

THE REAL AND THE IMAGINARY IN THE SOLDIER'S EXPERIENCE¹

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"No, it's not a bad thing it ended
the way it did, in defeat.
It opened our eyes."²

1. An Initial Approximation. A soldier's experience is divided into three stages, namely: the departure, the battlefield, and the homecoming; they are arranged along the arrow of time and split like the real and the imaginary. As the soldier enters the battlefield, he (I will, in this paper, use 'he' as the neutral pronoun whenever I refer to soldiers, given that the soldiers talk about are all men) is shocked by the fact that he can hear the bullet hitting his comrade's body but, nevertheless, he experiences this fact as unreal. The sound of the bullet hitting his comrade's body is so *strange* that his mind interprets it as an event within a dream; but why should this sound strike the soldier as so strange? Couldn't it have been anticipated? Haven't we, after all, heard that noise in movies, read about it in novels? In the pages to come, I will examine the nature of this strangeness and Jean Améry's notion of *confidence in the world* will play a central role in that process. This confidence is constituted by two crucial expectations: firstly, that no one will hurt me and, secondly, that, if someone were to hurt me (or I were in a state of need), someone else would come and help me. We may thus describe as *human* any given world were such expectations are actually honored and preserved. When the soldier enters for the first time the battlefield his sense of reality is still shaped by these two expectations. The bullet hitting a comrade's body seems so strange because such a fact *is excluded* from the expectations of the homely world he has just abandoned and such that still permeates his experience:

"When a bullet hits a person you hear it. It's an unmistakable sound you never forget, like a kind of wet slap. Your mate next to you falls face down in the sand, sand that tastes bitter as ash. You turn him over on his back. The cigarette you just gave him is stuck between his teeth, and it's still alight. The first time it happens you react like in a dream. You run, you drag him, and you shoot, and afterwards you can't remember a thing about it and can't tell anyone anyway. It's like a nightmare you watch happening behind a sheet of glass. You wake up scared, and don't know why."³

At the outset, the soldier experiences the bullet's sound and his comrade's dead body as a nightmare, as alien to his conception of what may be a fact. Yet, he soon realizes that it is really a fact, though of a rather different world. He thereby perceives his life as divided into two worlds: home and the battlefield. Some may reply that there is *only one world* and, therefore, that home and the battlefield should rather be construed as two aspects (or, perhaps, regions) of *a single world*; whereby an appropriate description of such a unity ought to show how these two aspects or regions actually relate to each other. The soldier's experience is in

1 With some minor revisions, this paper will be published as chapter 3 in *Morality, Self-Knowledge, and Human Suffering: An Essay on the Loss of Confidence in the World* (New York and London, Routledge, forthcoming). Credit is due to Routledge for authorizing publication of this paper in *Organon F*. A previous version of this text was published in Spanish in N. Sánchez (ed.), *La guerra*, Valencia, Pre-textos, 2006, pp. 185-206. I must, finally, acknowledge that research for this paper has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (BFF2003-08335-Co3-01, HUM2006-08236, PR2008-0221, CSD00C-09-62102)) and the Valencian Regional Ministry of Culture, Education and Sports (GRUPOS04/48, GVO4B-251, ACOMPO6/13).

2 Alexievich (1992), p. 36.

3 Alexievich (1992), p. 16.

need of explanation precisely because it seems to neglect that obvious metaphysical truth. What happens in the battlefield is so strange that he cannot experience it as real, as an aspect of the world he inhabited before his departure. How could we, then, make sense of his experience?

It is true that those who stay at home, away from bullets, *know that* in the battlefield people are systematically injured and killed, and also that bullets make a specific noise as they hit a human body; but there must be another sense in which they do not really know, in which they *are not fully aware* of what *may actually occur* in such places, in which they do not entirely apprehend that the armed confrontations the news talk about are not just fictions, stories invented to entertain, but facts that involve actual injuries and deaths. For, otherwise, the soldier would not have experienced the bullet's sound as part of a nightmare, that is, as being so strange that it could not belong to his world. We thus conclude that those who feel away from the battlefield know that in such places people kill and die; nevertheless, there is a relevant sense in which what happens there comes to their minds as if such deaths had not really occurred. So, it seems that something like a distinction between *merely knowing that* such and such is fact and *being sensitive to* that fact may be required to understand the soldier's experience. We may, correspondingly, distinguish between a *mere declarative* awareness of certain facts and an *expressive* awareness of them, so that the former kind of awareness should be consistent with an experience of those facts as merely imaginary, that is, as failing to appropriately shape one's conduct and emotional attitudes; whereas an expressive awareness of such facts would comprise of a suitable transformation of one's conduct and attitudes.⁴

It does not take much time before the soldier concedes that the battlefield is not a dream and, thereby, that bullets really hurt and dead bodies are actually heavy to drag:

"The fact is, in order to experience the horror you have to remember it and get used to it. Within two or three weeks there's nothing left of the old you except your name. You've become someone else. This someone else isn't frightened of a corpse, but calmly (and a bit pissed off, too) wonders how he's going to drag it down the rocks and carry it for several kilometres in that heat.

This new person doesn't have to imagine: he *knows* the smell of a man's guts hanging out; the smell of human excrement mixed with blood. He's *seen* scorched skulls grinning out of a puddle of molten metal, as though they'd been laughing, not screaming, as they died only a few hours before."⁵

This ability to perceive the battlefield as real comes with a transformation, which the soldier will only later on acknowledge, namely: his old self has vanished and a new, but damaged one has emerged and replaced it. How are we suppose to make sense of this experience, though? The moral nature of the divide between the homely world and the battlefield may be of some avail in this respect. More specifically, I will argue that the confidence in the world forms a part of our identity as human agents to the effect that, whenever we may be forced to lose it, we are bound to regard our life as severely damaged or even extinguished. In other words,

4 This is not to deny that declarative awareness of some facts may eventually contribute to increasing an agent's expressive awareness of them. Yet, I will argue that the specific ways in which such a contribution may take place are severely conditioned by factors in the agent's psychology that go beyond her capacity to become declaratively aware of any given facts. Moreover, one should not expect that the kind of transformation that expressive awareness involves, would always go in the direction of morality. Certain kinds of perversions may require that the agent should be sensitive to the harm she is inflicting upon her victim. This is, though, too complex an issue to be dealt with in this paper.

5 Alexievich (1992), p. 16.

we could say that the expectations of a human world are so deeply ingrained within our identity that, in order to perceive their denial as real, one must become a different self:

"After I got back I couldn't bear to wear my 'pre-war' jeans and shirts. They belonged to some stranger, although they still smelt of me, as my mother assured me. That stranger no longer exists. His place had been taken by someone else with the same surname -which I'd rather you didn't mention. I rather liked that other person."⁶

As soon as the soldier comes back to what he still regards as home, he perceives that he has been transformed. His life seems to have changed for ever; a deep divide between him and those who did not depart has emerged: people at home can't really understand his experience in the battlefield; there is no way in which they would share a common, homely, world. The world of the soldier who returns is neither the battlefield, since war is not a place to stay, nor his old home, since his previous confidence in the world is lost, but a world poisoned by an endless (and fruitless) struggle to come back home:

"You try and live a normal life, the way you lived before. But you can't. I didn't give a damn about myself or life in general. I just felt my life was over."⁷

Back to the point of departure, the soldier regards his new life as both more lucid and more damaged than his previous one. It is the more lucid because he is, finally, aware of how stupidly he allowed himself to be deceived by vague, epic, proclamations and also how people around him are still deceived in a similar manner. And even more damaged because what remains within him is a longing for home, for the sort of innocence that was lost in the battlefield.

In this paper, I intend to shed a unifying light on the three phenomena that have so far been mentioned, namely: (a) the strangeness of the bullet hitting the body of the soldier's comrade; (b) the fact that, in order to perceive the battlefield as real, the soldier must alienate himself from his old identity, and (c) the impossibility of homecoming. To this purpose, I will firstly introduce in some detail the sorts of expectations that, according to Améry, constitute our confidence of the world; at a second stage, I will return to the soldier's experience and examine each of its three stages in the light of such expectations and their role in the identity of the self.

6 Alexievich (1992), p. 38.

7 Alexievich (1992), p.26.