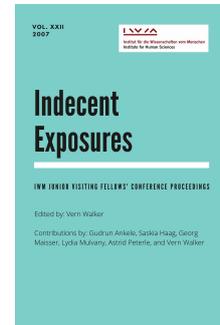


Apprenticeship in Pacifism Or What to Do with Practical Advice?

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As was passed on by a twentieth century monk named Thomas Merton, himself living a secluded life in the Abby of Gethsemane in Kentucky, we have this saying, which is only one of many sayings that came out of the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia and Persia during the fourth century:

“Another brother asked the same elder, Abbot Theodore, and began to inquire about things which he had never yet put into practice himself. The elder said to him: As yet you have not found a ship, and have not put your baggage aboard, and you have not started to cross the sea: can you talk as if you had arrived in that city to which you planned to go? When you have put into practice the thing you are talking about, then speak from knowledge of the thing itself! (35)” [1]

The ironic challenge given by the elder is to speak only from experience, as if experience itself produces knowledge as such. How much poorer is our ability simply to speak when we want to respond to an experience, and more so when it is an experience that falls outside any ideological, systematic framework – even, in their case, a theological grounding. From the desert the hermits learned a certain silence, which manifested as a silence before dogmatic thought. As Merton explains, “...the Fathers steered clear of everything lofty, everything esoteric, everything theoretical or difficult to understand” (9). And yet, we should not merely dismiss their silence towards such subjects because they knew they were not theologians or philosophers. How would such constructions of thought even be useful in their situation? It is as if the emptiness of the desert revealed a limit in language and thought – one, perhaps, that was there all along. The aim of this article is to begin to see how these sayings were the proper medium for communicating the pacifist experience of the desert hermits

I find in this historical figure of the desert hermit a peculiar embodiment of both the literary and the pacifist problem – problems at once real and conceptual. And as such it is possible to see not only how literature and pacifism strangely relate (strangely occupy the same desert), but also how they function similarly in confronting the same historical

brutality.[2] What I would like to do in this essay is to develop one particular literary problem with an essay from Walter Benjamin called “The Storyteller;”[3] and then explore this question’s ramifications within the desert hermit context as well as with a short story by Ingeborg Bachmann. Entitled “Everything” or “Alles,”[4] it is a story of a young father who suddenly has a crisis in language (yet another kind of silence) when faced with the problem of how to raise his son without sacrificing him to the world as it is. He wanted to give his son “everything,” meaning a new way, a different life; in fact, he wanted to somehow leave open the possibility for his son to find his own way without being automatically bound and dictated by the negative prescriptions of our established society.

Because I am concerned here with only a very particular experience of both pacifism and literature, more precisely where their mutual problems intersect outside rational thought, we must accept that such an experience cannot be taught in a pedagogical manner, but wholly involves a kind of apprenticeship. For me, the question is how an apprenticeship of a literary text helps us to understand the workings of an apprenticeship in a pacifist way of living. In my project I aim at presenting a sense of pacifism. I wish to develop the problem that is the sense of pacifism – a problem that is not solvable, but precisely thereby becomes a passion.

In so saying, it is the very problem of pacifism that is necessary and urgent today – however, it is necessary and urgent not to resolve, but precisely in developing and complicating. As Gilles Deleuze explains, “A solution always has the truth it deserves according to the problem to which it is a response, and the problem always has the solution it deserves in proportion to *its own* truth or falsity – in other words, in proportion to its sense” (159).[5] The effectiveness of the concept of pacifism depends not only upon a clear articulation of the problem, but also, necessarily, by first adequately complicating it. Everything hinges upon the very sense of the problem. Therefore, if I refrain from setting out beforehand a definition of pacifism that I will employ, it is for two reasons: first, that I do not wish to impose a preconceived concept of pacifism onto these texts, but gleam a sense of pacifism or the problem of pacifism from them. In other words, I wish to concentrate solely on a sense of pacifism, developing its own “truth” that does not rely on an opposition to war. Secondly, because I want to rigorously hold to this particular path (as much as we desire to work otherwise), we will soon realize that a definition is impossible to formulate from these texts.

What is at stake then, to argue that the pacifist problem is a matter of sense? Above all, it is perhaps that pacifism is/has nothing to rely upon. This is, of course, a generally held opinion. Yes, perhaps some critics, philosophical or otherwise, are right to argue that pacifism is indeed self-refuting.[6] Granted; but let us start precisely there, work through this claim (but not by immediately proclaiming personal belief as a defense). I would like to ask if this “self-refutation” could mean something *more*. In my project, the sense of pacifism is more closely aligned to literature and storytelling rather than any kind of knowledge – social, political, theological alike. This is so not only because the function of a definition is inconsistent with the form of these particular texts with which I have chosen to begin, but also that the very idea of a definition points to a very real

misunderstanding of pacifism – that it takes on the same form for every situation. It is only a sense of pacifism, as opposed to a definition, that is able to embrace this ambiguity in a dynamic way and discover in its paradoxes and even in its “faults” a way to confront very real crisis’.

However, ambiguity does not present something indefinite, just as a paradox creates a very exact and particular problem. As such, it is not a haphazard intersection that pacifism and literature form, for inherent in the concept of pacifism is a passivity that cannot be reconciled with reason or knowledge.[7] It is usually dismissed for more “active” solutions on the common-sense grounds that pacifism is not practical. This is a gross misunderstanding, but in a very peculiar way: if pacifism is not “practical,” it is so because it is *nothing but* its practice. In this way, my study of pacifism will be directed towards its practice without recourse to its justifications. This does not necessarily mean a description of historical pacifist communities and movements. Through the study of literature outside of its mode of representation (outside pacifist literature as such), we may begin to entertain in a different way this active passivity which is essential to the experience of pacifism.

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Turning to the Benjamin text to form the literary question, I would like to focus on one paradox he creates in speaking about the practice and limits of storytelling. It is a craft at once simple and complex. Holding the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov as a quintessential figure of the storyteller, Benjamin develops an image of the storyteller through creating a montage – juxtaposing the art of storytelling to other media such as the newspaper and the novel. The story, he explains, always contains “openly or covertly, something useful”, and many are concerned with practical matters (144). This is the same for Merton’s reading of the desert hermits[8] – “It will help us to understand these sayings better,” he advises us, “if we remember their practical, and, one might say, existential quality” (13). But how ironic and strange this suggestion is, when you then turn to read some of these brief sayings. For instance, we read this one: “Abbot Moses said: A man ought to be like a dead man with his companion, for to die to one’s friend is to cease to judge him in anything” (75). To read this saying as practical advice is helpful only insofar as to embrace how foreign it sounds, not for its practical quality. Or is it all too practical as Merton insists? In that way it would be helpful only insofar as we can then understand such sayings were never intended for general or universal use, but were “originally concrete and precise keys to particular doors that had to be entered, at a given time, by a given individual” (12) – that is, not moral or metaphysical and, thereby, at the exclusion of all others.

The question then becomes: what are *we*, who are so distant from their desert experience, to do with such practical advice? More often than not, they simply strike us dumb [*sprachlos*]. We can do nothing with them. We cannot relate to them. And yet, when Benjamin takes up a passage from the classical Greek writer Herodotus as an example for an effective story, it is the “dryness” quality that he praises most (148). It is the dryness of a story that allows it to survive over the centuries and continue to produce an effect. Benjamin then continues to suggest, “There is nothing that commends a story to memory

more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis” (149). It is the absence of complexity in the story that makes it more effective. In the same way, it is perhaps the very silence that the desert hermit’s sayings provoke in their reader that is most important.

Benjamin seemingly gestures in the opposite direction when he very carefully describes the aims and limits of the novel. As a particular medium that addresses an event, the novel “...take[s] to the extreme that which is incommensurable in the representation of human existence. In the midst of life’s fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living” (146). The stress Benjamin gives on the novel as an important medium is its ability to develop the very complexity of life – not answer it. We again must accept another kind of silence through the novel. Is it possible, however, to see this limited aim as not simply a failing, a human weakness in the attempt to grasp or understand a historical event (which it inevitably is)? Is it possible for us to affirm and desire this seeming shortcoming?

It is precisely on this point that Benjamin criticizes the *Bildungsroman*: the novelist’s attempt “to implant instruction into the novel” is an endeavor that runs contrary to the means of the medium. He writes, “By integrating the social process with the development of a person, it bestows the most brittle justification on the order determining that process. The legitimizing of this order stands in direct opposition to its reality. The unattainable is event – precisely in the *Bildungsroman*” (147). For Benjamin, the event of such a novel is not the coming of age of or the morals learned by the heroic character, but that which escapes the character. To read for these literary events would mean to resist the pedagogy of such novelist.

Furthermore, as we shall see with the historical crisis in which our three works were addressing, it is the social process itself (which integrates with the person) that is dangerous. Therefore, to avoid following this process, in fact, by complicating it and thereby distancing itself away from it, the novel discovers its own strength. We should regard this resistance to be the novel’s true challenge toward the historical event itself. Only by embracing this particular silence, the silence that comes upon us by intentionally perplexing our understanding of the event, may we open up new paths for action.

Finally, strangely enough, it is precisely because it is informative communication that Benjamin opposes the newspaper press to the storyteller (and the novelist). It is not simply that the press and the storyteller are two different perspectives of the same event, for modern life is set against any extended thought of experience itself. Thus Benjamin opens his essay with this description: “For never has experience been more thoroughly belied than strategic experience was belied by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power” (145). Our state of affairs, quite plainly, as Benjamin writes, “benefits information” (148). However, the relation between information and warfare/inflation/power is beneficial insofar as they propagate themselves through brutality – in other words, they feed off of each other and consume everything.[9] The modern paradox is that never before has such a dark time been so thoroughly clarified. It is because of this mutually brutal drive that our predicament becomes even darker.

Through this consideration of literary media, we may risk considering an important aspect of the workings of pacifism. If pacifism seeks to create a position of contention, resistance against brutality, it must do so also and only by freeing its expression from information. As such, we may begin to see how pacifism confronts not simply the problem of war, but perhaps even more so, the problem of peace (at least the concept of peace as it is identified with clarity and control). Or, we should begin to understand how pacifism considers both war and peace to be a manifestation of the same problem of brutality. At various levels – whether as justification to reestablish peace as well as to maintain it at all costs – the desire for peace has a natural tendency towards war and brutality. To approach this complicated and most pressing thought, we should ask just how it is that storytelling – and pacifist expression as storytelling – retains its use as practical advice, without forming a pedagogy of knowledge (*Bildungsroman*) or explaining the crisis at hand (the press)? In other words, how is advice something other than a solution? In this respect, its most radical passivity lies in its distance.

With Benjamin we may state the problem in another way. The practical advice (or “counsel,” as he begins to call it) that is passed on by the storyteller, “is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is in the process of unfolding” (145). It is precisely this orientation towards the story that we have lost (can no longer afford), for it is directly connected to experience; and its confrontation with the brutality of the system is marked at every point with the ever-growing problematic “communicability of experience.” More generally, even though Benjamin’s conception of the story and of the novel have opposite trajectories – toward dryness/simplicity and toward complication/perplexity, respectively – both of these media discover their strength in passing on and developing the problem. Therefore the paradox with which I am concerned is: how can counsel be practical advice not as an answer to a question but in the passing on of an unsolvable problem – a problem-story that “preserves and concentrates its energy and is capable of releasing it even after a long time [...] [and] is still capable of provoking astonishment and reflection” (148)? In other words, how is what is most useful in a problem or story precisely that which it does not resolve (that which it leaves open)?

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If that is the literary problem, it is first a problem not because we have this story or that story, this saying or that saying. Benjamin attributes the authority of a story not so much to the truth/falsity contained in the story itself, but to the death of the person who experienced it (150-152). For his part, Merton places the emphasis on the fact that the desert hermits actually lived these stories. It amounts to the same thing: not to get completely caught up in the opinions of the texts – to say that they are right or wrong – but to read and feel these stories and sayings on a different level. Merton writes,

Our time is in desperate need of this kind of simplicity [the simplicity of the desert hermits]. It needs to recapture something of the experience reflected in these lines. The word to emphasize is experience. The few short phrases selected in this volume have little or no value merely as information. It would be futile to skip through these pages and lightly take note of the fact that the Fathers said this and this. What good will it do us to know merely that such things were once said? The important thing is that they were lived. (11)

If it will not do us much good to only read these desert hermit passages as sayings (and therefore as morals), we must also come to terms with the fact that recapturing the experience of these lines may also be a futile effort. For Benjamin was already beginning to notice the shift of importance away from experience: “It is as if a capability that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, has been taken from us: the ability to share experiences. One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value” (143). Not only has our ability to tell a story been severely diminished under the overwhelming force of brutality, but also our desire to listen. Yet how is this predicament just as equally a confusion about our own relation to experience as such, especially if it is our own experience? How must we relearn how to listen and to work with experience itself?

Let us now take up the various kinds of historical brutality to which each of our three texts are responding. Leaving aside the historical crisis’ in which each of our three writers were living,[10] these religious men who fled into the desert during the 4th century were escaping at precisely the moment when Christianity became the official religion of Constantine’s empire. It was a horror to these desert hermits that such a worldly force as a “Christian State” could exist, even though (precisely because) they themselves were devout Christians. Turning to Benjamin, he situates the “Storyteller” essay at the end of the First World War, reflecting on the soldiers returning home without the ability to tell of their experience at the front. Only 10 years later would a flood of war novels, written in solitude, to be read in solitude, attempt to address the unsayable (144). Finally, Bachmann’s young father also confronted the unsayable in desperately wanting to teach his son something new – in fact, teach him through silence (for language, as a function of sociality itself, was precisely what was at stake).[11] Yet this is how the father articulates the crisis he was responding to:

I walked around extending my hatred to everything that came of man, to the trams, the house numbers, titles, the division of time, this whole jumbled, ingenious chaos that is called order, to refuse disposal, lecture-lists, registration offices, all these wretched institutions against which it is no longer possible to kick, against which nobody ever does kick, these altars on which I had sacrificed but wasn’t willing to let my child be sacrificed. (65) [12]

The real crisis is not which form of brutality we should set ourselves against – it is everywhere. For this very reason, it is the very possibility of kicking against the social form that is seemingly no longer possible. It is this process of defining the possible that is at stake today, in that the hidden process that constitutes sociality is what is most misleading and, therefore, paralyzing.

Therefore, the pacifist problem created, extended, and interwoven through these literary texts is this: in very broad strokes, three distinct yet inseparably related forms of brutality – state brutality, war brutality, and social brutality. In this particular light, when Benjamin writes that our reaction to storytelling is one of “embarrassment” (143), it is not an embarrassment of something that is childish, but of the horror it confronts and a story’s inability to respond with an answer or justification.

Yet justifications for such horror do exist, and whatever means that attempt to answer such brutality usually create even worse predicaments. Therefore, the problem is not just that of history or of our bodies, but it is also a conceptual problem. What it means to think the problem is also at stake. As the young father explains:

For each person has only one turn at the game which he finds waiting for him and is compelled to take up: procreation and education, economics and politics, and he is allowed to occupy himself with money and emotion, with work and invention and the justification of the rules of the game which is called thinking. (58)

If the *justification* of the rules is evident in thinking (thinking within binaries – in forms; or, what is more, in dialectical thinking – the formation of a third, better condition out of a clash of two), then the very *rules* of the brutality are simply language itself. Because of this, both Bachmann’s young father and the desert hermits took up silence, each in their own way.

Again, the historical crisis as stated above is actually just the normal state of affairs. The young father gives this abstract articulation: “One doesn’t believe it possible, but there is no way out for us. Again and again everything is divided into above and below, good and evil, light and dark, into quantity and quality, friend and enemy...” (66). The real crisis is the very possibility to create a new path. That is to ask: is it possible to confront the unknown, or, in fact, to work with the “impossible”? However, there is something wrong with the grammar of such a question – it leads only into poetic language. For this very reason, Gilles Deleuze does not speak in terms of working with the possible – for the possible is restricted only to that which is already constituted in the real, that which is already set out in the state of affairs. The task then, is to begin to experiment not with what is possible, but with what is *virtual*. Deleuze explains that by using this term we have not “fallen into the vagueness of a notion closer to the undetermined[...]

 (208). He continues to write, “The virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual. *The virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual.*” It is virtual because it is not yet actual, and thus is not yet possible. To work with the virtual is neither to work with the imaginary, nor to avoid the crisis itself – but is the only effective engagement in *theproblem* as such.

How does one effectively engage from both the historical and the conceptual problem? It is in fact the same problem, one that incessantly threatens us, an abstraction set to kill us, and therefore demands urgent attention – action, resistance... seemingly anything but the drawn-out time of storytelling. The historical-conceptual problem ensures its own continuation because it produces only an incessant tension and play within binaries. When one tries to think otherwise, meaning, out of the binaries, then several things immediately happen: we begin to stutter, realizing that we *only* think within binaries –

events only hold a certain limited sense between binaries. It is here that we take up the engagement of the virtual and the task of making a new sense. When we attempt to turn away from binary thinking, we experience our own stupidity in the urgency to create something new. For the young father, not only does he fall paralyzed in silence before his young son and wife, but he repeatedly calls this new conceptual landscape he entered a “minefield.” Such radical questioning ignites a chain of explosions that, if we allow it to continue, will only disrupt our entire life.

The desert hermits confronted a similar predicament but attempted a different path as Bachmann’s young father. We can now begin to see that the desert experience was an experiment with the virtual. The desert hermit’s problem was this, as Merton describes it:

They did not reject society with proud contempt, as if they were superior to other men. On the contrary, one of the reasons why they fled from the world was that in the world men were divided into those who were successful, and imposed their will on others, and those who had to give in and be imposed upon. The Desert Fathers declined to be ruled by men, but had no desire to rule over others themselves. (5)

What is at stake is the very act of *getting out* – which is again not simply a physical move, but also a conceptual matter, in the attempt to disrupt or break free of judgment itself. The desert hermits did not take up the negative force of bitterness and *ressentiment* in the desert, as did the father. They disposed of all criteria. Merton is very careful to make this last point clear, and throughout his short essay, the conceptual disruption apprenticed and performed by the desert hermits manifest similarly in different forms – giving up one’s ego (7), and as a variation of this, a practice of love that does not objectify the other, but arises out of a radical humility (18) – all as if the desert experience forced the hermits to redefine everything in their lives.

We begin now to have a paradoxical sense that in order to get out, to break free, we must first hit this block, this impossibility. We must first confront the limit in order to break out of the impasse, otherwise we will simply be kicking against that which does not really affect the whole. But are such extremes also present in storytelling? If the dryness of a story presumes simplicity, we must not confuse this simplicity as one that cannot reach the depths. Thus Benjamin writes of his figure of a storyteller, Nikolai Leskov:

It is astonishing how fearfully the world can darken for this author, and with what majesty evil can raise its scepter [...] The elemental natures in his Tales from Olden Times go to the limit in their ruthless passion. But it is precisely the mystics who have been inclined to see this limit as the point at which utter depravity turns into saintliness. (160)

Rather than seeking an answer to the crisis (which usually only enacts a reversal of the established order), the challenge is to strike at the limit and thereby attempt to create a radically different orientation. In doing so, we must understand this getting out, this *line of flight*, to use a term from Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as something other than mere escapism. It demands its own ruthless passion, one that strikes at the limits and continually disrupts itself. With this violence of thought, we must also accept a new way of thinking – a nomadic thought always outside of ‘truth,’ a life in the desert.

Given the overwhelming scope and depth of brutality, pacifism's place is in the desert. However, in the desert the hermits certainly did not encounter a utopian peace, but truly an immediate way to engage with the various levels of brutality. It is for this reason that Merton describes at length how to understand the *quies*, or the "rest" of the desert hermits: "Not rest of the body, nor even the fixation of the exalted spirit upon some point or summit of light" (8). It was a rest that is found in being "carried away by the perfection of freedom that is in it" – a freedom that was not even bound by the "preoccupation with a false or limited 'self'" (8). With regard to our normal conception, the freedom of the desert is a terrible freedom. Therefore, to get out, to break free of the order of social brutality only exposes us in a greater degree of brutality itself – yet it is only in this way that we are able to effectively engage with it.

Furthermore, such freedom only creates a position for constant struggle. As Merton writes, the desert hermits "...were so inclined to accept the common realities of life and be content with the ordinary lot of man who has to struggle all his life to overcome himself" (16). As we read with each saying, the hermits attempted to find a way out of a particular confrontation – many times learning only by their mistakes. They could only learn by their mistakes because the predicaments they confronted did not fit into any prescribed moral formula, and many worked against both good and common sense: as such we have the story of the hermits who, when they heard of their fellow being robbed, captured the thieves and turned them over to the authorities. Realizing their fault, that they were first "betrayed" by their own "inward thoughts," the hermits went to the jail and broke the criminals free (38). Their life was marked by a constant attempt to break out in unknown directions, to constantly resist impulses to judge, and to create lines of flight out of the system of brutality. But for the desert hermits, such big gestures manifested themselves more as taking small steps – "Don't go too far. First learn to walk forward. Learn it yourself," Bachmann's young father concludes (76). The experience of pacifism is as if to continually learn how to walk for the first time.

Yes, the hermits sought a way out of the binaries by going off into the desert. But the point, of course, is not for us to go off into the desert. Distance is not necessarily a matter of spatiality, but of intensity. Therefore, it will do us good to think about the desert in a different way. Paul Virilio develops this necessary distinction:

The Hebraic tradition manifest two kinds of lack, expressed by two deserts, emerging one from the other, heart of everything, in its heart everything. One is named Shemama, despair and destruction, the other Misbar, which is a desert not of dereliction but instead a field of uncertainty and effort. The Shemama is, rather, polarity of the city-state (city of Ur – our light), its desert is the tragic one of laws, ideology, order as opposed to what could have resulted from wandering. (27)[13]

In the distinction between these two understandings of the desert, we not only find the tragic brutality of the desert of state brutality, but an image of another desert that fits perfectly with our desert hermits: the creative desert is one of wandering, of effort, of

uncertainty. The emphasis of effort only reiterates the fact that the drastic move did not completely free the desert hermits of the problem. Only by making this physical move did they create a position of contention against the brutal system.[14]

Yet we should also understand this position of contention as a shift that discovers language as a problem (Bachmann's young father), a move that reveals the act of judgment as a problem (desert hermits). Yet these are not two different problems, but seemingly a concatenation of the same problem. Wittgenstein noted in his unpublished work *Philosophical Investigations*: "If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments" (#242).[15] Within this double bind, our task is to weave these problems *as problems* into our lives – experience them, not just know them – just as the task of a listener of a story is not merely passive, nor even a memorization of the text, but an active participant in the storytelling process: "For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to" (149). As such, Merton concludes his essay by giving his own advice, "We cannot do exactly what they did. But we must be as thorough and ruthless in our determination [...] we need to learn from these men of the fourth century how to ignore prejudice, defy compulsion and strike out fearlessly into the unknown" (24). We need to learn from the desert hermits a passion for the problem.

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The question now, finally, is how do we not become paralyzed within this all-encompassing problem? What we have in the stories of the desert hermits and the young father in "Alles" are two experiments – experiments because they seek to break out of these binaries. "The world is an experiment," says the young father, "and it is enough that this experiment has always been repeated in the same way with the same result. Make another experiment!" (63). Yet with all true experiments, the results are unknown beforehand; with our two examples, we have one that 'succeeded' and one that tragically failed. We should not fall, however, into the trap of such a line of questioning. Our literary practice should not be limited to their specific situations, or to the text as such, but to question how their experiments functioned, and, as it were, did not function. In other words, neither is it our place – here, now – to judge the desert hermits;[16] nor is it enough simply to say that the young father's experiment failed because he attempted to teach his son something he himself did not yet know. Let us see if we can learn a few strategies towards pacifist experimentation from our texts, given the complex understanding of the crisis-problem:

1. The experiment involves a radical change. However, the most difficult thing is to *begin*, all the rest follows. For the young father, all he asked of his son was a "slight deviation" (69). Furthermore, the change has nothing to do with quantity or quality.... "I didn't want Fipps [the son] to become cleverer or better than us. [...] No, I wanted... him to begin from the beginning, to show me with a single gesture that he didn't have to reflect *our* gestures" (67). As a radical beginning, the change is something other. And, as a beginning, it in no way resembles a solution.

2. The experiment incorporates both language and the body together.

Benjamin uses this word to describe the storyteller to which we also should apply to pacifism: *verkörpern* – meaning, not only to practice, as in to play in the theatre, but also to embody. As such it addresses the crisis-problem – the young father remarks,

And I suddenly knew, it is all a question of language and not merely of this one language of ours that was created with others in Babel to confuse the world. For underneath it there smoulders another language that extends to gestures and looks, the unwinding of thoughts and the passage of feelings, and in it is all our misfortune. (62)

However, by complicating the problem in this way, it also gestures towards a way out. By thinking language and the body together does not exclude the possibility that our bodies might be able to make the first break – a move which also reveals the limits of language. Exposing this limit, a complete reevaluation of language must follow. Otherwise a collapse of the experiment is surely inevitable.

3. The experiment involves a dynamic silence towards universals. As Benjamin writes of Leskov, “He sees his prototype in the man who finds his way around the world without getting too deeply involved with it” (145). The question is how to manage the particular case without recourse to a misleading transcendental understanding or the paralyzing demand of a solution. Thus, in thinking about the world as it is, the young father remarks, “...The result till now has been a life in guilt, love and despair.’(I had begun to think of everything in universal terms; then words like this occurred to me.) But I could spare him guilt, love and any kind of fate and free him for another life” (63). The young father, trapped in the silence of universals, foresaw that he was doomed for failure. As soon as he saw his son begin to imitate society, he dropped him from his love (65); “... yes, I had expected him to redeem the world,” wrote the young father, and he continued to painfully admit, “It sounds monstrous. And I did indeed behave monstrously towards the child, but there is nothing monstrous about what I hoped for” (67). The desert hermits, however, were silent before such universals, thereby tempting a different kind of madness,^[17] and expended great energy in confronting each particular situation – all that which produced their stories which they passed along to each other by word of mouth.

4. Fill the cleared, silent space with effort. We have this desert story, which I believe presents a challenging simplicity:

It was told of Abbot John the Dwarf that once he had said to his elder brother: I want to live in the same security as the angels have, doing no work, but serving God without intermission. And casting off everything he had on, he started out into the desert. When a week had gone by he returned to his brother. And while he was knocking on the door, his brother called out before opening, and asked: Who are you? He replied: I am John. Then his brother answered and said: John has become an angel and is no longer among men. But John kept on knocking and said: It is I. Still the brother did not open, but kept him waiting. Finally, opening the door, he said: If you are a man, you are going to have to start working again in order to live. But if you are angel, why do you want to come into a cell? So John did penance and said: Forgive me, brother, for I have sinned. (Merton, 42)

It is there, through daily effort and practice, that a sense of pacifism is produced without having to justify or judge it.

5. Experimentation is a matter of intensity. “The storyteller” writes Benjamin, “he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of the story” (162). Because pacifist life is also completely involved, it is an intensity that is not concerned with progress. In this way, if spoken of in terms of a movement, pacifism should not be lived grounded by an intention of achieving a defined goal such as peace. Such a position leads only to a double danger: either developing a debilitating *ressentiment* in the face of unending effort and struggle, or the temptation to justify a means of achieving this end that is not pacifist. Furthermore, pacifism, as it is wholly concerned in community, cannot institute a new society. In the same way, as it is wholly concerned with ethical living, pacifism cannot institute a new morality. It is a gross misconception to link community as a smaller version of society, ethics as the play of morality. It is the difference between intensity and form, that which comes from experience or practice and that which comes from an application of knowledge.

6. Experimentation is a matter of desire. Just as storytelling has fallen “into bottomlessness” (*insBodelose*), because “Experience has fallen in value” (143), pacifism too will disappear if it is not constantly affirmed with passionate desire by those who attempt to live it out. There was never any grounding for storytelling, just as there is no grounding for pacifism. In other words, one cannot rationally or even theologically convince someone (or even oneself) to become a pacifist. Either they want to or not. It is a desire for pacifism in and of itself, not a pacifism defined against brutality. In other words, it is a desire to engage entirely with the problem of peace. And yet we should also think the concept of desire in another sense of the term – as that which seeks to make connections, extends the horizons of action so that it makes use of all that is virtual.

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It was necessary to sketch these absurd pieces of advice from texts that are as ungrounded as Benjamin’s elusively shifting essay, as foreign to our modern predicament as Merton’s desert hermits, and as monstrous as Bachmann’s crisis of language experienced by the young father. How else to highlight the necessity of an apprenticeship in pacifism? How else to speak about the free practice of pacifism without locking it down? At such distances we are able to see the “great, simple outlines”[18] of pacifism – without, that is, being nostalgic for these particular practices; yet also, without giving up – without, as the young father succinctly puts it, “half aiming at the wolfish practice and half at the idea of morality [...] like a man of my times” (76). In this way, I believe I am taking up Shoshana Felman’s critical challenge to return Benjamin to his silence.[19] It was a silence that freed instead of imprisons. Benjamin’s silence is also the radical silence learned in the desert. “Benjamin was a good listener,” writes Felman, “because he was always faithful to the silent one” (234). The task is to learn his practice of listening, the practice of listening to a story that does not involve a consummation of information/knowledge, but of weaving its problem into our lives – learning how to embody the problem and experiment within it. In other words, our challenge is to have the courage to live creatively within the historical crisis.

Approaching the problem in this direction allows us to work with it without being overwhelmed and paralyzed. Therefore, the particular experience of pacifism that I was attempting to address here is this: that the practical tradition passed on by pacifism should not be confused with answers, but is truly a continuation of experiments with the unknown – always seeking to create new positions, new gestures into the virtual that effectively confront very real brutality. To this challenge, we also need to constantly ask how storytelling is proper and particular to what is radical in pacifism.[20]

Notes:

1. Thomas Merton. *The Wisdom of the Desert*. New York: New Directions, 1960.

Due to the larger number of page referencing, I will simply use internal citation for page numbers and footnote the bibliographical information.

2. I use the term ‘brutality’ in a very general sense, but following the definition given by Jean Genet in an essay entitled “Violence and Brutality”: “The brutal gesture is one that halts and suppresses a free act.” Jean Genet. *The Declared Enemy*. Ed. Albert Dichy, Trans. Jeff Fort. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004; pg. 171. It is not the place here to address the important problematic of using this definition of brutality, especially in light of its opposition and its ramifications on the concept of pacifism. Let me simply say that in my work, pacifism constitutes only *one* manifestation of a free act – without commenting on Genet’s own examples, pacifism still holds true to this definition.

3. Walter Benjamin. “The Storyteller” in *Selected Writings, Vol. 3. 1935-1938*. Ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1996.

4. Ingeborg Bachmann. “Everything” in *The Thirtieth Year*. Trans. Michael Bullock. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1995.

5. Gilles Deleuze. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

6. See, for instance, Jan Narveson’s article, “Is Pacifism Self-Refuting” in *Pacifismus: Ideengeschichte, Theorie und Praxis*. Ed. Barbara Bleisch, Jean-Daniel Strub. Wien: Haupt Verlag, 2006. Narveson concludes his article by writing, “Pacifism, then, is a mistake. Starting with the reasonable premise that violence is evil, it arrives at a conclusion that paves the way for more evil rather than less. That, indeed, is self-refutation” (144). For further consideration of this opinion, Narveson also suggests reading his “oft-reprinted essay” “Pacifism: A Philosophical Analysis” in *Ethics* 75 (4), 1965.

7. Unless we follow Walter Benjamin in his insistence that, “Knowledge is concerned with individual phenomena, but not directly with their unity.” Walter Benjamin, “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. New York: Verso, 1998; pg. 30. The danger is that knowledge, coupled with reason, has the tendency to betray its own means.

8. Though Benjamin does not consider “sayings” as such in comparison to storytelling proper, I believe Merton describes a very similar function.

9. For two other references towards this claim, see: Karl Kraus, “In These Great Times,” an essay written in 1914: “But some day people might find out what a trifling matter such a world war was as compared to the intellectual self-mutilation of mankind by means of its press and how at bottom it constituted only one of the press’s emanations” Karl Kraus. *In These Great Times: A Karl Kraus Reader*. Ed. Harry Zohn. Trans. Joseph Farby, Max Knight, Karl F. Ross, Harry Zohn. Great Britain: Carcanet Press Lmt., 1976; pg.77; also in a conference lecture given in 1987 entitled “Qu’est ce que la création?” Gilles Deleuze also clearly makes this connection: “Ce qui revient à dire: que l’information, c’est exactement le système du contrôle.” Gilles Deleuze, “Qu’est-ce que la creation?” Conference paper given May 17, 1987: www.webdeleuze.com. I will return to this point further in the essay.

10. Very briefly, Thomas Merton published this short essay in 1960, a time explosively tense with the nuclear cold war; Benjamin wrote this essay in 1936 as the rise and threat of the Nazi power was evident; and Bachmann was attempting to describe the way things were at the time she was writing this short story.

11. Bachmann was an excellent reader of Ludwig Wittgenstein. “What belongs to a language game is a whole culture.” Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Lectures & Conversationson Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*. Ed. Cyril Barrett. Berkley: University of California Press; pg. 8. Note the peculiar grammar of this sentence.

12. The father’s crisis list is strikingly similar to Jean Genet’s elaboration of the term ‘brutality’: “Brutality takes the most unexpected forms, often not immediately discernible as brutality: the architecture of public housing projects; bureaucracy; the substitution of a word – proper or familiar – by a number; the priority, in traffic, given to speed over the slow rhythm of the pedestrian; the authority of the machine over the man who serves it; the codification of laws that override custom...” etc. From “Violence and Brutality” (172).

13. Paul Virilio. *Aesthetics of Disappearance*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991.

14. Working out from Jean Genet’s writings, William Haver writes, “Let me hasten to add, if only parenthetically, that... we cannot take sides, for we have always already taken sides; the problem – the historical, political problem – is not which side to take (the liberal version of the problem), but to invent new sides we are not yet able to imagine.” 11

15. Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2001.

16. It is actually Merton’s suggestion on the opening page of his essay, “We need not stop here to discuss the fairness of this view [that the world was a shipwreck]: what matters is to remember that it was a fact” (3).

17. Bachmann’s young father described confronting his problem by saying “to think about it deprives one of one’s reason” (71).

18. This is actually how Benjamin approaches the art of storytelling – an art that no longer belonged to the world. (143)

19. Shoshana Felman. “Benjamin’s Silence.” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol.25, No.2‘Angelus Novus’: *Perspectives On Walter Benjamin*. (Winter, 1995), pp. 201-234.

20. Benjamin concludes his “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” by writing, “Only by approaching the subject from some distance and, initially, foregoing any view of the whole, can the mind be left, through a more or less ascetic apprenticeship, to the position of strength from which it is possible to take in the whole panorama and yet remain in control of oneself. The course of this apprenticeship is what had to be described here” (56). This paper is an outline of the themes to be developed in my dissertation, which for the most part concerns the pacifist group the Catholic Workers, who, by forming communities in the very heart of destitution, experiment in the desert.

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