

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": The Afterlife of Words and Deeds

A recent *Los Angeles Times* review of *A Line in the Sand*, the latest novel by Kevin Powers, the author of seminal Global War on Terror novel *The Yellow Birds*, proposes that GWOT fiction written by veterans, which was much celebrated on its arrival, has lost its luster. Author Mark Athitakis writes, "Two long wars, clumsily entered into and clumsily exited, won't capture the hearts and minds of readers the way they did in 2012." Even more pointedly, Athitakis writes that *A Line in the Sand* "delivers a sense that amid the literary battles of the last decade, the war novel lost. For all its accolades, *The Yellow Birds* and its compatriots aren't much discussed now."

The argument that GWOT fiction and film was once in ascendancy and is now a sideshow intrigues me. I'm on the record for calling the initial flurry of post-9/11 fiction and movies circa 2012 a "Golden Age." In 2018, however, I wrote a *Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature* blogpost titled "Does Anyone Remember *American Sniper*?" I had in mind both the book and the movie, but sticking here with the movie, I described watching it on Sunday afternoon network television while channel surfing. Half-paying attention in between naps, commercials, and trips to the kitchen, my impression was that the movie's resonance was now deflated, almost flat, as compared to the fever pitch of media commentary occasioned upon its release in 2014. I didn't state it in the blogpost, but I was also wondering if the cluster of vet-authored fiction, including *The Yellow Birds*, that inspired me to start *Time Now* in 2012, was now past its prime, too.

Musing on the reception and afterlife of GWOT artistic expression, I revisited a 1989 essay by none other than French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. Reading Derrida is never a walk-in-the-park, but this essay, titled “Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments” is reasonably accessible and full of interesting things, beginning with the title, which for some reason omits the expected colon between “Biodegradables” and “Seven.” In graduate school, I mined the essay often while writing papers on how literature lingers (or doesn’t) in the cultural memory after initial publication.

In “Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments,” Derrida first considers biodegradability as an ecological construct, in keeping with burgeoning worry about the ability of man-made materials to decompose over time. The quote below suggests some of the complexities Derrida finds inherent in biodegradability. The uneven line spacing is not in the original essay, but resulted from my cutting-and-pasting words from a PDF copy of the essay into a Word document. The jaunty result seems to do justice to the often-playful dissonance inherent in Derrida’s thinking and writing:

Jacques Derrida’s description of a biodegradable object (from “Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments,” *Critical Inquiry* 15.4, Summer 1989):

On the one hand, this thing is not a thing, not-as one ordinarily believes things to be-a natural thing:

in fact “biodegradable,” on the contrary, is generally said of an artificial product, most often an industrial product, whenever it lets itself be de-

composed by microorganisms. On the other hand, the “biodegradable” is hardly a thing since it remains a thing that does not remain, an essentially

decomposable thing, destined to pass away, to lose its identity as a thing

and to become again a non-thing.

The issue of biodegradability of course is still with us. Just this week I read an article about the danger of “micro-plastic” particles—the residue of bazillions of water bottles and plastic bags, tires and food packaging—that infect even

the most fervent plastic recyclers and abstainers. The import is that even as, say, a milk jug dissipates over time, its alteration of the environment persists. And as with milk jugs, even more so with nuclear waste and other more toxic chemical residue.

Riffing on biodegradability, Derrida suggests that the concept of biodegradability might be applied to books, magazines, and newspapers. He fancifully proposes that the processes of biodegradation corresponds with what might be said to be the "shelf-live" of publications in libraries. Left to themselves, texts, especially ephemeral ones such as newspapers, lie largely ignored while they disintegrate slowly into oblivion. The question, Derrida intuited in 1988, was becoming massively complicated by the creation of digital libraries and archives, which chart a similar-but-different path from first appearance to obscurity. But Derrida wonders whether the ideas and sentiments contained in texts, like micro-plastic particles, ever really disappear. Perhaps they still circulate in diluted, but still potent or even toxic form throughout culture and the lives of people. Or, perhaps the process of biodegradation can be interrupted or manipulated, and old ideas and texts given new life.

Playful as Derrida's musing might be, the larger context of "Biodegradability Seven Diary Fragments" is serious. It has more connection with war and war-writing than I have made clear so far.

Derrida's inspiration for writing was a controversy over the discovery that the World War II journalism of another prominent deconstructionist, Paul de Man, was sympathetic to Nazi Germany's attitude and actions to oppress Europe's Jewish population. Derrida does not defend de Man, but implies that the long-neglected physical copies of the newspapers in which de Man's journalism appeared might well have been left to rot. To resurrect them forty years later and hold them afresh for more debate than they received in their own time, Derrida

implies, is an abrogation of a “natural” process and thus somewhat unfair to de Man.

That’s a curious way of looking at things, for what else are library archives for but to serve as repositories for future scholars to study artifacts of days gone-by? But Derrida does not stop there. Drifting from consideration of physical objects, he proposes that there is such a thing as “cultural biodegradability” that structures the dissolution of a publication’s ideas and import into culture over time. He asks, “Can one transpose onto ‘culture’ the vocabulary of ‘natural waste treatment’—recycling, ecosystems, and so on, along with the whole legislative apparatus that regulates the ‘environment’ in our societies?” In Derrida’s formulation, ideas, like micro-plastics, do not achieve maximum potency only in their original expression, but through a process of permeation of general outlooks and attitudes in what he calls “the great organic body of culture.”

For example, upon publication, a book might be read by many and its ideas publicly debated. With time, in most cases, fewer people read the original book, and the book and its ideas begin to fade. Or, though fewer people might read the actual book, knowledge of the book continues to circulate and its ideas seep into the cultural mainstream, where they influence other ideas and in turn are influenced by them. Specific examples (mine, not Derrida’s) might include The Bible; not so many have read it cover to cover, but its stories and tenets have been imbibed by all. Or, we might consider the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1854. In its time, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was hugely popular and influential in galvanizing abolitionist sentiment in the North. Over the ensuing decades, however, fewer people actually read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but many knew of it, and colorful characters such as Uncle Tom and Topsy became cultural touchstones, as did the anti-slavery sentiment it promoted. Or, to use examples from the literary theory realm,

Thomas Kuhn first proposed and explained his theory of the scientific “paradigm” in a 1962 book titled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, while Laura Mulvey promulgated the idea of the “male gaze” in a 1975 essay titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Not-so-many read these essays today, but the concepts of the paradigm and the male gaze are generally understood by most educated readers.

The concept of cultural biodegradability is interesting to think about in terms of my own area of interest: books, movies, and art about America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Returning to Mark Athitakis’ article, we can wonder about the process by which the attention a book such as *The Yellow Birds* commanded upon publication withers over time. Per de Man, we can also think about stories, books, and movies that were overlooked on arrival, but which now possess significance unaccounted for at the time. Also per de Man, we can think about the early writings of now-prominent authors and consider what might happen if we gave them more scrutiny now than when they first appeared.

For example, though the movie version of *American Sniper* now lies fallow in various streaming services, some future critic or scholar might mine it for purposes not apparent now. Or a devotee or devotees will find new ways and new energy to proclaim its importance. However things play out, certain ideas promulgated by *American Sniper* have not stopped resonating, and in fact many have gained valence and saturate thinking about America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among these ideas are the “good man with a gun” sentiment. Or, that special operations represented the most effective means of waging war in Iraq and Afghanistan. And another, the idea that soldiers have difficulty transitioning to civilian life after military service.

Whether “biodegradability” or “cultural biodegradability” best describes the processes of public reception and historical reckoning I’m describing, I’m not sure, but I don’t know what

the better words are. Derrida doesn't clearly explain whether an important work (a "classic") resists biodegradability by continuing to be read in its original form or whether it exemplifies the way the spirit and messages of a work permeates society through a process of dissolution. He also does not clearly distinguish whether cultural biodegradability is an agent-less process—a function of an organic or structural occurrence—or if it can be manipulated by scholars, critics, audiences, marketers, or the creators themselves. I like the idea that worthy books will find their readers as they will, but there's also plenty of evidence that a book's reception and long-lasting esteem can be manipulated and is often contested. We see it all the time on social media, for instance, where posts frequently proclaim the overlooked greatness of this-or-that war novel or film.

Still, the ideas in "Biodegradability Seven Diary Fragments" are suggestive, even provocative. In Derrida's formulation, every act, once committed, and every text, once published, commences a process of dynamic interaction with the culture into which it is born. Most works contribute only slightly to the prevailing milieu, either immediately or over time. Other, more highly charged works retain their influence longer. Some possess a radioactive-like toxicity.

De Man (who died in 1983) probably had little reason to think that his World War II journalism would resurface after his death and to a large extent define his legacy. An early example of today's cancel-culture wars, the rediscovery of his journalism opened consideration of whether de Man's expressed views in 1941 negated appreciation of his later contributions to literary theory. Or worse, whether hostility to Jews and sympathy for fascist Germany was part-and-parcel with the philosophy and techniques of deconstruction, with the two sets of ideas congruent with each other. In other words, you can't have one without the other. As Derrida writes, "the actual stakes, the enemy to be destroyed in these simulacra of trial

proceedings, is doubtless not only and not principally the de Man of 1940-42, but 'the Deconstruction' of 1989."

A similar recent case involves the former president of Stanford University. Marc Tessier-Lavigne stepped-down when Stanford students discovered that there was manipulated data in research he published between 2001 and 2008. Tessier-Lavigne has denied the charges and apparently was not the member of his research team responsible for the fraudulent data. But he was listed as one of the authors of the research and thus could not avoid the tarnish of scandal.

What would such a case look like for vet-writers who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan? Thoughtless or even shameful early publications, or ones that didn't jibe with the values held by the later and presumably wiser and more mature author? Dishonorable or incompetent service while in uniform, on deployment, or in combat? Disreputable personal conduct? For myself, I've got a string of publications dating back to the 1980s. I think they hold up pretty well, and I've made at least a token effort to rescue some of them from oblivion, in the form of a *Time Now* post that reprinted my contributions to *Military Review* from 2001-2009. My two blogs, *Time Now* and *15-Month Adventure*, are still online for anyone to peruse, and a few scholarly articles are available to those with access to a university library digital archive. I cringe when I think about places in each blog where I might have been unfair or mean to a real person. Fortunately, those places aren't many or particularly egregious, though I still dread the day that I am called on them. My military record is nothing spectacular, but there's also not much to hang me for either, at least not from the highest of trees.

As for my personal life, I like the line from a great Drive-By Truckers song called "The Righteous Path": "I've got a couple of big secrets / I'd kill to keep hid." My intent is to take my "big secrets" to the grave, but we'll see—secrets are hard to keep buried. Like decades-old journalism and obscure

scholarly articles, the particulars of anyone's life are rarely scrutinized until reasons emerge for doing so. The import of cultural biodegradability is that once something is done, it can't be undone, and once something is written, it can't be unwritten, and it all counts.

Mark Athitakis, "What Happened to All the War Vet Novelists? They've Moved On and So Have We." *Los Angeles Times*. May 12, 2023.

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2023-05-12/what-happened-to-all-the-war-vet-novelists-theyve-moved-on-and-so-have-we>

Jacques Derrida, "Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments." *Critical Inquiry* 15.4, Summer 1989. Peggy Kamuf, a frequent translator of Derrida, is here named as co-author.

Peter Molin, "Whatever Happened to American Sniper?" *Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature*. July 2018.

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