

# The Minimum Wager

---

*place a small bet on your better self*

---

No. 9

May 2022

This bimonthly letter is addressed to those with limits on their funds and their free time who nevertheless want to think. The features below, which will appear regularly, are created and curated by members of the Respondeo Authors' Publishing Co-operative. If you have something to contribute or want to know more about the work of the co-op, or want to become a supporting subscriber, please contact us at our website [www.Respondeobooks.com](http://www.Respondeobooks.com).

## A Legacy Passage: the final chapter of Tolstoi's *War and Peace* (1867)

From the time that the law of Copernicus was discovered and proved, the mere recognition of the fact that it was not the sun but the earth that moves sufficed to destroy the whole cosmography of the ancients. By disproving that law it might have been possible to retain the old conception of the movements of bodies, but without disproving it, it would seem impossible to continue studying Ptolemaic worlds. But even after the discovery of the law of Copernicus the Ptolemaic worlds were still studied for a long time.

From the time the first person said and proved that the number of births or of crimes is subject to mathematical laws, and that this or that mode of government is determined by certain geographical and economic conditions, and that certain relations of population to soil produce migrations of peoples, the foundations on which history had been built were destroyed in their essence.

By refuting these new laws the former view of history might have been retained; but without refuting them it would seem impossible to continue studying historic events as the results of man's free will. For if a certain mode of government was established or certain migrations of people took place in consequence of such and such geographic, ethnographic, or economic conditions, then the free will of those individuals who appear to us to have established that mode of government or occasioned the migrations can no longer be regarded as the cause. And yet the former history continues to be studied side by side with the laws of statistics, geography, political economy, comparative philology, and geology, which directly contradict its assumptions.

The struggle between the old views and the new was long and stubbornly fought out in physical philosophy. Theology stood on guard for the old views and accused the new of violating revelation. But when truth conquered, theology established itself just as firmly on the new foundation.

Just as prolonged and stubborn is the struggle now proceeding between the old and the new conception of history, and theology in the same way stands on guard for the old view, and accuses the new of subverting revelation.

In the one case as in the other, on both sides the struggle provokes passion and stifles truth. On the one hand there is fear and regret for the loss of the whole edifice constructed through the ages, and on the other is the passion for destruction.

To the men who fought against the rising truths of physical philosophy, it seemed that if they admitted the truth it would destroy faith in God, in the creation of the firmament, and in the miracle of Joshua the son of Nun. To the defenders of the laws of Copernicus and Newton, to Voltaire for example, it seemed that the laws of astronomy destroyed religion, and he utilized the law of gravitation as a weapon against religion.

Just so, it now seems as if we have only to admit the law of inevitability to destroy the conception of the soul, of good and evil, and all the institutions of state and church that have been built up on those conceptions.

So too, like Voltaire in his time, uninvited defenders of the law of inevitability today use that law as a weapon against religion, though the law of inevitability in history, like the law of Copernicus in astronomy, far from destroying, even strengthens the foundation on which the institutions of state and church are erected.

As in the question of astronomy then, so in the question of history now, the whole difference of opinion is based on the recognition or non-recognition of something absolute, serving as the measure of visual phenomena. In astronomy it was the immovability of the earth, in history it is the independence of personality – free will.

As with astronomy the difficulty in recognizing the motion of the earth lay in abandoning the immediate sensation of the earth's fixity and of the motion of the planets, so in history the difficulty in recognizing the subjection of personality to laws of space, time, and cause lies in renouncing the direct feeling of the independence of one's own personality. But as in astronomy the new view said: "It is true that we do not feel the motion of the earth, but by

admitting its immobility we arrive at absurdity, while by admitting its motion (which we do not feel) we arrive at laws," so also in history the new view says: "It is true that we are not conscious of our dependence, but by admitting our free will we arrive at absurdity, while by admitting our dependence on the external world, on time, and on cause, we arrive at laws."

In the first case it was necessary to renounce the consciousness of an unreal immobility in space and to recognize a motion we did not feel; in the present case it is similarly necessary to renounce a freedom that does not exist, and to recognize a dependence of which we are not conscious.

translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude

## What Were They (the Supreme Court) Thinking?

### High Noon at the Supreme Court

Guns are at the center of one of our most intense culture wars. They have strong emotional symbolism in many directions. A trusty household gun is associated with brave American Revolutionary Minutemen opposing governmental tyranny, the romantic individualism of the (uncertainly admirable) movement Westward, and also the time-honored sport of hunting. On the other hand, guns are linked to mobs, gangs, school shooters and suicides. These diverse connections are differently compelling to different people, so that the disagreements over the true meaning of gun ownership are especially pitched and vivid.

The legal framework for thinking about the place of guns in American society is the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution. It reads:

A well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed.

For most of American history, as far as the Supreme Court was concerned, this amendment slept largely undisturbed. Up until the twenty-first century, there were just a few Court opinions that mentioned it in passing, mostly holding that it did not affect the cases at issue. E.g. *United States v. Cruikshank*, 92 U.S. 542 (1875). This ruling held that the Second Amendment does not constrain the states, but only the federal government. Lower courts, meanwhile, developed an interpretation that the Second Amendment was intended to protect only the possession of weapons that were related to preserving a "well regulated militia,"

E.g. *United States v. Pfeifer*, 8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2004. That meant there is no *personal* right to own guns, only the right to own them if they are needed for militia duties.

During these years when the Second Amendment was ignored, the technology of weaponry exploded. Weapons became available that had destructive power unimaginable to the Founders. Muzzle loaded muskets used in the American Revolution, slow and not very deadly by today's standards, are no longer the weapons that might be used by a state's militia. Instead, our nation – and other nations as well – are well supplied with armaments that could destroy the world several times over.

Because evolving technology has made such enormous changes in the power of guns compared to what the writers of the Constitution and Bill of Rights could have foreseen, together with the near-total absence of Supreme Court precedents interpreting the Second Amendment, today's quarrel over guns has given rise to a particularly testy struggle over the interpretive doctrine known as "Originalism." This doctrine, which is usually associated with the conservative wing of the Court, holds that all statements in the Constitution must be understood as they would have been understood at the time the Constitution was adopted. For Originalists, interpreting the Constitution requires immersing oneself in the political and intellectual atmosphere of the 1780's and 1790's – somehow placing out of mind knowledge we now have which that earlier age did not, and putting on beliefs, attitudes, philosophies, prejudices and loyalties that are not those of our own day.

The Second Amendment presents a blatant challenge to Originalism. What the Founders meant by "a well regulated militia," for example, is hard to apply in today's world. Militias occupy a very different place in modern society than they did in 1791, the year the Second Amendment was ratified as part of the Bill of Rights. Moreover, Originalism seems to lose its bearings completely when it tries to determine exactly what "arms" citizens have a right to own. A truly rigorous Originalist interpretation of the Second Amendment would be that it protects the right of citizens to own muzzle-loading muskets. This makes the amendment irrelevant and ridiculous. But if, contrary to strict Originalism, the meaning of "arms" is updated to embrace modern weaponry, then the amendment becomes horrifying. It must be the case that federal and state governments can do *some* infringing on our right to bear the kinds of massively destructive weapons that have been developed in the last 230 years! The Second Amendment could not be read to allow people, or even well regulated militias, to get nuclear warheads or surface-to-air anti-aircraft missiles, could it?

In 2008 the long drought of Supreme Court rulings on the Second Amendment ended with *District of Columbia v. Heller*. In that case, which was decided by a 5-4 vote, Justice Scalia, writing the opinion of the Court's majority, claimed to take an Originalist approach in

striking down D.C. gun laws as violating the Second Amendment. He argued that the right to own guns for self-defense was *presumed* at the time of the Constitution, and that it was therefore a *personal* right, despite the stipulation of a “well regulated militia.” It did not matter to Scalia that the type of handguns D.C. was trying to prohibit did not exist at the time of the Constitution; it was sufficient for him that they were now popular for self-defense. Generally, Scalia brushed by the problem of the vastly increased deadliness of modern weapons, remarking breezily – and without explaining how this remark fit the straightforward language of the Second Amendment – that it was obvious that there were limits on the personal constitutional right to bear arms.

Justice Stevens, writing for the liberal dissenters, also claimed to take an Originalist approach, which throws into question whether Originalism actually means much. Stevens argued that the Founders’ intent, plainly expressed in the Second Amendment, was that governments could limit ownership of weapons except as they were needed for a “well regulated militia.” In taking this position, Stevens was agreeing with the understanding of the Second Amendment that had long been adopted by the lower courts. It was Scalia that was doing something new and radical by finding a personal constitutional right to own guns, thus engaging in the kind of judicial activism that conservative judges claim to deplore. Such a result makes it look as if Originalism is not a principled difference between conservatives and liberals, but exists only in the eye of the beholder. The Second Amendment, because it presents such a stark difference in circumstances between the eighteenth century and the twenty-first century, has exposed this conundrum.

In 2021 the Court agreed to take a new Second Amendment case, *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen*. The briefs already filed in this case suggest that Originalism will figure prominently in the upcoming decision. Both sides are relying on history. The challengers to the New York state handgun law claim that the Founders, knowing that the right to bear a gun or weapon has been the rule under British and colonial law for 700 years, must have intended that any restrictions on that pre-existing right be heavily disfavored. New York, joined by the United States, argues that the Founders also knew that in all of that 700-year history governments have imposed restrictions on guns as necessary to ensure public safety.

If both claims are true, neither side can claim to be more Originalist than the other, and neither side will persuade opponents away from their entrenched ideologies. Bitterness will continue. Because the ideological make-up of the present Court favors the loosening of gun control laws, the likely real-world consequence of this standoff is more guns on the streets. Our culture wars are about to get bloodier.

by Martha Franks

## A Scientific Note: Aggression

Are humans innately aggressive? Why do we fight?

In the early 20th century, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud posited that aggression was a fundamental characteristic of human nature. He proposed a “Dual-Instinct Theory” --the death instinct (which he named Thanatos) opposed the life instinct (which he named Eros). Freud believed that violent behaviors, such as aggressiveness, sadism, and masochism, resulted from the instinctive death drive being channeled outwards (rather than inwards, which would result in suicide). He concluded that “civilization is therefore an attempt to control aggression.”

The ethologist Konrad Lorenz in his book *On Aggression* (1963), looked to the behavior of animals for support of Freud’s claim. Lorenz agreed with Freud that conflict behavior in humans is instinctive, but maintained that it could be environmentally modified by understanding and providing for basic human needs. Lorenz described a psycho-hydraulic model of human emotions and instincts wherein the “drive” within an individual builds up pressure which must be released (the “drive-discharge” model): low levels of aggressive behavior could be released through competitive sports or combative war-substitutes, thereby preventing the build-up of that drive which could result in an eruption of more violent forms of aggressive behavior.

If the Freud and Lorenz model of aggression is correct, then we would expect to see societies where violent sports events and war-substitutes are popular manifesting less violent behavior, and those societies would engage in fewer wars. The social biologist E. O. Wilson argues that the above model is essentially wrong: its prediction is not what we observe. In fact, we observe the opposite.. Societies in which such war-substitutes are popular actually have more instances of violent behavior and crime, and they engage in wars more frequently.

Rather than being one aspect of a Freudian dichotomy or duality, aggression in any species is actually a complicated *array* of responses, each with separate controls in the nervous system. All animals experience aggression and fight over scarce resources, specifically for food, territory, or mates. Fighting over resources is mostly contained as aggressive behavior *within* the species. Wilson arranges these behaviors into five categories:

- 1) defense and conquest of territory
- 2) assertion of dominance

- 3) sexual aggression
- 4) acts of hostility to accomplish weaning
- 5) moralistic and disciplinary aggression used to enforce the rules of society

Some aggressive displays and behaviors occur between individuals of different species, such as attacks against prey and the flip side, aggression against predators. Like Lorenz, Wilson found some aggressive displays to be intentional forms of communication. Such displays typically utilize clear visual cues.

Wilson emphasized that none of the above categories exists as a general instinct over a broad array of species. Each category can be added, modified, or erased by an individual species in the course of its genetic evolution, just as eye color can be altered. Aggressive behavior is in fact one of the most labile genetic traits.

Game theory provides us with models of aggressive contests and displays within animal species. One of the most famous “games” is the Hawk-Dove model (Maynard Smith, 1982). It describes the contest between a selfish strategy (Hawk) and a more socially beneficial strategy (Dove) when competing for a shared resource. In this model, Hawks always fight to injure or kill opponents, which also entails the risk of injury to themselves. Doves only display, and they “lose” by retreating, never engaging in serious fights. By assigning relative values related to the costs of serious injury and expenditure of caloric energy in displays, and comparing these costs to the benefits of “winning” the contest, we find the following: when Hawk competes with Hawk, half the time it wins, half the time it suffers injuries; Hawk **always** beats Dove, because Dove immediately retreats against Hawk; when Dove meets Dove, each always displays, resulting in energy costs, winning half the time and retreating half the time.

One might imagine Hawk to be the better strategy because Hawks win half their combats. However, the cost of losing combat is so much higher than the cost of retreating that the overall benefit of the Hawk strategy is greatly reduced. A pertinent example of Dove-like retreat is found in the behavior of gorillas. Lowland mountain gorilla silverbacks very rarely engage in physical combat—they almost always retreat. This seems incongruous given their strength. However, it has been documented that when silverbacks do engage in physical fights they bite. Their sharp canines cause very deep wounds which often prove fatal. The lethality of their fights is so high that silverbacks usually choose to retreat instead of fight.

There is an important variation to the Hawk-Dove model: add to it a third strategy called “Bourgeois” which attacks (or “plays Hawk”) when it is the **owner** of the resource, but retreats (or “plays Dove”) when it is the **intruder**. In the game of Hawk-Dove-Bourgeois

there is one and only one successful strategy-- Bourgeois. This model, though still theoretical, more accurately depicts the nature of conflict behavior in animals--a mixture of display and fighting depending upon the individual's circumstances. Animals will fight more energetically when they are defending their territory, their meal, or their mate. When intruding or invading another's territory or trying to steal another's food or mate, the cost of injury (for the intruder) probably exceeds the value of the resource. While an intruding animal will behave aggressively, its motivation is less strong, and so generally speaking its energetic output will be weaker. Territories are a special case and seem to contain an "invincible center." The owner defends it much more energetically than the intruder tries to steal it, so the defending owner usually wins. Wilson claims that "in a special sense, the owner has the 'moral advantage' over trespassers."

It is a common belief in human conflicts that the defender has an advantage: defense of "hearth and home" is a potent motivation. Napoleon's 1812 failed invasion of Russia is a comfortably distant historical example in which a numerically and technologically superior invader was defeated by the defender's indefatigable resistance. The defense of Ukraine from Russian invasion provides a current example. Against all expectations, the much smaller and less well-equipped army of Ukraine is continuing to defend its homeland against a militarily superior force.

*Homo sapiens*, although markedly aggressive, is **not** the most violent animal. Many animal species, like hyenas, lions, and langur monkeys, engage in lethal fighting, infanticides, and even cannibalism at a rate far above that of humans. Ants conduct assassinations, skirmishes, and pitched battles as routine business. In a study of violence in 1000 species of animals (2016) the meerkat was found to be the species most likely to murder its own kind. In 2006, a study by *National Geographic* showed meerkat mothers killing the offspring of other females in order to maintain dominance. About 20% of meerkat deaths are attributed to murder by other meerkats! Though humans do not display as much intra-species violent behavior as meerkats, the average level of aggressive behavior by *Homo sapiens* globally *does* seem more lethally violent than the average mammal. Taking into account our evolution and that of our closest related species, anthropological estimates for uncivilized humans would predict a rate of 2% lethal violence among such humans (i.e., 2 out of every 100 deaths would be murder). So, humans in the "state of nature" are slightly less murderous than the common ancestor of primates (2.3%) but *much more* murderous than mammals as a whole (0.3%). But civilized humans are much less murderous. According to Mark Pagel (*Nature*, 2016), "Rates of homicide in modern societies that have police forces, legal systems, prisons and strong cultural attitudes that reject violence are, at less than 1 in 10,000 deaths (or 0.01%), about 200 times lower than the authors' predictions for our state of nature."



while Toyofumi Ogura stood still  
on a path in the rim of hills cradling the city,

open like a woman's bamboo fan  
to the sea, to the air, the morning light that was there  
on each twig, each smooth stone,

...between these two... before the bluish endflash...  
orphan moments floated off the past  
severed from their source, unoriented.

new mother drowsing  
her nipple still firm with milk  
after his small tongue

open like a woman's bamboo fan  
to the sea, to the air, the morning light that was there  
on each twig, each smooth stone,

old man bicycling  
across a bridge, silver suns  
glint in his glasses

*(bright flash of blue-white light in whole space,  
followed at asterisk by mounting roar on timpani, obliterating speech)*

open like a woman's bamboo fan \*  
to the sea, to the air, the morning light that was there  
on each twig, each smooth stone

by Phil LeCuyer

## Film Review:

*Apocalypse Now*, by Francis Ford Coppola

“Today art is hardly conceivable except as an orientation anticipating the apocalypse.”  
–Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

The obvious literary reference for Coppola’s 1979 Vietnam film is Joseph Conrad’s 1899 novel *Heart of Darkness*. In both film and novel, a man (Marlow in the novel, Willard in the film) journeys up a river in search of an enigmatic, charismatic, perhaps mad, object of cult-like adoration named Kurtz—a figure who represents the horrors of European colonialism in the Congo in one case, and of the American intervention in the Vietnamese Civil War in the other.

In Coppola’s film Martin Sheen plays Captain Benjamin Willard, a US Army assassin on his third tour in Vietnam, who is sent upriver to find Colonel Walter E. Kurtz and ordered to “terminate his command ... with extreme prejudice.” But the film, it quickly turns out, is more about Willard’s spiritual journey through the horrors of war and its impact on his own psyche than it is about a physical journey from South Vietnam to the fortified compound of a madman somewhere along the Nùng River in Cambodia.

The film begins in Saigon—a fact revealed in the first lines spoken by Willard while he is still in his hotel room already spinning wildly out of control—and ends with Willard’s departure from Kurtz’s compound. It begins with the picking up of weapons: Willard’s officer-issued sidearm is one of the first images in the film. It ends with laying them down: the symbolism in this final scene is too complex to be fully unpacked in a short review. In both the opening and closing shots of the film Willard’s face (upside down at the beginning, right-side up at the end) is superimposed on the face of an enormous Cambodian idol—perhaps that of a Buddha. In Conrad’s novel Marlow is three times compared to a Buddhist idol. The journey that separates Willard’s initial and final departures is punctuated by a series of characters and conflicts, comic and violent by turn, which expose not only one storyteller’s obsession with America’s role in the Vietnam War, but also the spiritual as well as physical toll that war—and by extension all wars—take on the men and women who are drawn into their compelling vortices.

Many referred to Vietnam as “America’s Trojan War.” Jonathan Shay’s 1994 book *Achilles in Vietnam* and its 2002 sequel *Odysseus in America* make this comparison explicit. That these two wars separated by several millennia and strikingly different cultures can evoke each other so vividly raises a series of interesting questions. If we take as wide a

view of humanity as world literature permits us, from the Mesopotamian epic of *Gilgamesh* which dates back some 4,000 years to the Homeric Epics, stories from the Jewish *Tanakh*, world epics like the Mayan *Popol Vuh*, the Indian *Mahabharata*, the Persian *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), the “African Trilogy” of Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, Chinese Historian Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian* and Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, we find certain things that seem to be ubiquitous constants in the universe of human experience. For example, if we are to judge from the cultures portrayed in these works of literature from around the world, all people at all times in all places seem to have practiced some form of poetry, played some form of music, and enjoyed some form of intoxicant – wine or a fermented grain.

War is the other universal constant reflected in the literature of every culture at every time in human history. At all times in all places, human beings have gone to war. Along with the cultural benefits of alcohol, poetry, and music, war seems to be the perennial dark side of what makes us human, and poets from Aeschylus and Virgil to Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen have turned to poetry to try and make sense of that undeniably fundamental human and horrifying experience.

In the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of those poets chose to write their songs in the medium of film. Michael Cimino’s 1978 *The Deer Hunter*; Oliver Stone’s 1986 *Platoon*; Stanley Kubrick’s 1987 *Full Metal Jacket*; John Irvin’s 1987 *Hamburger Hill* (with soundtrack by Philip Glass); Randall Wallace’s 2002 *We Were Soldiers*; Spike Lee’s 2002 *Da 5 Bloods* are just a few of the dozens of movies filmmakers have made about America’s involvement in Vietnam and its lasting impact on the soldiers who fought there and on their families when they came home.

Why are war stories, even for those of us who have never been soldiers – for those of us who have never even thrown a spear or fired a gun – such powerful touchstones? Why do we return to them again and again, to make sense of ourselves and our identity as individuals and citizens? More importantly, what makes *Apocalypse Now* stand apart from the films mentioned above, distinguishing it (along with Terrence Malick’s 1998 World War II movie *The Thin Red Line*) as one of the greatest war movies ever made?

There are several possible answers to this question, some of them related to the technical brilliance of Coppola’s work as a director, John Milius’s writing, Vittorio Storaro’s cinematography, and Walter Murch’s editing. Other answers can be found in the unforgettable characters portrayed by Martin Sheen, Marlon Brando, Dennis Hopper, and Robert Duvall. (Kilgore’s “I love the smell of napalm in the morning” may be among the most quoted lines in movie history, and his character one of the most unnerving and

disturbing portraits of a leader of men at war ever portrayed in a film.) But I suspect that what distinguishes *Apocalypse Now* from other war movies are its ambitions and its commitment to a tradition of exploring the deepest questions of being human through moments of crisis, conflict, despair, and hope that date back at least as far as Homer's *Iliad*.

Many years ago, I had the opportunity to lead a series of seminar discussions on the *Iliad*. My seminar partner, Annapolis Tutor Eva Brann, asked the opening question on our first night together: "What makes war beautiful?" Her question knocked me back in my seat when she first asked it, and it has haunted me ever since. *Can* war be beautiful? Dare we make it such through the power that film and poetry have to transform things? What responsibilities do artists bear when they harness this tremendous power and make horrifying things beautiful?

I find Ms. Brann's question all the more disturbing because I have to admit that I do find Homer's poem beautiful. I find Conrad's novel beautiful. And I find Coppola's film beautiful. In fact when I reflect on the film's powerful cinematography, I realize that some of the most horrifying visual images, those of crashed fighter jets caught in tree branches along the banks of the Nùng River or of the assault at the Do Lung bridge, are also among the most beautiful images in the film.

What disturbs me most about these revelations of beauty is their stark contrast (whether of sound or image, or both combined on the screen) with the horrors of war that are portrayed in the film. How dare we, I ask myself every time I sit down to watch *Apocalypse Now*, find – or create – beauty in and out of the violence and destruction that was Vietnam (or World War II, or the Trojan War, or the war that unfolds on the battlefield of Kurukshetra fought between the Kauravas and the Pandavas as recounted in the *Mahabharata*)?

Why do we keep returning to the songs and poems, paintings (one thinks of Picasso's *Guernica*) and images (one thinks of Nick Ut's devastating photo "The Terror of War") of warfare that pervade human history as surely as the cultural traditions of music and poetry themselves do? Why are we drawn to what we loath and fascinated by what we condemn? Why are we attracted to what can kill us, and what has, over the course of human history, killed untold millions, whether at Thermopylae, on the fields of Agincourt and Borodino, or along the banks of the Yellow River in China?

The power of *Apocalypse Now* is that it not only confronts its viewers with such questions, but it takes us on a journey of our own – we accompany Willard, not only upriver, but

through the dark night of the soul that he must navigate as he tries to come to terms with the mission he has been sent on, a mission to kill another American soldier. This mission forces him to doubt everything he has previously understood about such overly simplistic categories as “friend” and “enemy,” “good guys” and “bad guys” (facile distinctions which Homer saw through millennia before Hollywood tried to inscribe them in our subconscious).

*Apocalypse Now* is about good and evil, but those categories are not found where we expect to find them, and the lines that divide them are not where people in positions of power and authority (such as those who send Willard on his mission) have told us they are. They are not found along lines of patriotism or duty. They are not found in distinctions of race or nationality. They are not found in the political disputes between Capitalism and Communism. In the film’s narration written by author Michael Herr (whose 1977 *Dispatches* which he wrote about his time in Vietnam John le Carré called, “the best book I have ever read on men and war in our time”), Willard comments, “I wanted a mission, and **for my sins** they gave me one.” This is an echo of Conrad’s Marlow who at one point observes about *his* Kurtz (the Kurtz in Conrad’s novel, who is an interesting parallel to Coppola’s – and Brando’s – Kurtz in many ways):

But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. I had – **for my sins**, I suppose – to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself. No eloquence could have been so withering to one’s belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity.

“For my sins...” -- Willard and Marlow alike realize that the journey each has embarked on is a spiritual journey, a journey which will force them to confront a madness that is both within and outside them. If it is, in part, a journey of self-discovery, it is also a journey in which they will encounter a man whose ambitions, failures, and power will teach them a great deal about themselves and their own ambitions, failures, and power – or lack thereof.

Kurtz’s “final burst of sincerity,” in book and film alike, is his pronouncement on... well *on what* is precisely the question: “The horror! The horror!” But what is the horror that these two works set out to expose and explore (much like Kurtz himself set out to explore the interior of the African continent)? What happens when the horror outside of us collides with the horror inside us? What happens when poet Wallace Stevens’ dictum that, “it is a violence from within that protects us from a violence from without” fails to hold true, and these two forms of violence strive to outdo one another?

Asking whether the horror is inside us or outside of us is as false a dichotomy as the simplistic notion of good guys and bad guys which all serious war narratives dismantle. The horror is the horror of being human; it is the horror of the wars that human beings fight as a seemingly inevitable part of their (*of our*) being in the world; and it is the horror of how we betray ourselves, our own highest ideals and best intentions, hopes and aspirations.

*Apocalypse Now* is about confronting that horror. The horror of failing to be as good as we want to be, try to be, or think of ourselves as being. But piercing through the “heart of darkness” of this horror is a light that illuminates something else – not something instead of the horror, because the horror cannot be removed, but something in addition to it, something (something that perhaps resides within us, right alongside the horror) that *can* strive against it – something that declares its own kind of war against the horror. This “something” is the hope and the beauty and the timeless, borderless power of those other human universals – art, poetry, and music – to illuminate the dark.

Is the ability of poetry and film to make war beautiful a betrayal and a failure to condemn that horror, or is it part of our attempt to take a stand against the horror and beat it back with something affirmative? All great works of art, no matter how dark their themes, say “yes” to life by virtue of their beauty and their power to make us feel and think and doubt and question. The power of art stands against nihilism, relativism, and materialism – forces serving “the horror” that the film, by virtue of its power to portray both horror and beauty, also shows us how to struggle against. In this sense, *Apocalypse Now*, like Homer’s *Iliad*, the *Mahabharata*, and other works of art that seem to be “about” war, are gifts that show us the possibility of life being about much more than that.

by David Carl

## Announcement of Additions to Respondeo’s free Lecture and Essay

**Library:** *Reading the Book of Esther*, by Phil LeCuyer. This essay presents two concepts, 'angular unconformity' from geology, and 'assymetrical repetition' from astronomy, to use in approaching the *Book of Esther*. *Esther*, the final book added to the Hebrew Bible, is the only biblical book written by a woman. If it is a revelation, it is the final revelation in the texts of that tradition. The name of God does not appear in it. *Reading the Book of Esther* points to a major scribal unconformity and pervasive assymetrical repetitions on every level in interpreting the text's theological silence.

## Book Review: Small Gems Recent and Remembered

an excerpt from Chapter Six, 'The Ache of Guilt,'  
in *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1959, with a new forward  
in 1970), by J. Glenn Gray

The fighting man is disinclined to repent his deeds of violence. Men who in private are scrupulous about conventional justice and right are able to destroy the lives and happiness of others in war without compunction. At least to other eyes they seem to have no regrets. It is understandable, of course, why soldiers in combat would not suffer pangs of conscience when they battle for their lives against others who are trying to kill them. And if the enemy is regarded as a beast or a devil, guilt feelings are not likely to arise if he is slain by your hand. But modern wars are notorious for the destruction of nonparticipants and the razing of properties in lands that are accidentally in the path of combat armies and air forces. In World War II the number of civilians who lost their lives exceeded the number of soldiers killed in combat. At all events, the possibility of the individual involving himself in guilt is immeasurably wider than the specific deeds he might commit against an armed foe. In the thousand chances of warfare, nearly every combat soldier has failed to support his comrades at a critical moment; through sins of omission or commission, he has been responsible for those he did not intend to kill. Through folly or fear, nearly every officer has exposed his own men to needless destruction at one time or another. Add to this the unnumbered acts of injustice so omnipresent in war, which may not result in death but inevitably bring grief and pain, and the impartial observer may wonder how the participants in such deeds could ever smile again and be free of care.

The sober fact appears to be that the great majority of veterans, not to speak of those who helped to put the weapons and ammunitions in their hands, are able to free themselves of responsibility with ease after the event, and frequently while they are performing it. Many a pilot or artilleryman who has destroyed untold numbers of terrified noncombatants has never felt any need for repentance or regret. Many a general who has won his laurels at a terrible cost in human life and suffering among friend and foe can endure the review of his career with great inner satisfaction. So are we made, we human creatures! Frequently we are shocked to discover how little our former enemies regret their deeds and repent their errors. Americans in Germany after World War II, for instance, feel aggrieved that the German populace does not feel more responsibility for having visited Hitler upon the world. The

Germans, for their part, resent the fact that few Americans appear to regret the bombing of German cities into rubble and the burning and crushing of helpless women and children. It appears to be symptomatic of a certain modern mentality to marvel at the absence of guilt consciousness in others while accepting its own innocence as a matter of course.

...In an exposed position on the battlefield during action, his [the soldier's] consciousness of being part of an organism is likely to plunge him into contradictory feelings of power and impotence which succeed one another rapidly. "If I don't hit that guy out there or man this machine gun to the last, my buddies will be killed and I'll be the cause of their death. Everything depends on me." A few minutes later he is likely to ask himself what one rifle or machine gun on one tiny portion of the field can possibly matter to the final outcome. His place in the whole complex is lost to sight, and he is in danger of feeling how absolute is his dependence. All the time, he acts as he feels he must, swept by moods of exaltation, despair, loyalty, hate, and many others. Much of the time he is out of himself, acting simply as a representative of the others, as part of a super-personal entity, on orders from elsewhere. He kills or fails to kill, fights courageously or runs away in the service of this unit and unity. Afterwards, he hears no voice calling him to account for his actions, or, if he does hear a voice, feels no need to respond.

...It is a crucial moment in a soldier's life when he is ordered to perform a deed that he finds completely at variance with his own notions of right and good. Probably for the first time, he discovers that an act that someone else thinks to be necessary is for him criminal. His whole being rouses itself in protest, and he may well be forced to choose in this moment of awareness of his freedom an act involving his own life or death. He feels himself caught in a situation that he is powerless to change yet cannot himself be part of. The past cannot be undone and the present is inescapable. His only choice is to alter himself, since all external features are unchangeable.

What this means in the midst of battle can only inadequately be imagined by those who have not experienced it themselves. It means to set oneself against others and with one stroke lose their comforting presence. It means to cut oneself free of doing what one's superiors approve, free of being an integral part of the military organism with the expansion of the ego that such belonging brings. Suddenly the soldier feels himself abandoned and cast off from all security. Conscience has isolated him, and its voice is a warning: "If you do this, you will not be at peace with me in the future. You can do it, but you ought not. You must act as a man and not as an instrument of another's will."

I shall always remember the face of a German soldier when he described such a drastic awakening as this. At the time we picked him up for investigation in the Vosges in 1944, he was fighting with the French Maquis against his own people. To my question concerning his motives for deserting to the French Resistance, he responded by describing his earlier involvement in German reprisal raids against the French. On one such raid, his unit was ordered to burn a village and to allow none of the villagers to escape. (Possibly the village was Oradour and the soldier was one of the participants in that grisly atrocity; at the time we knew little of what was happening elsewhere and I did not ask him for names.) As he told how women and children were shot as they fled screaming from the flames of their burning homes, the soldier's face was contorted in painful fashion and he was nearly unable to breathe. It was quite clear that this extreme experience had shocked him into full awareness of his own guilt, a guilt he feared he would never atone. At the moment of that awakening he did not have the courage or resolution to hinder the massacre, but his desertion to the Resistance soon after was evidence of a radically new course. Terrible as was his self-reproach at what now could not be undone, he had won himself through this experience and would never again be available as a functionary.

In the Netherlands, the Dutch tell of a German soldier who was a member of an execution squad ordered to shoot innocent hostages. Suddenly he stepped out of rank and refused to participate in the execution. On the spot he was charged with treason by the officer in charge and was placed with the hostages, where he was promptly executed by his comrades. In such an act the soldier has abandoned once and for all the security of the group and exposed himself to the ultimate demands of freedom. He responded in the crucial moment to the voice of conscience and was no longer driven by external commands. In this case we can only guess what must have been the influence of his deed on slayers and slain. At all events, it was surely not slight, and his example on those who hear of the episode cannot fail to be inspiring. Were it not for the revelation of nobility in mankind, which again and again appears in time of war, we could scarcely endure reading the literature of combat.

## A Reflection: Biking, Wars, and Current Events (April 20, 2022)

'At the Going Down of the Sun and in the Morning, We will Remember Them.' It has been sunny and warm (at least for northern France in the middle of April) these past couple of weeks. To take advantage of the good weather, I've been riding a lot, biking on farm tracks and through the woods. The winter wheat is looking good, and the canola oil plants paint the

landscape a brilliant yellow. Wind in my face, legs pumping me up hills, birds singing. It's a good time to bike.

Almost every day I ride past a marker which mentions a major battle at the end of World War I. That spring and summer of 1918, the front lines between French and German armies lay about two kilometers north of my village. The Germans tried to break through Allied forces along the Western front, and this was one of the places where tanks stopped them. Moroccan colonial soldiers fighting for the French bivouacked in my house, and parts of the village suffered artillery strikes which destroyed buildings.

I think about the death and destruction which flattened parts of this region, and how one hundred years later, it has been rebuilt and is prosperous enough. It is easy to pick out the buildings which survived 1918 and those that had to be rebuilt. But I wonder if this region has recovered emotionally from the devastation of World War I. The horrors of war cast long shadows.

As I bike through the villages, I also think about the daily images which show the destroyed Ukrainian towns and cities. It will take an international effort to rebuild these places, at least physically. It can be done. Northern France today is proof of that. It will take a long time, but with perseverance, luck, and generosity from those countries not destroyed working with the Ukrainians, it can be done.

During World War II, Germans occupied this part of France again. My father-in-law as a teenager had to hide in the cave under his house at night from the soldiers. He only talked with me about it once. There was not so much physical destruction, but again, it scarred those who lived through it.

Today on my bike I explored a little used track through the nearby woods and came out of the forest to a small village. As I exited the leaf strewn track, I saw a sign as I sped by. I turned around and read about a British bomber which crashed in an adjacent field in June 1944. It said the remains of the crew were buried in the local cemetery 300 yards away. I rode to the church and went into its yard which held some twenty gravestones of local families. On the Commonwealth grave of the British air crew engraved in the headstone are the names, rank, age, "Royal Air Force, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1944, and for each man, the verse "At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them."

A picture frame encasing the middle stanzas of the poem leans against the gravestone. It is "Ode of Remembrance," a well-known poem written by Laurence Binyon a few weeks after the start of the First World War.:

“They went with the songs to the battle. They were young,  
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.  
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted.  
They fell with their faces to the foe.

They shall not grow old as we who are left grow old.

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,  
We will remember them.”

I thought of the besieged soldiers and civilians in the city of Mariupol as I rode away from the cemetery. Flying back through the woods, a gnat flew in my mouth. I tried to spit it out, but it was stuck and I started to choke. I had to stop and drink some water from my water bottle to dislodge it. And then I thought of Putin saying that the scum and traitors who don't support his war are like gnats which you spit out. Sometimes that is not so easy. Sometimes one chokes on the gnat.

by Jon Hunner, emeritus Professor of History living in Northern France