Noble Accounts: American War Stories, American Mothers, and Failed American Dreams

In the social history of our country, the current cultural moment may seem particularly conducive to division, denial and fear. But in his 1962 essay “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” James Baldwin exposes what he sees as a specifically American character trait: panic at the idea that our dreams have failed, and the complacency that “so inadequately masks [this] panic.” Discussing the great American novelists up to the time of his writing, he elaborates: “all dreams were to have become possible here. This did not happen. And the panic… comes out of the fact that we are not confronting the awful question of whether or not all our dreams have failed… How have we managed to become what we have, in fact, become? And if we are, as indeed we seem to be, so empty and so desperate, what are we to do about it?” In life, as in fiction, this is an incendiary question.

Baldwin posits that “the effort to become a great novelist simply involves attempting to tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more.” Living as we now do in what some deem a post-truth society, would a novelist hewing to Baldwin’s definition be noble or naïve?

Acknowledging the prominence of war literature in the American canon, Baldwin takes issue with those who idolize the giants—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Faulkner— and complain that the younger generation doesn't live up to their legacy. "It is inane…" he says, "to compare the literary harvest of World War II with that of World War I—not only because we do not, after all, fight wars in order to produce literature, but also because the two wars had nothing in common."

As Michael Carson discussed on this site, Sam Sacks, in *Harper's*, lately took up the question of war literature and the prominence of the first person account. In "First-Person Shooters: What's Missing in Contemporary War Fiction," Sacks echoed Baldwin's characterization of the American public as complacent, pointing out that the tendency to praise modern war writing "ennobles the account while deploring the event." Returning soldiers, attempting to process or at least to share their experiences through literature, are met with a "disconnected," "distractable" public. In Phil Klay's much-praised *Redeployment*, Sacks observes, "redemption seems to rely on a shared incomprehension of what exactly [the Terror Wars] were about."

Does incomprehension, then, become the only thing the narrator and the reader have in common? It is personal experience that gives soldier-writers the authority to attempt to write about war, but it is also this very experience that distances them from their audience.

Sacks takes issue with soldiers' personal accounts as literature. Citing an argument by Eric Bennett, he says, "Nearly all recent war writing has been cultivated in the hothouse of creative-writing programs. No wonder so much of it looks alike." (I would argue that there's something of a post hoc fallacy here, and point out that given the opportunity to use the benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, veterans already inclined toward writing might understandably choose to go for an arts degree that would otherwise seem impractical and/or

financially out of reach.)

Sacks asks, “What might the novel be capable of—aesthetically and politically—if it broke out of its obsessively curated pigeonholes of first-person experience?” While this is a tantalizing question, some of the best fictional portraits of twentieth-century Americans were necessarily based on such specific “pigeonholes,” isolated as the characters were by madness, geography, oppression, alienation, or a host of other factors. This was true not only for soldiers, but for women in various circumstances, notably that of the “desperate housewife”. This hyper-personal view through which we filtered literature over the last century paved the way for current trends; some dismiss the primacy of first-person accounts, others criticize the rise of “identity politics,” and the cult of the individual perhaps enforces our general cultural narcissism. Certainly the legacy of individuality, while containing elements we can be proud of, contributed to the rise of social media as both useful tool and scourge (depending on who you’re talking to). We hurtle insults; we troll each other; the more civilized and less anonymous among us agree to disagree. Maybe, as Baldwin implied, what unites us is our shared panic.

Failed dreams and illusions littered the ground in mid-twentieth century America. In *Fifth Avenue, 5 a.m.: Audrey Hepburn, Breakfast at Tiffany’s, and the Dawn of the Modern Woman*, Sam Wasson observes: “With an unprecedented degree of leisure time, and more media access than ever before, the Fifties woman was the single most vulnerable woman in American history to the grasp of prefab wholesale thought, and by extension, to the men who made it.” These living Barbies in their gilded cages, straining against intellectual stultification, lead us to a generation of characters like Maria in Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays* and, much later, Betty Draper in Matt Weiner’s *Mad Men*. In one episode of that show, a newly divorced mother moves to the suburbs and is

regarded as an alien for, among other infractions, taking long aimless walks. “Where are you going?” a housewife asks, seething with disdain and suspicion.

Didion’s Maria is nearly incapacitated by “the unspeakable peril in the everyday… In the whole world there was not as much sedation as there was instantaneous peril.” This is reminiscent of stories of American soldiers in Vietnam, getting stoned out of their minds or slipping into heroin to numb their terror. Maria lives during the same era, but rather than being on her belly in a jungle, or marching in Mississippi facing down guns, riot gear, and water hoses, she is in L.A. on a vast freeway of loneliness, surrounded by drugs, vapidity and self-deception. After her husband leaves her, she sleeps near the pool, though sleeping outdoors strikes her as the “first step toward something unnameable.” Hers is a very specific and isolated terror, perhaps even its own type of war. Can one human being’s abject fear of annihilation be distinguished from another’s? As readers, we may become irritated by the overly personal account, especially when the speaker is perceived as privileged, selfish, or narcissistic. But, says Baldwin, “What the writer is always trying to do is utilize the particular in order to reveal something much larger and heavier than any particular can be.” Sacks thinks recent war writing has it backward, trying to shoehorn the universal into the particular: “The public’s unprecedented disconnection from the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan—wars waged by a volunteer army and funded with borrowed money—has made it all the more eager to genuflect before the writing that has emerged from these conflicts. As if in response to this public appetite for artistic redemption, veterans have been producing stories of personal struggle that are built around abstract universal truths, stories that strive to close the gap between soldier and civilian.”

Lucia Berlin’s Korean War-era story, “Lead Street,

Albuquerque," depicts a brilliant young artist who avoids military orders by getting his new wife pregnant. After she has the baby, his wife—another Maria—gazes out of the hospital window and smiles, saying, "How come nobody ever talks about this? About dying or being born?"

The next war, Vietnam, would be the first "television war," and there would then be plenty of talk about dying. But unlike the men his age who are sent to be killed, Maria's husband, who "hated the baby's smells," is above such earthbound matters. (Except, of course, when having sex with his mistress, as he was doing when the baby was born). At the end of the story, the artist abandons Maria when she informs him that she is pregnant again. He leaves behind his rare, caged birds, which Maria gives to a neighbor. The story could be read as a sly take on McCarthy-era fear of artists and bohemians as morally corrupt and un-American, or it could stand on its merits as a depiction of one woman's reality.

Berlin tells, in an indirect way, a woman's experience (or non-experience) of a war. Where, I wonder, is the great American "spouse left behind during wartime" novel? The great one written by a female veteran? Sacks reminds us that "There are more than 200,000 women on active duty in the military, but the female experience of warfare has barely been broached."

What does it mean for our cultural conceptions of "big ticket items" like war, morality, and artistic authority that we live in a country with a long history of women's voices being silenced? This history strengthens the case for the centrality of personal experience in fiction. Still, Sacks's characterization makes sense. We, the somatized public, are supposedly at a safe remove from the dangers of war, praising the accounts of those who return without having to comprehend their realities or condone the act of war itself. "Ennobl[ing] the account while deploring the event."

It strikes me that we do the opposite with certain women's experiences. Mothering, for example. The "mommy wars", in fact, have this as a basic tenet: motherhood is an inherently noble pursuit, the most important job you'll ever have, etc. ad nauseam, but you're doing it wrong. Here is a kind of symmetry; men can't physically experience childbirth, and women have not—historically, officially-—been able to experience combat.

Baldwin said that "The multiple truths about a people are revealed by that people's artists—that is what the artists are for." This is interesting, given Berlin's antagonist artist character, obviously not the kind of artist Baldwin was thinking of. Or perhaps he was including such nasty characters? Maybe our dreams have failed: the American dream of what it is to be a mother, an artist, a soldier, a reader, a citizen. Perhaps they have failed because no American is able to fit these notions as neatly as we would like, now or ever. Baldwin also called this nation one "in which words are mostly used to cover the speaker, not to wake him up." Is panic and its attendant complacency surprising in a country where your youth doesn't belong to you, nor your body, your time with a new baby, or your privacy? And why shouldn't our fiction reflect our personal experiences of these failed dreams?

Why Black Literature Matters

"The Thankful Poor", Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1894

Last month in *The Atlantic*, Egyptian writer and activist Alaa Al Aswany wrote an excellent essay on How Literature Inspires Empathy. He gives an example from a sentence in Dostoyevsky's *The House of the Dead* ("He, also, had a mother") to show how a single word makes the reader see a criminal and prisoner in a whole new light. As Al Aswany explains, "the role of literature is in this 'also'. It means we're going to understand, we're going to forgive, we're not going to judge. We should understand that people are not bad, but they can do bad things under particular circumstances." Later, after mentioning how *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* help us sympathize with and not judge those titular unfaithful wives, he writes "Literature gives us a broad spectrum of human possibilities. It teaches us how to feel other people suffering. When you read a good novel, you forget about the nationality of the character. You forget about his or her religion. You forget about his skin color or her skin color. You only understand the human. You understand that this is a human being, the same way we are. And so reading great novels absolutely can remake us as much better human beings." There

is a case to be made that Dostoyevsky is not an author who always aspires much empathy in his readers (especially when compared to his counterpart Tolstoy). Likewise, it is impossible to claim that reading literature always improves the reader, which is just not the case.

My main interests of study and research have always been history, philosophy, and literature. I have two degrees in history, which helps me learn about and understand the world. Philosophy helps me think about the world, sometimes too abstractly, as it is and ought to be. But literature is a way of feeling, understanding, and connecting with humanity in all its various guises on a personal and emotional level. It is a continuation of the oldest human activity of storytelling. I would argue that not only is literature at least as important as the other arts and sciences, including history and philosophy, but, at its best, it is one of the central things that symbolizes our shared humanity and, in the process of both absorbing old and creating new literature, shapes us as human creatures.

One reason for this is that, despite some self-appointed guardians of what constitutes high culture (or snobbish protectors of an exclusive and immutable “canon”), literature is and always has been primarily a form of popular entertainment appealing to people from all walks of life. We think of Shakespeare, rightly, as an almost godlike literary creator central to Western literature; in reality, a large part of his plays just barely survived in written form only through the foresight of two contemporaries who produced the Folios. If not for this, Shakespeare might today be known only to scholars as an Elizabethan playwright whose enormous popularity was due mostly to the lower and middle classes enjoying his over-abundance of wittily crude sexual jokes and double entendres.

According to my own rough formulation, all literature can probably be grouped into two categories based on the motives

of both author and reader: escapism, and edification. Most genre literature falls under escapism—fantasy, science fiction, mystery, thriller, historical fiction, romance, western, travel, etc. The somewhat smaller range of books that intend to represent broad universal truths, dig into a particular philosophical discourse, or teach some important life lesson to the readers about the world fall under the category of edification—these are usually the "classics" that are reread by every generation of reader. It is important to note that there is overlap between the two categories; that is, every type of escapist "genre" literature has its own exemplars of great literature due to the skill and depth of the writing. Tolkien is considered the greatest of the fantasy writers, and his work transcends that genre and becomes something valuable and worthy for all readers (I don't know if the Harry Potter series can be seen the same way since I have never read it; readers can let me know in the comments section). Similarly in science fiction, Asimov is one of the writers who pushed the boundaries of his genre into something greater and more universal. Most of Jane Austen's novels are basically simple romance (just like all Shakespeare's comedies), but that does not mean they are not also edifying literature in some capacity. I do not intend to attempt any wider comparisons on this theme of two types of literature, but I would be interested to read about other examples that come to mind (once again, you can let me know in the comments section).

Coming broadly around from this digression to my main point, literature can do many things, and one of the most important of these, to my mind, is to inspire empathy—something which has never been overly abundant in the world but which there can never be too much of. Because of the unique merits of literature, it has a power to reach people on a raw or emotional level that is rare in other media. In the most extreme end of the spectrum, it can cause readers to be so affected as to kill themselves in droves, as with Goethe's *The*

Sorrows of Young Werther. It can convey the feeling of shared humanity, such as Prince Andrei felt while mortally wounded on the field of Borodino in *War and Peace*. It can make us understand the lives of people who are totally different from us, and who we would otherwise never know anything about. This is especially true of the books by people who in the past were never represented in literature due to political and social circumstances– slavery, colonialism, poverty, and other exploitations. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is considered the first important modern novel by an African writer, which shows the African rather than the European perspective of a Joseph Conrad or a Graham Greene. A similar example is the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels *Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between*, and *A Grain of Wheat*, which describe the hardships of colonial Kenyan life and the Mau Mau rebellion in a much different way than the more idealized European vision of a Karen Blixen.

A writer does not have to be one of the excluded minorities or oppressed in order to write about them. Alan Paton was a white liberal South African who worked for penal reform in his country and founded the South African Liberal Party (which was outlawed by the Apartheid regime). His book *Cry, the Beloved Country* tells the story of a poor Zulu priest who makes a Dantean journey to Johannesburg to look for his missing sister and son. It is one of the most emotionally charged books I have read, and a book that cannot fail to create a strong sense of empathy in the reader for the injustices of racism in South Africa (and, by extension, the whole world).

"Black Lives Matter" is a new civil rights movement for Black people in America after the seemingly endless cases of police murder and injustice that have recently proven the existence and depth of entrenched systemic racism in the America of the First Black President. The reactionaries and enablers of injustice that have decried this movement say that it foments

violence (it does not) or disregard for White people's lives (it does not). Despite the unique promise of its founding, America is a country whose relatively short history has had more than its share of horrific and unforgettable injustice. After decades or even centuries of hard-fought activism slowly bending the arc of history towards justice, much of the past has indeed been forgotten or misrepresented. In school textbooks, I fear that much of the true history is at least partially white-washed, if not completely elided. The two grossest examples are the 400-year genocide of the Native Americans, and the 300-year terror regime of Black slavery. Both of these things allowed the United States to grow into the wealthy and powerful country it is today, and the latter's influence on the society and politics of 21st century America is still quite strong and cannot be forgotten, diminished, or excused. For every romantic apology for the South (such as the novel and film *Gone With the Wind*) or for every apologist who claims that slavery was "not so bad" for the slaves, there must be someone who refutes them immediately with the truth. If someone claims that things are fine for Black people now because of the Civil Rights Act and Affirmative Action, they need to understand that such relatively feeble legislation has barely put a dent in the centuries of heart-breaking brutality and relentless economic exploitation.

Luckily, there is a strong recent tradition in America of Black literature which tells stories that could never have been told even 100 years ago. For anyone doubting that White privilege is real or that Black Lives have not mattered as much as White Lives in America, I would recommend some of these books more than any history book. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. I was thinking mostly of fiction—novels, specifically—as the focus of this piece, but there are numerous examples of literary non-fiction—especially autobiographies—that are worth

reading and have lessons to teach: Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*. More than the superficiality of film and the flatness of art and photography, the depth of characterization, psychology, tragedy, and emotion contained in such literature can do more to create awareness of the joy and tragedy of human lives and inspire deep and long-lasting empathy for other people.

In Al Aswany's article, he comments that "I don't think literature is the right tool to change the situation right now. If you would like to change the situation now, go out into the street. Literature, to me, is about a more important change: It changes our vision, our understanding, the way we see. And people who are changed by literature, in turn, will be more capable to change the situation." There is often a strong connection between writers and political activism, which has been especially clear in the case of writers coming from traditionally suppressed minority backgrounds; James Baldwin was a lifelong fighter for social and racial justice, and Alice Walker famously declared that "Activism is my rent for living on the planet."

In a time when Liberal Arts and humanistic studies are coming under criticism for not being apparently linked to "real-world" skills, and budgets for education are being cut across the board, we need to ask ourselves if there are things important in society beyond profit-making. Is nation-building and money-making the most important thing in society, more than the lives of people it exploits? Are some people in society just a means for others and not an end in themselves? How can we enrich our culture and society to be not only good citizens but empathetic fellow humans? Reading literature is no panacea, but is certainly something that can do no harm. Only in such a world where we understand and feel compassion for people outside our own circle can a statement such as

Black Lives Matter be both a true assertion and a reality. Where kids and teenagers are not murdered by the police for no reason other than that they were Black, where refugees and immigrants would be universally welcomed rather than treated like lower life forms. Only in a more empathetic world of shared humanity is this possible.