

“Goya’s Scarcity”

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Recent discussions of Francisco Goya’s series of aquatint engravings known as *The Disasters of War* locate the artist’s unsparing vision of the degradation of humanity in a necropolitical context. As Ian Baucom argues, Goya’s vividly realized scenes of anguish, starvation, rape, execution, and dismemberment picture a world in which war has become the last sovereign, the pulverizing milieu whose “type” is what he calls “*Homo inimicus*” or “inimical life” (179). Let us set aside Baucom’s unhesitating identification of “man” and “life,” which reproduces the biopolitical assumption that life is elementally how the human takes the measure of itself. Under the conditions of Goya’s warring modernity, Baucom argues, “every form of killing has been made possible by” the determination of belligerents “to regard one another as unjust, not just foes, less and worse than enemies resolutely inimical to one another” (179). Because Goya places himself at the heart of a daemonaically violent history through which we are still living, it is a question of *letting* not making the *Disasters* matter. When we observe the U.S. government condoning the torture of “unlawful combatants,” Baucom concludes, “think Goya” (188).

But what can it mean today to *think* Goya, including the thought of “*the worst*,” the Spanish artist’s over-determined figure for the relation of his thought to his own time? The *Disasters* is a fiercely self-contesting text, roiling with difficulties, obscurities, and sudden shifts in visual styles. Its horizonless spaces, indeterminate historical referents, and refusal to align

unproblematically with any of the belligerents that it depicts contribute to the disorienting experience of occupying a dystopian world of ambient violence in which “one crime simply follows another” (Paulson 337). The engravings call out for an organizing logic that they cannot provide, as if narratively mirroring a war-world in which “there is no party innocent of the most horrific violence, no revolution whose coming...betokens the possibility of progress” (Baucom 182-3). *Nada*, nothing, Goya announces at one point, naming both the waste of war and the strange void to which the labour of watching war is consigned when even loss is lost. What I want to emphasize is this: Goya did not publish the *Disasters* during his lifetime, an abstention that is mysterious to everyone except the historicists who say that he feared the displeasure of the restored monarchy. Since he otherwise showed little concern for the sensibilities of the Bourbons, whose benumbed *insensibility* he didn't hesitate to capture in a famous portrait of the royal family, the reason for his decision not to print the engravings probably lies there but elsewhere too. My wager is to treat Goya's desistance not as merely evasive or shrewd but “positively” as intrinsic to the *Disasters* itself, and in fact constitutive of its perlocutionary force—now seen as an artistic practice that unfolds in the mode of its own fading, as if he promised the engravings to a certain biodegradability in the face of the brutalizing necropoliticization of life. The fact that the engravings remained uncirculated during Goya's lifetime threads together life and work, wartime and the aesthetic, in ambiguous but mortalizing ways, and puts to us that, for a time, for the decade that they took to engrave, and for the remainder of his life, the inventor and then the keeper of the *Disasters* lived disastrously; that is, he experienced life alongside images of *the worst* in a condition of complex asociality, schooling himself, but always in the company of others, to live alone in the void of catastrophe, now, forever, without the ameliorative props

that his public personae as royal court painter furnished. Goya's redaction, the life-long scarcity of the relation of his engravings to public view, attests not only to the intolerability of the war world they depict, but also to the intolerability of the violent--because politically immobilized--post-war world in which they were finally set aside, the difficulty that Goya discerns in discovering a consequential space in which to see war and be seen to see war when it is no longer possible to glean the difference between revolution or reaction. So Goya releases his images by refusing them a "refuge in visibility" (Lippit 14) and of the visibly social. One could almost say that he chooses instead to see the disaster by *touching* it, feeling its unmistakable force, with all the grimy physicality that comes from labouring with acid and ink, paper and copper, hand and burin. This *tact* or recessiveness, this unuseability about the *Disasters*, reminds us that the political and the historical are irreducible to the publically declarative; but this negation and abstention is otherwise difficult to discern if your optic is calibrated to the legible and the social, the same optic, as it happens, through which sovereign power parses the difference between who lives and who is made to die.

In their queerly inoperative status, designed for publication but unpublished, powerfully executed but cached in a place of non-power, the series might then be treated as a kind of transitional object: that is, as something Goya cherished, *loved* even, in any case, something he worked *on* yet avoided working *through*, an object that he could and in fact needed to put or hold away from public consideration and consumption, not only shielding it from what Mieszkowski calls "the spectacle logic of war" (154) but also from being taken up by the reception histories into which his authorship was immersed and dispersed. The unusually ferocious use and abuse of the *Disasters* in recent years--perhaps most famously defaced by the British avant-garde artists,

Dino and Jake Chapman (as well as converted into wallpaper, life-size dioramas, lego-sets, and so forth) suggests that the engravings have become a transitional object for others as well, passionately attached *to* in the mode of being revisioned and knocked about, but always with the unwavering expectation that they *cannot* disappear, that they can somehow bear this treatment and that it is in their nature to do so. We need to develop a better vocabulary to describe the curious animacy of these objects, these perdurable not-nothings that make nothing happen, whose living-on seems less or more than biopolitical in nature--unless of course that vocabulary is precisely what criticism is.

So Goya pauses, and although he went on painting and engraving after the war, *with the Disasters he also pauses forever*, takes a step in the form of engraving the series that is also not taking a step, his persona as court painter and satirist of the foibles of the literate class also overwritten by different impulses, for which he struggles to find words in the form of hand-written captions whose tone is hard to pin down and that often read like fragments of subtitles to an absolutely foreign film, or perhaps like words shouted uselessly at images that remain insentient and wordless-- "silent," as de Man says so evocatively about figures, "mute as pictures are mute" (80). --Fourth person or perhaps disastrous narration, we might call it: *Nada; This is the worst; There was nothing to be done and he died; Why?; There is no one to help them; This is what you were born for; and I saw it*. These and dozens of other declamations follow one other and sometimes communicate laterally with each other but otherwise track no progress, no phenomenology of spirit. What then is the form of life that Goya fashions in this arresting and arrested assemblage of image and text?

The estoppel characterizing the *Disasters* is reproduced within the series, perhaps no

more luridly so than in *Great deeds against the dead!*, the image that you have before you (see below). We see that there *are* fates worse than death, and part of what makes scenes like this *the worst* is not that they are sublimely unimaginable but in fact all too available to be observed, remembered, imagined, engraved, and thus in some sense both taken in and *lived with*. --Not sublimity, then, unless sublimity includes radical desublimation, the dispiriting solidification of the human form into its insensate segments and volumes. (Lawless warfare, Kant rather stupidly observes in the *Critique of Judgment*, spoils sublimity.) To borrow an important phrase from Didi-Huberman, these are “images in spite of all.” When Goya imagines *the worst* and dwells with it, this is what he sees: views of humiliation and torture, dismembered bodies not strewn about a battlefield but hung up, arranged like trophies in a verdant tree to be observed, or perhaps not, as if in a macabre *tableau vivant*. We are reminded that war is always already its re-enactments, a theatricalized repetition that Goya’s images mimic uncontrollably. After such knowledge, what forgiveness? In what world could these losses be economized? For now, forever, time feels frozen, at a stand-still. The presumed scopic pleasure taken by the torturers mixes uncomfortably with the horror that we are asked to feel. It’s tempting to say that the image captures the outer limits of sovereign power over life and death, except Goya’s point is to register the effects of the derangement of the political, not its maximum projection, this, by marking the point at which the political enemy becomes the phantasmatic enemy of the political. Goya’s focus lies with the ensuing chaos, and the negatively creative power that flourishes in that pandemonium, where killing becomes over-killing, and when fury is brought to bear on bodies “whose death is no longer what needs to be assured” (Debrix 122). Because this is the work of bone-collectors, we can be sure that there will be more of it, since it is in the nature of collecting

not to be able to stop. The image fuses the anonymizing question of “what can a body do?” with its cruel correlative, namely “what can be *done* to a body?,” once the object is not only the murder of a human being or the endless corporealization of the enemy and the re-territorialization of the nation but also the demolition of the human form. The Spanish resistance against the French is also a ferocious civil war, and this scene may well depict the unrestricted violence that the insurgency inflicts on itself, the extra-judicial killings that swept the countryside as suspected enlighteners were executed and dismembered in the field. In the mad attempt to preserve the sanctity of a national “life,” no horror is too much because there can be no end to the work of embodying the invisible enemy for the purposes of its annihilation. A lesson about the arbitrary, belligerent and foundationless foundation of the political is here to be had, but how is that possible when the educability of human beings is counted among the war dead? Never has a classroom been less promising or had fewer measurable outcomes. And yet Goya looks at what is left of academicism, re-tracing its shapely contours with his living hand, contemplating bodies and parts of bodies that cite without necessarily jettisoning the aesthetic education of man. The artist positions corpses that have been routed through adjacent and competing aesthetic frames, including still life (a form with which Goya had experimented, always painting pictures of dead things), anatomist drawings (Vesalius’s strange, dissected torsos especially), and the conventions governing early modern portrayals of the martyrdom of the saints. The an-aesthetic contiguity of the bodies models a strangely minimal relationship between the engraving and its spectators that Goya anticipates by withholding the series from sight. The most terribly torn body—but in what world are we called upon to calculate degrees of mutilation?— . . . the most torn body conjures the Belvedere Torso, the fragment of classical statuary that Winckelmann considered to be “the

fullest surviving embodiment of the Greek ideal,” and an exemplary instance of the “becalmed beautiful body” (Potts 180)—although even the German art historian is haunted by the torso’s cold serenity and by the story of murderous violence that it remembers in the mode of forgetting. Like Winckelmann, Goya knew that under the sign of the aesthetic, beauty and defilement share a relationship finer than one of contrast. It is possible that Goya is here marshalling after-images of the beautiful to work against the dangerous insistence on imagining war sublimely. One needs a kind of double-vision to see what one is seeing: the bodies are massed together in one place, forming a grisly group portrait, but their coming into appearance in the shape of beautiful ghosts makes for a kind of visual nonsense, each apparition upon a bough occupying the same pictorial space but otherwise dumbly related. “Creations and destroyings,” Keats’s Apollo might say, “deeds...dire events, rebellions/Majesties, sovran voices, agonies,” all accumulated as so much indiscriminate stuff, an immobile army of metonymies. Goya attends not only to the bodies but also to the dead spaces between the bodies with something like “lucid despair,” Thomas Pfau’s honed phrase for the mood of radical thinkers awash in what he calls ““a thoroughly over-determined world in which all objects, identities, and possible forms of action appear owned and exhausted a priori”” (326). What is perhaps most depleted is the artist’s faith in the power of demarcating “a body through a boundary, the form by which it is bound,” as Judith Butler puts it, of which the aestheticized body is a paradigmatic case. Goya shows no trace of nostalgia for the loss of that faith, and why would he when the immunologic of war, which is predicated on setting life against life, has resulted in such devastation.

Among the strangest captions that Goya added to the engravings is perhaps the most ordinary one: *I saw it*, he writes. Adding the phrase, *I saw it*, was in Goya’s time a banally

familiar convention in poetry and engraving, meaning not, *I saw this with my own eyes* (Goya appears not actually to have seen most of the horrors that he depicts), but instead functions as a promise of two things: first, *this happened, this event really took place*; and second, I am a “war spectator,” the one who can “create the illusion of being there when dreadful things happen” (Hughes 272). Mieszkowski would describe this as an example of “the Napoleonic war imaginary,” but to do so perhaps under-states the curious rhetorical substitution by which Goya’s signature is under-written. For *I saw it* is a kind of conjuring, the routing of authorship through its citation, and the invention of a seeing and imagining artistic subject that is imposed upon the blank anonymity—the *it happened*--of the disastrous event, an event, moreover, that that fictional “I” hails as the spectral ground of its own authority. Put simply, *I saw it* is made to stand as a proxy for *that which I didn’t see it*, except *figuratively*, day for night. *I saw it* posits a world available to sight and knowledge, but draws attention to itself as a positing and little more. The insentient operation of rhetoric suggests that Goya is leaving traces of being present to the disaster in ways that are in excess of the imaginary and the phenomenological. Hidden in plain sight, Goya’s citation re-purposes an otherwise tired convention to register something new and very hard to say, namely the permeation of the artist by the worst---which is not quite the same thing as seeing it imaginatively as a spectator or testifying to it as a witness, although Goya was also caught up in the terrible labour of both of those practices. In its self-arresting brevity or inhibition, *I saw it* instead recalls something Michael Herr says about the experience of another disastrous war, that is, the disaster before Iraq and Afghanistan, before Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib: “*It just stayed stored there in your eyes*” (20), Herr writes, his stressed syllables slowing time down, as if one could have the experience of an unnamed catastrophe in Southeast Asia and

not so much miss the meaning, as in the case of trauma, as be stuck *with* it or stuck *to* it, visually.

–To experience or imagine not much more than that, not much more than *that* happened *and I saw it...*and for now, forever, to hold those two things in one place, eyes wide shut. In its bareness or scarcity, *I saw it* is a declaration of adequation and just-enoughness, of a moment of sheer commensurateness with horror and terror, whatever this coming together might mean or came to mean. *I saw it* thus withholds itself in the way that Rei Terada observes in Keats, where she observes a form of looking that abstains from moving too quickly to what we are schooled normatively into wanting to think, namely, *I saw this, but I wish that I saw something else, something better* (296). What would it mean to say *I saw it*, and leave it at that, to experiment with the very idea of living that letting be among all the other ways that one lives with others?

The indeterminacy of the referent “it” redounds back upon the “I” who is posited as seeing, for it is possible that the pronoun refers to the engraving itself, and so functions as a prosopopoeia, an animating projection on the engraving that “sees” without ever knowing what it sees. What would it mean to see as the engraver or rather the engraving sees, to store the worst for now, forever, to dwell with disaster but in an unknown because asocial, unproductive, untimely, and non-declarative way? One answer to that impossible question comes unbidden from a not entirely unexpected place, that is, from another artist who lives amid perpetual war brimming with the inimicalized life that the Peninsular Wars modelled, god help us. I’m reminded of the novelist, David Grossman, who wonders aloud about what it means to occupy the catastrophe of the war between Israel and the Palestinians, the war that saw his son, Uri, killed by an anti-tank rocket in Lebanon in 2006. Grossman stands still and that is the unknown way in which he still stands, now, forever: “I touch on grief and loss like one touching electricity with bare hands,” he

says, “yet I do not die. *I do not understand how this miracle works*” (np).

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Francisco Goya (1746-1828), *The Disasters of War* (1810-1820; published 1863)
Great Deeds Against the Dead (Plate 39)



Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Great Deeds Against the Dead* (1994/1997); and *Great Deeds Against the Dead* from *Insult to Injury* (2003)

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