled "Sonnets Elegiac and Satirical")

PRAISE AND LAMENTATION

I praise an Israeli soldier named Nisan:
“They think that I’m a monster with a gun,
Who prays each day, eats kosher, yes, and kills
Arabs,” he says. Sardonicly, he smiles:
“I never pray; I don’t believe in it”
(There’s something oddly comforting in that);
“I drink milk and eat cheese even with meat.”
He lives in a village bordering Lebanon,
Which *Hezbollah* is always firing on;
He’s nineteen and he hasn’t slept for days.
Another reason to accord him praise
Is that he hasn’t any politics
To speak of: all he wants is to go home!
His people really are in quite a fix,
So he’s stuck standing guard in Bethlehem!
These are my people, and I’m proud of them.

These are my people and I’m proud of them,
But now we too must learn to bear the shame
That other peoples, nations (*goyim*) do,
For we are now among the nations too,
And have ourselves begun to victimize
Others (it’s one of history’s sadder ironies).
Oh, it was easier in our own eyes,
When violence was visited on us,
To be a victim and be virtuous,
But now it seems to end in violence;
And though we say that it’s in self-defense
We know that it’s a half-truth – hence a lie.
We, who once preached against idolatry
And put an end to human sacrifice,
We, through whose books the world learned to be wise,
We too have now resorted to the slick
Impostures of religious rhetoric.
Religion in its Latin derivation
Refers to that which binds us to a nation,
And in the end, when all is said and done,
It binds us to the past – to what is gone,
And binding us together, binds us down,
Making us monads of the nation-state,
Anachronism’s slaves – such is our fate.

We who wrote Jonah and the Book of Ruth
Had pity once on strangers, for in truth
We had been strangers in an alien land.
We who wrote Job, Ecclesiastes, and

The Book of Samuel once understood
That since we're really only flesh and blood,
Apotheosis isn't in our line:
We're human, all too human, not divine.
Ruth was from Moab, southern Palestine,
And Job was probably an Edomite;
Yet evidently they both got it right,
While Jonah had to be rebuked for pride
(He wanted God to practice genocide!)
And even David, the anointed one,
Was made to grieve through Absalom, his son,
Because he took a lamb that wasn't his.
If one is chosen, this is what it is
To choose to be among the chosen ones –
Knowing that nothing that one has or owns
Or is a part of has priority.
This is a great responsibility
And most of us find it far too arduous:
It seems to be much easier for us
To think we have a special destiny
And have been chosen by the fates on high.
The Chosen People are the ones who knew
That no one's ever chosen; this being so,
They learned to live within a paradox
Inscribed in secret in their sacred books,
Books that the centuries bequeathed to us.
That's why their writings are anonymous,
And why as wanderers without a home
They learned to wait for what would never come.

Easy to valorize, from where I stand,
The People of the Book and not the Land,
Here in the comfort of America,
Not the worst corner of Diaspora,
A promised land flowing with milk and honey –
At least for those who have been blessed with money.
Easy to fail to recognize that these
Fanatic settlers are refugees
From Yemen, Egypt, Turkey, and the dark
Precincts of Williamsburg or Borough Park
(At any rate, from somewhere in New York),
Shaped, like the rest of us, by circumstance,
Contingency, exigency, or chance,
And, like the rest of us, committed to
A way of life, things that they think are so.
Their history is not your history;
And why should you imagine you are free
Of prejudice, much less that you were sent
To be a spokesman for enlightenment?

No one is chosen, as I said before
(It's very hard to hear this); what is more,
Nobody really chooses on his own.
To be, essentially, is to be thrown
Into a world of possibilities
Impossible to grasp, do what you please:
A partial world in which we play a part,
Not one that we have made as one makes art –
And we are part and partial, never whole.
That's why we seek for power and control
As partisans – as Arab or as Jew,
Believing that our own beliefs are true
And ready to engage in violence –
As if there weren't any common sense
Or age-old wisdom one could bring to bear –
Like little children, never taught to share.

So here we are, and likely to remain,
In the proverbial *condition humaine*,
Arab and Jew, you, me, and everyone,
A nineteen-year old soldier named Nisan,
Stuck in the past, in bondage, partisan.

from: *Without Mythologies: New and Selected Poems and Translations* (Dos Madres, 2008)

ON THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BUDDHAS IN BAMMIYAN

In Bammiyan, Afghanistan
The lovely Buddhas stood so high
That almost reaching to the sky
They overlooked the woes of man
(It must have been the sculptors' plan)
With perfect equanimity,
Thus imaging, for those who die,
That there is something greater than
The violence and cruelty
That add to suffering and pain
(Which, plausibly, they might restrain),
Or else – sad thought to entertain –
That all our strivings are in vain.

They might have been constructed by
Greeks, who, coming in the van
Of Alexander's victory,
With the passing years began
To orient their artistry
(Spirit struggling to be free)
To the wise passivity
Of those who long had farmed the plain
And mountain pass, with whom again
They would have joined their ancestry.
For Bammiyan was, and would remain,
A vital crossroads in the chain
Of outposts linking China and
The whole Mediterranean,
Along the famous Silk Road in
The first few centuries C.E.

The cannonballs of Genghis Khan
In the thirteenth century
Would fall upon them thick as rain:
They still kept their serenity.
Aurangzeb and his murderous clan,
In the seventeenth, would try
To burn them to the ground. Thereby
He left behind the filthy stain
Of bigotry, which would remain,
But did not mar their dignity.
Even the British, lusting for gain
And what is called hegemony,
In the nineteenth century,
Although they never would refrain
From making quiet Bammiyan

A battlefield, through might and main,
Could not destroy them utterly.

A new millennium began
And also in Afghanistan,
Ruled as it was by the Taliban.
The people lived in poverty;
Incessant war had bled them dry;
And Soviet and American
Money had done what money can
To make their lives a misery.
The ruling ideology
Required a religious enemy;
And so what neither Genghis Khan,
Aurangzeb, nor the British crown
Had yet accomplished, soon was done.
The lovely Buddhas standing high
And almost reaching to the sky
Were blasted down – by TNT.

Some reckon their destruction an
Unmitigated tragedy,
Not only for Afghanistan
But for the world, and I agree:
The Buddhas that in Bamiyan
Once overlooked the woes of man
With perfect equanimity
Are gone, and will not come again.
But there are those who would maintain
That in their absence they remain
Present, and to the inner eye
In Bamiyan still standing high
And almost reaching to the sky.

from: *Without Mythologies: New and Selected Poems and Translations* (Dos Madres, 2008)

AUGUST: THE LAKE AT NOTRE DAME

“ne l’aere dolce che dal sol s’allegra”

Dante, *Inferno* 7.122

“in the sweet air that’s gladdened by the sun”

Allen Mandelbaum, trans.

Mid-to-late summer on a sunny day:
The air is clear; there’s no humidity.
A bright-blue sky, expansive and serene,
Bends over tree-tops, blending with their green.

Swans with their cygnets, soon to be full grown
And, in their turn, rear cygnets of their own,
Circle the surface, mirrored in the wake
Of sunlight glimmering on the glassy lake.

Who could be sullen in the afternoon
– In the sweet air that’s gladdened by the sun,
Or fail in gratitude when song-birds sing,
A Great Blue Heron suddenly takes wing?

Our lady stands upon her golden dome
– In this place, which in some sense is our home,
With outstretched arm and blessings to confer
Even on those who don’t believe in her;

And from the depths of her untroubled eye
Her gaze goes out into the bright-blue sky,
Where in the distance wisps of cloud are swirled –
As if there were no troubles in the world.

from: *Without Mythologies: New and Selected Poems and Translations* (Dos Madres, 2008)