
The Phenomena of Encounter in the Theater of War: Restitution of the Self in Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*

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*It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die
miserably every day for lack of what is found there*

-William Carlos Williams

If journalism in its most objective form can be said to mimic reality through undemanding signifying operations, the arts complicate enunciation, bringing with them the provocative subjectivity of individual narrative. A case in point, Brian Turner's collection of Iraq War poetry, *Here, Bullet*, has been studied for its subjective speaker as well as its fictionalizing of the war and the Iraqi landscape. Commenting on Turner's aesthetic aims, reviewer Jeffrey Alfer compares Turner's work to Paul Nash's *We Are Making a New World* (1918), suggesting that "like the Cubist rendering of that war-torn world, the people of Turner's poems are melded to the canvas of war" (341). Turner himself notes the primacy of the subjective, overruling the journalistic: "If we don't have a connection to the human quality of the moment, then we can't feel or experience that moment. With poetry, one of its domains is the emotional content, so that's part of its territory" (Hicks 75). As Cubist painting arithmetically widens viewpoint, Turner's varying focus and subjects redouble the discursive possibilities, inflecting perception of the warfront. Discussing the immediacy of *Here, Bullet*, Mara Naaman describes Turner's work as giving "a visceral sense of a chaotic warscape in the present, described not with the intimacy and lyricism of an estranged (and nostalgic) native, but against the contradictions that contemporary Iraq, if also America, embodies" (366-67). Interestingly, Turner's speaker *is* both estranged and nostalgic, obviously for different reasons than those of the other poets in Naaman's study; he is living the contradictions of both countries simultaneously in an encounter that exposes and reconfigures, as alterity works to reconstruct the speaker's perceptions of wartime events.

Besides popular admiration due in part to his candor in interviews and his political outspokenness after returning from Iraq, Turner's work bears aesthetic appeal for its penetrating language, violent paroxysms, and metamorphic series of framed, cinematographic narrations. The complexity of this poetry's fabric, its

haunting reportage intensified by metaphorical and metaleptic qualities, its fixing of the allegorical amid radio reporting buzz, are all heightened not only by the context of war, but also by the atemporal, epic dimensions of the conflict, and sharpened by what Julia Kristeva would call the poet's potent "transformations of the matrices of enunciation" ("The Semiotic" 92).¹ If the poems seem straightforwardly didactic at times, it is because the alienated, nostalgic speaker is continually experiencing the trauma of encounter in the theater of war. When first exploring Turner's *Here, Bullet*, one cannot help but hear the voice of a militant humanist addressing an uninformed and perhaps callous public. Upon a closer look, however, it becomes clear that his reportage poetry limns the confines of the speaker's encounters with the other, a phenomenon where alterity shapes the poetic language—a language not so distant, as Jacques Lacan reminds us, from the that of the mind²—to reveal the fragmentation of thought processes, a fragmentation signaling the destruction of the known, a dismantling of events that the poet rebuilds through poetic devices and cinematic recomposition of sequential images. In short, in the phenomena of violent encounter, Turner the war poet figuratively follows the path of civilization itself, destroying in order to create, reconstituting a vision fortified by the elements of the new space peopled by his speaker and the *other*. The first part of this study will concern the rhetorically-amplified metaphoric present, which transforms language when poetic operations supplant the didactic or reportage mode. This examination leads directly to a closer view of the dislocation created through the poetic process and the role of alterity in reestablishing a "whole" in Turner's Iraq war poetic works.

A Metaphorical Reportage Present

Dense figurative language invigorates the most intense pieces of Turner's war poetry and is found throughout *Here, Bullet* accompanied by more literal narration. These poetic invasions by the subconscious mind, itself dominated by the signifier, contribute to the unevenness, the irregularity of each free-verse (and thus speech-like) utterance, continually reminding the reader of the speaker's estrangement or alienation, despite efforts toward exactitude.³ These states occasionally thwart the informative, didactic aims of his poetic reportage, revealing the potency of the encounter in the poet's mind. As Jean-Louis Chrétien notes, "Le cercle doit se renoncer pour que soit l'ellipse" ("the circle must renounce itself so that the ellipsis may be" 20).⁴ Hence, dispassionate journalistic prose must deny its corporeal rigidity, its codified signifying practices, to yield what Turner calls "emotional content." This distinction shifts Turner's work from simple journalism to subjective reportage. His overtly didactic purposes within the subjective poetic frame appear through some of the poem titles, e.g., "A Soldier's Arabic," "What

Every Soldier Should Know,” “Highway 1,” and “Body Bags” among others. In each title, despite the straightforward seeming intentions, the literal is invaded or displaced by the figurative.

“A Soldier’s Arabic” serves as epigraph to the collection, yet swiftly disinherits its simplistic title, speaking obliquely to the reader through a series of chiasmic structures that evoke the nature of the Iraqis’ language compared to the speaker’s own. “The word for love, *habib*, is written from right / to left, starting where we would end it / and ending where we might begin” (1-3). This first stanza borrows from the most obvious cultural phenomenon that divides writers (and more fundamentally, people). With even the writing forms of these two civilizations being at odds, the consequent repercussions of “reading” stand in conflict as well. Interpreting one another’s understanding of “love,” as a result, is misapprehended by both. Fraught with misinterpretations, the narrated present unfolds only to refold on itself, “now” yet inaccessible. The second stanza reasserts this idea replacing “love” with the notion of “war”: “Where we would end a war / Another might take as a beginning, / Or as an echo of history, recited again” (4-6). Self-conscious in its subjectivity and hyperaware of these cultural differences, of the difficulties reading one another, this stanza depends upon line endings to separate: the long history of war in Iraq, the Middle East in general, isolates one adversary from the other. “Death” then supplants “war” as a focus in the third stanza, where the reader can “hear the cursives of the wind” (8), where the misread written word again prevails, though neither enduring nor stable as an image, and metaphorically occluded by the “veil of the unknown” (9). The poem closes with a cautionary “earned” (12), suggesting that the valences “blood,” “sand” and “time” (10-11) that infuse the language have created distortions within that cannot be understood simply from without.⁵ One of the most provocative poems in the collection, “A Soldier’s Arabic” reveals a plane shaped by alterity where the narrative present of poetic language and reportage stretches beyond literal and temporal boundaries into the oblivion and perils of misperception.

Unlike “A Soldier’s Arabic,” the explicitly didactic “What Every Soldier Should Know” establishes the speaker’s identity and, adopting the mimetic mode of speech, communicates directly with the reader, narrowing distance through “you” and “your.”⁶ The poem catalogues phrases in Arabic that are “useful” (5), as well as important cultural differences, such as how one should enter a home. With an epigraph by Rousseau, equivocal in its recontextualizing,⁷ the poem illustrates how fatal an uninformed reading of the landscape and its inhabitants can be. Composed in couplets, each stanza warns of a different danger of misreading the environment, as even silence can be misleading: “You will hear the RPG coming

for you. / Not so the roadside bomb” (11-12). Other poems with literal titles such as “16 Iraqi Policemen” similarly recount in an oblique reportage manner:

The explosion left a hole in the roadbed
Large enough to fit a mid-sized car.
It shattered concrete, twisted metal,
Busted storefront windows in sheets
And lifted a BMW chassis up onto a rooftop. (1-5)

While descriptive, the narration nonetheless develops as poetry, denying the expected through the catachretic (one would speak of “shattered windows” but finds the blast has “shattered concrete,” metaleptically interleaving glass into the image) and moving into the straightforwardly metaphorical “Busted storefront windows in sheets” before closing on the most visually shocking element of the scene, a car “chassis” on a “rooftop.” The first “car” is absent, an absence representative of the volume of what has disappeared, while the BMW chassis imitates the absent and is denied weight through “lifted.”

Places—“Milh,” “Observation Post #798,” “Najaf 1820,” and “The Al Harishma Weapons Market”—reveal a theater of war strewn with artifacts and unsettling metaphors of the conflict, such as “Akbar,” who “like a musician / swaddling a silver-plated trumpet,” “wraps an AK-47 in cloth” (“Al Harishma” 6). Denotation of “swaddling” uncovers the metonymical infant, juxtaposed disturbingly with the weapon: Naaman’s “contradictions” condensate undeniably here. In “Milh,” women harvesting salt are “ablaze,” “as if they would burst upward in flame” (8, 10). Titles using Arabic words can suggest the adoption of the mimetic mode of speech, yet the text paradoxically effects the erasure of the self—which should be reflected by speech—and the resultant exteriority of the speaker.⁸ This is the case in “Sadiq,” or “friend,” an inclusive text with wide-ranging ambitions that ends with “my friend / it should break your heart to kill” (8-9). Poetically didactic, “Sadiq” uses parallelism as a device to balance rhapsodically the equalizing conditions of “no matter” when addressing the appropriated “friend”:

. . . no matter what adrenaline
feeds the muscle its courage, no matter
what god shines down on you, no matter
what crackling pain and anger you carry in your fists . . . (4-7)

The imperative pivots around the anaphoric “what,” precluding any unspoken justifications, and the title is only understood in the last lines. Similarly, the understated didacticism of the poem “*Ashbah*,” or “ghost,” reminds the living to participate in the ethical action of remembering the bewildered dead, Iraqi and American. The speaker effaces himself completely here, excepting his locus, in that the dead inhabit his immediate surroundings: “the desert wind blowing

trash / down the narrow alleys” (4-5), and “they watch in silence from rooftops / as date palms line the shore in silhouette” (9-10). Finally, the cautious persona of the speaker exhorts the reader to consider the struggle through different lenses, using allusions to Gilgamesh, the Garden of Eden, and Allah/God throughout the book that reinforce its epic and cosmic dimensions. Still, the immediate, material origins of the conflict are never far: “*We live on the roof of Hell*” opens “Kirkuk Oilfield, 1927,” suggesting that the conflict builds upon something unholy, with a “black river / wash[ing] through the village in a flood of oil / as if the drillers had struck a vein / deep in the skull of God” (3-6). Even when flowing from the most literal, most unambiguous titles, the present remains suspended by figurative incursions amplifying subjectivity and complexity.

As in reportage, Turner’s speaker desires to decode and share his experiences with the reader. Knowledge gleaned appears *en exergue*, through poetic devices emphasizing survival tactics that we should “know,” preparing the reader for the inevitable fracture generated by collision with the warscape. This desire underscores the speaker’s humanity, his empathy, when thinking of the young soldiers whom he can see around him as he writes and who represent the others that would follow him into the war. In “What Every Soldier Should Know,” we find “bombs under the overpasses, / in trashpiles, in bricks, in cars” (13-14), where accumulation amplifies the sense of foreboding, suggesting near-impossible survival. The speaker describes “shopping carts with clothes soaked / in foogas, a sticky gel of homemade napalm,” where “homemade” juxtaposes repulsively with the lethal “napalm” (15-16).⁹ The climax of horror in this poem—“Parachute bombs and artillery shells / sewn into the carcasses of dead farm animals” (17-18)—prepares the reader for the threat on the wall: “*I will kell you, American*” (19-20). Here, the attempt at writing in English sublates the ascendancy of differences and crosses the language divide, now left to right, to address the reader directly. Had the poet noticed graffiti in Arabic, inciting Iraqis to kill Americans, the effect on the reader would have been far less forceful; instead, “I” determines an agent, and “will kell” posits unambiguous intent. Exposing oneself in the warscape involves recognizing its hazards and lethality, if one is to survive. In “What Every Soldier Should Know,” the repugnant catalogue of the incongruous defies logic and belies any stability in war.

Lacanian speech of the oneiric is curiously present in descriptions of the real, where reportage is subjectively handled through the figurative, the metamorphic, or even the allegorical. The first poem in Part I, “The Baghdad Zoo,” displaces the violence of the conflict onto the actual event of animals escaping from the zoo.¹⁰ A bear “maul[s] a man” while bystanders can only throw stones to stop

it. “A lion chase[s] down a horse” while a “gunner watch[es]” impassively (1-6). Exotic birds are “frightened” by Blackhawk “rotorwash,” and a baboon is found lost in the desert (10-15). The strangeness of the zoo animals unleashed upon an unsuspecting city creates a sense of horror, while this unexpected but now real contiguity between human and animal suggests a metonymical replacement of the inhabitants in each description, inhabitants who are thus “chased,” “watched,” “frightened,” and “lost” in the early days of the arrival of the American troops. Again oneiric, though more clearly allegorical in nature, “*Jameel*” (“beautiful”) suggests the simplicity and determination of life itself, waiting out “this storm” (10) that in the context of the book points to the war.

Other poems stage the unanticipated through a *dispositio* of elements choreographed for surprise: the man committing suicide in “Two Stories Down” seeks the soldier’s knife not to kill but to end his own torment; Thalia Fields in “AB Negative” experiences a soothing and colorful death, “ten thousand feet above Iraq” (35), as “the most beautiful colors rise in darkness, / tangerine washing into Russian blue” (26-27). “Caravan” begins with the freight inventory of the ships “at anchor in the Persian Gulf” (2), line by line extracting the staggering scope of the war enterprise through the vast amounts of commodities needed to carry it out. The poem ends, however, with destruction, as “the stunned / gather body parts from the roadway / to collect in cardboard boxes” (20-22). The figurative in “Caravan” works from negation, with those “boxes” not being “taped and shipped” (23) to the White House, “not buried / under the green sod thrown over” (24-25). Comparable to the violence of human depravity in wartime mirrored in the animals in “Baghdad Zoo,” “Caravan” creates an image only to destroy it, with “not” repeatedly denying decent burial to the faceless dead or “body parts.” Conventional symbolism itself is thus destroyed, as the speaker evokes “the Tomb of the Unknown,” omitting “soldier” (27); this symbolism can no longer transcend place and context. Inversely, “Body Bags” builds from the nonexistent, describing not simply corpses with “hard feet” (13), but rather men “ask[ing] where their wives and children are . . . the taste of flatbread and chai / gone from their mouths” (8, 10-11).¹¹ Here as elsewhere, Turner’s poetic reportage heightens and effectively exploits the emotional commitment that purely journalistic prose must relinquish. Taking the figurative a step further, Turner obliterates the known, dismantles the conflict in order to punctuate the speaker’s encounter with the remnant civilization of Gilgamesh.¹²

Dislocation, destruction generated by Turner’s Poetics

In phenomenological terms, encounter implies separation from self, a separation that in poetic operations is conveyed figuratively. Indeed, otherness forces

imprecision on the chasm occupied by encounter, an ambiguity that Chrétien asserts is the very interest of poetic encounters. He discusses the importance of otherness as described by the poet Hofmannsthal regarding a forest animal coming upon a human:

The indeterminacy that permeates all description by the poet is neither privation nor inconsistency. It rather indicates, with the greatest rigor, that an encounter is not an apparition in front of a new being in a pre-existing space, already known and already ours but, from the outset, an opening of a new space, irrigated by an indeterminate alterity, the virtual omnipresence of which has already torn us from ourselves. (17)¹³

Poetic language, therefore, expands the aperture of understanding rather than imposing the vague or unreliable. In the context of war poetry, how much more striking must be the encounter between the deployed soldier and the “other”? How much more significant the “tearing” away from the self? *Here, Bullet* exposes the disturbance of encounter through dislocation resulting from Turner’s figures and tropes, a dislocation frequently linked to explosions real or imagined. Yet, the speaker’s volatile diction sustains causal relation, even when experiencing trauma, defying Roland Barthes’s thoughts on modern poetry where the modern poet does away with “the intention to establish relationships to produce instead an explosion of words” (46). Turner indeed produces an “explosion of words,” as the modern warscape demands volatility and paroxysm in an authentic recreation. However, the encounter, the establishing of relationships, is central to all that Turner accomplishes, albeit through an initial fragmentation of self as seen through the cleft in known space, an “explosion” due to the opening of a vast, now unappropriated space sparsely populated by the “self” and the “other,” in Chrétien’s terms. Before reaching the closing of the breach in space and time, let us return to the book’s epigraph to discuss the effect of dislocation resulting from Turner’s encounters.

“A Soldier’s Arabic,” whose epigraph is an epigraph by Hemingway,¹⁴ is the reader’s first encounter with the poet, an encounter that deconstructs the warscape through Barthes’s “harbingers” (46), i.e., rhetorical figures such as chiasmus and antithesis that are intended to unsettle the reader upon entering the threshold of Turner’s world. We have focused on this poem’s chiasmus in the first part of this study; we should now consider the functionality of antithesis and its figurative moorings:

The word for love, *habib*, is written from right
to left, starting where we would end it
and ending where we might begin. (1-3)

“Left,” “right,” “begin,” and “end,” like a pendulum, the chiasmic format forces a return from an extreme and, as in the case of oxymora, neither one side nor the other can ever lastingly prevail, thus lending a conflicting and fragmentary quality to the notions of writing and understanding. The pendants of the chiasmus through which the mind must travel, “love,” “war,” and “death,” serve as motile anchors, acting against the antitheses within the remarkably intimate context of war. Existence on the plane of this new encounter is thus rhetorically charted as a helicoidal movement—an unstable pendulum integrating circularity gained through its destabilized anchors—through time, punctuated by unfinished starts and conclusions unbegun. Time, conceived of as relentlessly advancing in the West, now shatters in contact with a civilization marked by chimera, whose writing “cursives” (metaleptically, “history”), are “of the wind” (8), occupying the realm of the “unknown” (9). This initial collision and ensuing destruction will be relived throughout the book in, as Alfier suggests, a fractured, Cubist manner.

A literal use of Cubism, borne by metamorphosis, is manifest in “Easel,” one of Turner’s more intensely bitter works in *Here, Bullet*. An artist, “Nathere,” mixes matter with brilliant colors—“river-blue oil,” “yellow cadmium,” and “date palms . . . a burst of green” (1-5)—though his palm trees have “no trunks / painted in to hold them” (5-6), which brings Nathere to pause. In “There is too much heat” (8), resonant with ekphrastic dimensions, an explosion recurs for the artist: “Figures of people / fade into a canvas blur, mere phantasms of paint, their features unrecoverable, their legs / disappearing beneath them” (9-12). The artist cannot paint his subjects, cannot give them a shadow “to hold them down” (13). The imitation of the self, the shadow, “light’s counterpoint, the dark processing / of thought” (15-16), is impossible to recreate, as the essence of those humans and recognition of their humanity have been obliterated.¹⁵ The easel now “burns in light” (16), “as colored tongues / lift in flame” (17-18) before disappearing entirely in “an erasure the sky washes out in blue” (19). Highly allegorical, the mimetic poem “Easel” depends on color and substance to depict a beauty that cannot be sustained in the warscape, a delocalized field that annihilates the “figures” as the explosion redefines the “now.”

Other poems destroy through the language employed, through evocation and negation. “Night in Blue” evokes images in order to stifle them:

I have no words to speak of war.
I never dug the graves in Talafar.
I never held the mother crying in Ramadi.
I never lifted my friend’s body
When they carried him home. (13-17)

Repetition through anaphora (also polysyndeton) often solidifies or builds; in

Turner's work, the device reveals a destructive tendency, ostensibly wrought by guilt in the speaker, and often, as in "Curfew," by the painful images that superimpose the present. "Curfew," a poem striking for its use of the nonhuman—"bats," "water snakes," "ponding basins," "rubbled palaces," and mosques—moves from the real into the imagined, where the past erupts into the present. An atypical warscape where "policemen sunbathed on traffic islands," the narration leads into what "isn't," but due to the insistent use of markers, sketches what must "have been":

There were no bombs, no panic in the streets.
Sgt. Gutierrez didn't comfort an injured man
who cupped pieces of his friend's brain
in his hands; instead, today,
white birds rose from the Tigris. (10-14)

Slipping into the past, "were," "didn't," and "cupped" signal a return to the horror that "was." The absence of war, "no bomb, no panic in the streets" (1) in a given "now," cannot conceal what "was." Both "Night in Blue" and "Curfew" thus operationalize an imagined past that "is not," casting doubt on what "is," or what could ever "be." The past destabilizes narrated time, perforating the latter with the stain of the past.

Also inconstant in time, "Highway 1" destroys the initial imagery of the ancient spice route with its metonymic "camel dust" and undying "heat," followed by "Egyptian limes / and sultani lemons" (8-9). The reader does not immediately realize at the beginning of the third stanza that the condensation of this past of "privet flowers and musk, aloes, / honeycombs and silk" (11-12) has been displaced; "waving children . . . marvel," not at the richly-laden caravan but at "painted guns" (14-15). Even though "the ruins of Babylon and Sumer" appear, the convoy passes them impassively, "pushes on" (16), "through the land of Gilgamesh" (17), mindless of the materially absent. "Katyusha Rockets" similarly positions itself initially in the present, this time in Hamman al Alil, before slipping into the speaker's past temporarily, where 107s "pinwheel over the rooftops . . . keep going, / traveling for years over the horizon" before "landing" (3, 5-6) at a Memorial Day parade in Fresno. An impact—unexplained, though potentially ordinance on a float—rocks the nostalgic recall of the "veterans' day parade" (10), with "mothers shielding their children" (11) and "old war vets crouching behind automobiles" (11). Here, Turner separates present from past by means of stanzas, with the mind as the conduit between memory and shock, where rockets destroy long after the fact, threatening the speaker's memories, "unaware of the dangers / headed their way" (20-21). The ordinance of the speaker's past parallels the unmentioned explosives of his present; the breach has forced anamnesis to

confront the present. With an emphasis on the lingering also, “How Bright It Is” re-contextualizes Chaucer’s opening lines of the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*: “Whan that aprill with his shoures soote / The droghte of march hath perced to the roote.” Instead, “April. And the air dry / as the shoulders of a water buffalo” (1-2) does nothing to relieve the drought, and the dehumanized “soldiers don’t notice anymore” the “Grasshoppers . . . flaring out in front” of them (7, 3-5). The destruction is first external, with “the wreckage of the streets, / bodies draped with sheets” (8-9), but sidles into the internal, painfully protracted by means of polysyndeton, as the “sun, / how bright it is, how hard and flat and white” (9-10), burns the inner space that cannot unexpose itself, a “light, which reflects off everything” (12), and that will take many “nails from the coffinmakers” (11) to obscure. The burning, intimated as coming from the sun, which we could read as awareness or recognition of the truth, moves from the bodies to the speaker, a slow destruction that establishes the speaker’s internal brokenness within the theater of war.

Within Turner’s Iraq War collection, “Here, Bullet” and “2000 lbs.” offer some of the strongest examples of Lacanian replacement—or extending—of the signified by the language of the unconscious. In the eponymous “Here, Bullet,” the crushing of the soldier’s humanity is made evident through the speaker’s transmogrification into a weapon, as he dialogues with the bullet, released from an oddly organic “barrel’s cold esophagus” (12). The speaker, by breaking himself down to “a body” (1), then accumulating metonymic elements through polysyndeton with “bone and gristle and flesh” (2), greets “the word” (10) the bullet brings “hissing through the air” (11). “Gristle” reduces the speaker to a consumable; “flesh” likewise dismantles denotative links to “human.” In many ways, this poem approaches anthropomorphism without achieving it, leaving the ambiguity in the metamorphosis of the bullet into something humanlike and the human into something weapon-like, with the defiant speaker’s “tongue’s explosives” “triggering” (12-13) and the “rifling” (13) the speaker has “inside” (14). Untenable as a reality, the alterity of the encounter involves the tearing away from the self as exposure to the “other,” which effects an exchange of traits and a subsequent dehumanizing of the speaker. The harshness of encounter, as conveyed by Turner in this instance, reminds the reader that the decision to expose oneself is not available to the soldier. Whereas Chrétien suggests that choosing one’s “exposition, means making of the act one of [one’s] position, even if the choice is passivity itself” (21), a combatant does not indulge in a phenomenological choice, except as a second choice, and often one based simply upon survival.

“2000 lbs.” brings about a similar destruction, not only through the cinematic

recurrence of the blast over the six stanzas that describe it, but also in the dilation of narrated time, creating a slow-motion redistribution of matter or substance. Signifiers suggestive of the characters' individuality, with Sefwan's "flight of gold" (7), and Sgt. Ledoux's reading of the spinning Humvee tires as "horses in a carousel" (30), aware of a silent "strange / beauty" (41-42) settling over the horror due to his ruptured ear drums. Forcing himself into the immediate of the others, the bomber's "touch is the air taken in, the blast / and the wave" (102-103). Despite the poetic subjectivity, destruction is the focus, with Sgt Ledoux's "wedding ring on his crushed hand, / the bright gold sinking in flesh / going to bone" (45-47). As well, Lt Jackson's "missing hands, [. . .] make / no sense to him" (66-67), and Rasheed and Sefa's image, suffers

. . . an instant
of clarity, just before each of them shatters
under the detonation's wave
as if even the idea of them were being
destroyed, stripped of form. (53-57)

Through metaphor and simile, the obliterated lovers' bodies lose their humanity, their essence, with "the idea of them" torn from their physical selves. Turner's discourse of destruction reveals the distress of the encounter in war, the anxiety created by the hostile space opened to alterity. Nostalgia plays a role as the speaker seizes the absence of the known before passing through the breach into the "other." As we will see, the recomposition of the broken does little to diminish the angst, though the encounter—the circle giving in to attraction of the ellipsis—will be complete.

Recomposition of "the broken"

Although recomposition is not always latent in the *Here, Bullet* poems, where it does occur, the impact is one of exchange, where nostalgia is eroded by its own futility and the sense of alienation is altered by the "other" before its post-encounter return to the speaker.¹⁶ "Here, Bullet" epitomizes this metamorphic exchange and ensuing recomposition in which the operative aims depends upon the speaker's unconscious drives. While the speaker remains exteriorized in "Body Bags," the poem works to compose, to bring to life an image that will satisfy the speaker's need to undo what has been done. The "murder of crows" (1), suggestive in its polysemy, confirms that the repeated "*Last Call*" (14) is unbearable to him. Bringing the dead men to life becomes an ethical question, a moral reconstitution of what "was" to erase "what is." The speaker's angst over the killings—whoever the perpetrator—surfaces in the encounter between the speaker and "the bodies" (3). The speaker thus brings them to life, appending a readable past, drawn from the speaker's perception of who they were, to their present. The reconstituting of

self and other in this instance juxtaposes the living with the dead.

Turner similarly reconstructs in “2000 lbs.,” where the cinematographic concludes by re-composing the event through the material of its destruction, redefining the experience for the reader. The recomposition of Rasheed and Sefa, bicycling into the “air” that “ruckles and breaks” (50), depends on a game of mirrors established through the glass of the store front, where “each of them shatters” (54), as above. Their reflections superpose the “manikins / who stood as though husband and wife” (58-59). Beckoned as a simile (“as if”), the “idea of them” is “destroyed, stripped of form” (56, 57), to be reconstructed “holding one another in their half-armed embrace” (63), an image dependent on the material of the event to be reconstituted and on the generic smoothness of the “manikins” to attenuate the horror, as love is now a mimetic embrace in the rubble. In an analogous manner, the grandmother of the sixth stanza finds speech in her death, voicing the despair the speaker does not allow himself: “It’s impossible / this isn’t the way we die” (96-97). The bomber as well receives speech in “the word / his soul is made of, *Inshallah*” (107-108), “word” signifying his very essence, whether he “invoked the Prophet’s name / or not” (99-100). The bomber is now “everywhere,” but also everyone:

. . . he is obliterated at the epicenter,
he is everywhere, he is of all things,
his touch is the air taken in, the blast
and wave, the electricity of shock,
his is the sound the heart makes quick
in the panic’s rush, the surge of blood
searching for light and color . . . (100-106)

The day’s peace extinguished, he now sinks arbitrarily into the material and the human; he is made of force—“electricity”—and transfigured into the sound and sensation of the blast, reconfiguring the landscape entirely.

Recomposing the broken is emblematic in “The Hurt Locker,” one of the most notably elliptical works in *Here, Bullet*, with anaphora, metaphor, apostrophe, parallelism, metalepsis, and synecdoche galvanizing meaning and resurrecting the most brutal, though elusive, face of war. The abstract nature of the poem returns the reader to Lacan’s elements of oneiric discourse, more specifically here, to metaphor and metonymy. Over the course of the text, its title, a metaphorical construct, must be visually dismantled before being refurbished in the reader’s mind with knowledge of what the “locker,” a space of pain, contains. From the metaphoric “punches a hole” (10) to the synecdotal “brass / and fire” (14-15), the poem’s systematic repetition and replacement obstructs the reader’s vision, dominating the deciphering mechanisms. Recomposition in “The Hurt Locker”

exceeds the cinematic, exploring the recesses of the unconscious where poet and reader must figuratively meet, an encounter that becomes especially arduous in the case of metonymic and metaleptic structures. For example, when “you open the hurt locker / and learn what there is of knives / and teeth” (15-17), the reader finds the metonymic “knife” that identifies the assassin, as well as the metaleptic “teeth” that evoke either the face that signifies the victim or the clenching of the teeth of the assassin that accompanies the act of murder. The presence of absence, stirred by the anaphoric “nothing,” is relieved by “and” in the same position in the first stanza, suggesting that “nothing” is in fact constructed by intangibles, unspeakables, and thus not “nothing” at all. Again anaphoric, “believe it” builds with “and,” which operates to construct a sense of the unexpected, through parallelism and persuasive apostrophes to the reader. Turner’s didactic intent returns in this poem, secreting the indefinite horror of the “hurt locker” from abstractions to a reassembled material whole.

Closing *Here, Bullet*, “To Sand” unites all of the elements of encounter through disintegration and consolidation of matter, summoning all in order to destroy.¹⁷ The title itself indicates the inevitable, a theme supported by repetition—especially anaphora—throughout. Order here is reversed from most others; instead of working from the natural world to the manmade, to the artifacts of the war, one begins with the latter to return to the former, an order that reestablishes Turner’s interest in the chiasmic. The envoys of war, “Tracers and ball ammunition,” “green smoke,” “Each finned mortar,” and “Each star cluster” (1-4), give way to the metaleptic “skeletons of war” (5), while memory, “minarets and steeple bells” overpower and occlude the more erratic and mechanical forces of the war. Objects of dread are, here, consumed by the beautiful, the natural; “. . .brackish / sludge from open sewers, trashfires. . .” (7-8) yield predominance gained through their squalor to those who have been waiting all along, “. . .the silent cowbirds resting / on the shoulders of a yak” (9-10). A *mise-en-abîme* opens in the final lines, suggestive of the many voices that are themselves consumed: “To sand / each head of cabbage unravels its leaves / the way dreams burn in the oilfires of night” (10-12). The anthropomorphic cabbage, suggestive of infinity and abundance, “unravels its leaves” as “dreams burn” in the substance of the conflict, in the dark. If “homefires” offer familial respite, “oilfires” burning matter transmuted over the millennia instead suggest the unbearable and inextinguishable, a permanence of trauma that cannot collapse of itself.¹⁸ Turner’s Lucretian turn here is not an isolated one. In “Gilgamesh, in Fossil Relief,” “dirt / and bone and ruin” combine on the “cloudy mirror” of History, the material remains of generations of human beings, with their bones leaving a “signature in the earth” (14) and the same

enigmas of our existence behind:

History is a cloudy mirror made of dirt

And bone and ruin. And love? Loss?

These are the questions we must answer

By war and famine and pestilence, and again

By touch and kiss, because each age must learn

This is the path of the sun's journey by night. (17-22)

Within an overtly epic framework, Turner signals the retracing of what we must learn: “questions we must answer,” “because each age must learn.” Humanity thus perpetually reevaluates its own significance, its “bone and ruin,” its “touch and kiss.” Turner’s work transcends his speaker’s encounter with Iraq by opening upon the country’s history, its literary heritage, and its warscape. It opens the speaker’s reflective space to an epic dimension, exposing, reconfiguring, and closing the exchange through poetic transfigurations, now indissociable from the suffering and horror seen, felt, or caused. Indeed, through its particular violence and horror, Turner’s recomposition of the broken with and through the “other” metamorphosizes the speaker. Importantly, experienced by the reflective soldier-poet and actualized in a context of war, Chrétien’s paradigm of fractured solitude urges a commitment to the present, to the breach opened by alterity, and to the creation of a self now inseparable from the “other.”

Exposed in a new space of anguish and separated from himself, the speaker’s experience of encounter within the violent phenomenon that is war forces a disassembling into parts, while fragments, distortions of images, proffered by the mind in its own metaphorical language, replace the dreaded unspoken. Turner fulfills the role that Julia Kristeva assigns to the poet: “to make language perceive what it doesn’t want to say, provide it with its matter independently of the sign, and free it from denotation” (31). While the speaker braces for the eventual rending brought about by new encounters, the reader also, through Turner’s reportage poetics, receives the vast, unfixable potentiality of figurative language—determinacy and consistency—to construct a new perceptive space. Emmanuel Levinas writes that “experience is a reading, an understanding of sense, an exegesis, a hermeneutic, and not an intuition” (“Signification” 13, emphasis mine). Turner’s Iraq War experiences as recounted in *Here, Bullet* reflect this form of blended writing, influenced by reportage and subjectively exploring the new space opened by alterity and encounter. Here, intuition can play no role, as the speaker closes the modified space, poetically reconstituted.

Notes

¹ In “Four Signifying Practices,” Julia Kristeva notes the proximity of genres from the epic, dramatic, and narrative to “news reporting, newspaper columns, and other journalistic genres” as inhabiting “the province of the signifying system—narrative. . . . Differences between these ‘genres’ are due to variations in the social organism and hence the latter’s constraints, as well as to certain transformations of the matrices of enunciation. But these variations do not fundamentally disturb the enunciation’s disposition; they merely indicate that meaning has been constituted and has taken shape at different levels of the same system” (92).

² In the chapter “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” in *Écrits*, Jacques Lacan describes the language of the unconscious as that of metaphor (51), and underscores the slippery nature of the rhetoric of telling the dream: “Ellipsis and pleonasm, hyperbaton or syllepsis, regression, repetition, apposition—these are the syntactical displacements; metaphor, catachresis, antonomasia, allegory, metonymy, and synecdoche—these are the semantic condensations; Freud teaches us to read in them the intentions—whether ostentatious or demonstrative, dissimulating or persuasive, retaliatory or seductive—with which the subject modulates his oneiric discourse” (57). I contend that, in experiencing a phenomenological erasure of reality, the speaker’s retelling of the event, oneiric in its unreality, can be read by these same rhetorical elements of language.

³ Turner’s speaker has been categorized as one unable to transcend the limits of his own identity. See Samina Najmi’s “The Whiteness of the Soldier-Speaker in Brian Turner’s *Here, Bullet*.” Najmi’s argument depends largely upon the creation of a “surreal identity” by and for the speaker; our approach is more concerned with language, with the phenomenological process of metaphoric replacement in Turner’s war poetry, the presence and direction of isotopies, and thus the process of creation.

⁴ All translations mine.

⁵ Tomas Tranströmer’s “Under a tarpaulin, language was being broken down” (8) intersects interestingly here, from “Face to Face” in *The Deleted World*, 2006.

⁶ In “The Word I, the Word You, the Word God,” Emmanuel Levinas considers the role of distance in cases of proximity, especially when “I” and “you” are defined:

To say ‘you’ is the primary fact of Saying [*Dire*]. All saying is direct discourse or a part of direct discourse. Saying is that rectitude from me to you, that directness of the face-to-face, a ‘between us’ [*entre-nous*], already conversation [*entre-tien*], already dia-logue and hence *distance* and quite the opposite of the contact in which coincidence and identification occur. But this is precisely the distance of proximity, the marvel of the social relation. (93)

Najmi’s work on Turner similarly revolves around distance and the speaker: “The distancing strategies of *Here, Bullet* are crucial to representation and individualization, and intimately tied to the white military subjectivity of its speaker” (56).

⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as quoted by Turner: “To yield to force is an act of necessity, not of will; it is at best an act of prudence.”

⁸ Najmi notes this deliberate return, on the part of the speaker, to exteriorizing: “The speaker

of *Here, Bullet* can be characterized as cerebral and knowledgeable in his learned allusions, a persona whose voice communicates itself as thoughtful, deliberate, and controlled, though not dispassionate. The most striking aspect of his voice consists in its personal deflections, marked by an insistent focus on exteriority” (59).

⁹ Najmi also covers the discordant aspects of the poem (60-61).

¹⁰ This event took place during the 2003 assault on Baghdad.

¹¹ We disagree with Naaman (367-368) and Najmi (69) regarding their conclusions on this poem in that the murderers are not made evident. These men were executed (“bullets lodged in the back of their skulls” 7), though no reference to this act is made or why it was committed. Their bodies, stiffened, recommit the text’s analeptic confines. It seems more likely that, had the speaker witnessed or carried out an execution, the brutality of the act would have brought him to confront it directly. Instead, by only speaking to the corpses, Turner seems to reveal the speaker’s desire to comprehend what has happened, who these people are, and how he can resurrect them. The title is provocative, interestingly misleading, as the “body bags” seem to be the corpses themselves. I wish to thank USAFA cadet A.J. Franz for noting the “silence” of the “murder of crows” (1) that had already formed as well as the “hovering / of flies” (9-10), which together suggest the bodies as remnants of an earlier struggle, whereas the speaker’s unit itself seems to be out on a regular “morning” (9) reconnaissance mission.

¹² Naaman notes Turner’s “genuine desire . . . to become familiar and intimate with an Arabic cultural and intellectual tradition, for it to inform his own experience in the country” (367).

¹³ “L’indétermination qui traverse toute la description du poète n’a rien d’une privation ni d’une inconsistance: elle marque avec la plus grande rigueur que la rencontre n’est pas l’apparition en vis-à-vis d’un nouvel être dans un espace préexistant, déjà connu et déjà nôtre, mais d’abord l’ouverture d’un espace neuf, irrigué d’une altérité indéterminée mais dont la virtuelle omniprésence nous arrache déjà à nous-mêmes.”

¹⁴ “This is a strange new kind of war where you learn just as much as you are able to believe,” from “A New Kind of War,” cabled from Madrid in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War.

¹⁵ Najmi links the lack of shadows to “a preoccupation with self-definition” (68). Whiteness, for Najmi, requires darkness; her reading of the text only explores dark and light from the viewpoint of the speaker’s whiteness.

¹⁶ Chrétien notes that in a non-conflictual case of encounter, “Car cet entrelacs du don et de la réception ne forme pas un jeu de reflets dans lequel le même serait sans fin de l’un à l’autre renvoyé. Quand je me reçois des mains de l’autre, je ne me reçois pas identique à celui que j’avais donné, et c’est ainsi que je peux me redonner à lui d’un don qui en soit vraiment un don.” “This interlacing of giving and of the receiving is not a game of reflections in which the same (reflection) would be given unendingly from one to the other. When I receive myself from the hands of the other, I do not receive a “self” identical to the one I gave, and it is thus that I can give myself again to the other, an exchange that is distinctly a gift” (23).

¹⁷ In “Mihrab,” a similar case is made for remembering the dead by exalting nature.

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that Turner returns to the natural world, especially the Tigris River, when closing his *National Geographic* article devoted to his return to Iraq as a tourist: “And so I focus on the Tigris as it winds its way through the heart of Baghdad. It’s a wide river with an unassuming surface of sunlight and shadow, a storied river that doesn’t advertise the inexorable pathos transported in its depths.”

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