The weight of the past

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Responding to the appalling violence that the machineries of war and economics unleashed during the twentieth century, Marcel Cohen concurs with Samuel Beckett's mid-century remark: "To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now". Based on a speech first delivered in 1998, Cohen's essay remains hugely relevant today.

Here’s an interesting little story. In 1915, when Italy went to war against Austro-Hungary, the poet Eugenio Montale was an officer in the Italian army. One day, his regiment captured a young Austrian officer. On searching him, they found in his pocket a volume of Rilke’s poetry. Montale went to have a word with him: Rilke? In a soldier’s pocket? At the front? They struck up a conversation, talked of poetry, music and opera, and realized that they had everything in common but the uniform they wore. A few days later, Montale was on leave in Milan. He had two tickets for La Scala and suddenly thought of the young enemy officer who would probably have loved to accompany him. He asked the commandant of the POW camp for permission. It seemed like a crazy plan, however the commandant, once he had got over his surprise, had a bright idea: “I’ll let you take your prisoner out,” he told Montale, “with a proviso: that he gives his word of honour as an officer not to take advantage of the situation and try to escape!” The Austrian officer gave his word, spent the evening at La Scala and then, with no fuss or bother, returned with Montale to the gate of the POW camp.

What I find so astonishing about this story is that it tells of a time light-years away from our own. One could probably find something similar happening in the fourteenth century, during the Hundred Years’ War. But, just a little bit later, it was already light-years away from the men who fought at Verdun.

In 1916, in a period of ten months, the battle of Verdun killed 360,000 French soldiers and 335,000 Germans. They were struck down in the mud like dumb beasts by sixty million shells that ploughed through the landscape from end to end. The historian Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau records that “there were more dead soldiers that disappeared into the mud than there were identifiable casualties”. Speaking of the shocked survivors, he adds: “They were broken men; even Pétain could see that. When he spoke to them, the surviving soldiers were incapable of saying a word in reply.” [1]
In Brittany in the 1970s, I met an ex-serviceman whose regiment had been sent into the attack with no ammunition whatsoever. The expected consignment of munitions had not arrived, but the generals took the view that this was no reason to delay the attack: after all, with or without ammunition, the regiment could expect to suffer seventy to eighty per cent losses! Knowing that, the veteran explained, how could you be expected to calmly climb out of your trench? “So they handed out a litre of red wine and a quarter-litre of gnole. [2] However, if you came back alive, the quartermaster’s department docked the cost of the gnole from your pay.” Never before had the high command been so cynical as to decide that what mattered was not fighting but getting yourself killed like a good soldier should.

We know that the underlying truth about the twentieth century is that it invented mass slaughter. The process attained the peak of industrial perfection with the Holocaust. We also need to remember that, for the Germans during World War II, administration was a matter of extreme importance and that the extermination of the Jews was not meant to cost the Reich a single pfennig. That’s why the victims’ own money was used to pay for their transportation to the death camps! The American historian Raul Hilberg has shown, for example, that the extermination of the Greek Jews was implemented at a very late stage simply because the German railways, which leased their wagons to the Wehrmacht, wanted to be paid in marks and not in drachmas. The Greek Jews, of course, only had drachmas, and drachmas were not convertible into marks.

We also know that the Holocaust, though it happened first, was itself light-years away from the 75,000 victims of Hiroshima and the 40,000 deaths in Nagasaki in August 1945. By knowingly sacrificing civilians, the Americans were responding to a military objective: to hasten victory by forcing the enemy to surrender. The Germans, on the other hand, had successfully conquered the whole of Europe when they implemented the final solution, murdering civilians who did not even pose an internal threat.

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But let us consider how war itself has been transformed. During World War I, one death in twenty was a civilian; during World War II, it was one in two. Since 1945, the conflicts that have spilled blood across the surface of the planet have caused twenty million fatalities and sixty million wounded.

Today, four victims out of five are non-combatants. [3] Today, the best way to survive the wars breaking out around us is to wear a uniform. Remember that cartoon by Plantu that appeared on the front page of Le Monde? It showed two Serbian snipers in Sarajevo aiming a bazooka at a school playground. The first soldier was saying to the second: “The trouble with kids is that they won’t keep still!”

These reminders are not intended to teach anyone anything. I include them here in the same way as I would put a date at the head of a letter: just to show where and when I am writing. For the corollary of our experience of the collapse of the values of civilization is the loss of our sense of any real feeling of control over our own destiny.

We can still feel that our sensibilities, our experience of love, the education we have
received and even – why not? – our personal gifts have some weight in our lives. But how can we forget that individual distinctions, which for the combatants at Verdun had already become irrelevant, were completely meaningless during World War II for countless men and women? The Jewish plumber or the Jewish intellectual, rich or poor, young or old, strong or weak, clergy or laity, saw their destinies so completely merged, summed up once and for all in the single word “Jew”, that they themselves could no longer understand how such a reduction could have come about. Not one of the particular features that distinguish one person from another had the slightest impact on their lives. And, unlike the combatants in 1914, they did not even have the illusion that they were fighting to defend their countries or the hope that this really was “the war to end all wars”. As Emmanuel Levinas put it: “The Jews believed that, when they died, justice died with them”. [4]

Do we need to be reminded that, in the camp registers, two initials sufficed to sum up their fate: “N.N.”, standing for Nacht und Nebel (Night and Fog), a play on the Latin expression nomen nescio (I do not know the name), used in every mortuary in Europe before the war to label unidentified corpses.

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At least in peacetime, the self recovers the semblance of freedom and the sense returns of being in control of one’s personal destiny. In western democracies, all the signs are there to convince us of this. And yet, can we swear, hand on heart, that it’s the truth?

Unlike during the trente glorieuses, no one today would dare maintain that anyone unable to find a job, whether man or woman, is less determined, less able or less industrious. The plain truth is that these people are no longer needed. While monetary tempest wreaks havoc on the economies of entire countries, men more powerful than any government decide to create thousands of jobs in one country and to destroy a similar number in another. These men display not the slightest signs of sadism; they are just responding to a logic more powerful than themselves.

In the 1930s, the US witnessed events that defied the most basic morality. At the same time as millions of starving people wandered the roads of America, the prices of agricultural produce fell so low that cattle were being slaughtered only to be burned, and their milk thrown away in a hopeless attempt to drive up the price of beef and dairy produce! Magistrates who were evicting farmers unable to keep up payments on their bank loans were keeping warm by burning corn produced by those same farmers, because corn was much cheaper than coal. [5]

Martin Buber: “The instant you speak, you hear, like me, how the machinery of economic life begins to hum in an unusual way. The foremen are smiling with an air of superiority, but inwardly they are grieving. They will tell you that they are adapting their machinery to the circumstances, but you can see that all they can do is adapt themselves to their machinery, as long as it will still allow them to do so.” [6]

I would like to add a statistic, though everyone knows it already: in the twentieth century, three-quarters of the world’s population share between them only a fifth of the world’s resources. [7]
The individual’s loss of substance, his inability to grasp his own personal destiny, the negation of his very essence, was so blindingly clear to Kafka that, on one occasion, he reacted in a way that was totally unpredictable. A student, Gustav Janouch, came to see Kafka one day in 1920 in his office at the Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute. He gave Kafka an enthusiastic account of a troupe of dancing girls currently performing in Prague. [8]

The more Janouch enthused about the dancing girls, however, the gloomier Kafka became. In the end, he got quite angry. What? Young women, all with the same measurements, the same costume, the same hair-do, raising the same leg at the same time, and all receiving the same applause? For Kafka, that had nothing to do with the love of women. On the contrary, it amounted to an absolute negation of woman. In Kafka’s eyes, to applaud a standardized image killed what was most precious in each and every woman: her own personality.

* Proust and Kafka were very close contemporaries: Proust died in 1922 and Kafka in 1924. Here, again, their works are light years apart. Milan Kundera pointed this out brilliantly. In an interview for Lettre international, [9] Kundera compared Proust’s oeuvre to a comet of pure beauty, forever fleeing from us. “Whilst Proust is lost in wonder at the dizzying universe that is a man’s inner world, Kafka poses quite a different question: in a world where external forces have become so crushingly powerful that internal motives have no weight, what possibilities remain for a man?”

Indeed, Kafka’s heroes no longer even have a name. In The Castle, the principal character is referred to merely as “K”; all we know about him is that he is a surveyor.

I am probably giving the impression that I am talking about history without being an historian, and venturing into philosophy without being a philosopher. But all I am really doing is speaking of myself in the first person. For me as a Jew, the Holocaust, which I miraculously escaped as a child, whilst it annihilated a large part of my family, has represented such a crushing weight that all other events in my life have necessarily been of secondary importance.

Once I became a writer, how could I bring myself to write about those things in my biography that seemed to be of secondary importance; or at least to have no direct relationship with the fundamental reality of my life? I can truly say that I have been dispossessed of my biography, for it does not represent me in any way. That is the sense in which I feel close to the 1914 veteran crushed by the war machine, or to today’s victims of the economic machine.

* Since I did not experience the death camps and was, at the time, much too young to understand what was happening, I cannot speak of the Holocaust or of the Occupation. I only know about these events through books. And so I am in the position of being unable either to speak or to remain silent, even though I continue to maintain a passionate belief
in the power of the written word. But why should I not at least try to recount those events of my childhood that have influenced my life? Because my childhood itself is already well known to everyone. It was crushed, destroyed, and does not even truly belong to me: that is what it means to be “dispossessed of my biography”. Those Jewish children who managed to slip through the net all have the same tale to tell, give or take a few tiny details. Their story has been told dozens of times. To cite a single example: these little city-dwellers who, like me, were abruptly relocated to the countryside, were all terrified of cows. I have even seen this detail portrayed quite accurately in a film. I have no wish to relate my own erstwhile fear of cows, and I have practically nothing else to say about my childhood.

* Emmanuel Hocquard, a writer friend of mine, was explaining at a round table discussion that the classic novel is, basically, a metaphor for life. Like life itself, novels that tell a story necessarily have a beginning, a climax and an end. As the pages turn, the characters develop according to a logic that is clearly apparent and is, in particular, a function of their character and the way they deal with events. As Novalis said: “Character is destiny”. Similarly, because the novelist’s characters are heading in a particular direction, he or she does indeed appear to be telling us something, even though the word “message” is, more often than not, inappropriate.

We could go on discussing this definition forever. We could say that there are as many novels as there are novelists, that the “message” may involve pointing out the impossibility of the “message”, that a novel consists of more than its plot. We could even claim, as Thomas Mann did in the 1940s, that from now on the only books that merited the name of novel were precisely those that did not present themselves as novels. [10] There is no end to this rather pointless debate: literature is a vast and boundless space, in which everything is possible at any time, though not everything is always relevant.

This is how Jean Paris describes James Joyce’s Ulysses, first published in 1929:

For Joyce, once the Golden Age had been abolished, all the world had left to show were the outward signs of chaos. Like Ulysses, wandering from one island to another, the spirit can do no more than keep count of appearances in order, if possible, to reduce their disorder by enumerating them. [...] This is the beginning of a literature that, unlike its traditional predecessor, will no longer have high or low points or purple passages but will attempt, meticulously and desperately, to describe the immensity of our exile. [11]

Half a century later, Samuel Beckett appears to have adopted, almost word for word, Jean Paris’s assessment: “To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.” [12]

* My wife and I spent a long time wondering where we could spend our holidays looking at the sea, somewhere where we could be alone. We found the answer: on the sea or, more
precisely, on one of those container ships that roam the oceans transporting just about everything that is consumed on our planet, from quartz wristwatches to bananas.

These container ships are immense workshops of 60,000 to 100,000 tonnes. They have generators powerful enough to supply enough electricity to a town the size of Tours. Satellite navigation is today so precise that a skipper leaving Le Havre knows to within 500 metres exactly what his position will be when he arrives at Pointe-à-Pitre, 7000 kilometres and seven time zones away. These ships represent such an enormous investment that they never stay at the quayside for more than a few hours. Almost all of them have two engines. When one needs repair, the ship goes to sea using the other, whilst engineers repair the first at sea. As soon as they have finished their work, they disembark at the first port of call and catch a plane back home.

From the cargo vessels on which Blaise Cendrars sailed in the 1920s to these floating super-workshops, there is one thing that has not changed: the solidarity felt by seamen. Going to the aid of a ship in distress or helping a man who has fallen overboard is a law that is so absolute no sailor ever needs reminding of it. Moreover, there is a radio frequency reserved for SOS calls. Ships are required to be permanently tuned to this wavelength. When an SOS message is transmitted, no ship in the vicinity can claim not to have heard it.

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Well, we travelled on just such a ship. A few months earlier, one of its novice seamen had fallen overboard. They had not realized he was missing until some hours later, after the ship had covered a considerable distance. Still, it turned back at full speed. Ships of several nationalities also changed course. Some were very far from where the accident had occurred and, although logic said they had not the slightest chance of saving the young seaman, they did not hesitate; they changed course and that was that.

Or rather, all changed course but one. It was perfectly clear from the radar trace that this ship was refusing to divert from its course at all, not even by a few miles. In fact, it was the only craft that was in the immediate vicinity of the accident and would therefore have some chance of finding the man alive.

Two things struck me about the account that the captain gave me of this tragedy. The first was the words he used: “Those people had no time to lose”. The second I find admirable. The captain had taken the time to find out the nationality of this ship, but he refused to tell me what it was. He did not want the crime of one man to rebound in my mind on all the seamen sailing under the same flag.

If you take into account the cost of the fuel, the crew’s pay and lots of other factors, saving a man’s life had, for “those people”, become much too expensive to even make the attempt. Was this just an isolated incident?
In late 1997, off the Breton coast, a French trawler was rammed by a Turkish cargo ship. This vessel also did not deign to help the men who were struggling just a few metres away. The cargo and the need to deliver it on time were much too important. Perhaps the ship was transporting dried Smyrna figs – they are the best! You can find them in all supermarkets. Or perhaps it was lychees in syrup from Hong Kong.
The reason that I mention the nationality of this second ship is that the officer of the watch and the captain ended up in a French prison awaiting trial. If I have made much of these two incidents, it is to make quite clear that the quotation from Martin Buber, dating from the 1920s, is as relevant today as it was then. The term “economic machinery” is more appropriate than ever. Do I need to add that it can crush us as though it were a war machine?

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We were speaking of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, published in 1929. A few years on saw the publication of two other great novels: *Auto-da-fé* by Elias Canetti in 1935 and *The Death of Virgil* by Hermann Broch in 1945. If Joyce’s novel is a text that, in many respects, knowingly closes the door on the novel after it has been exhausted as a genre, Broch and Canetti were also aware that a literary epoch was ending, probably forever. The subjects chosen by each proclaim this quite clearly.

In *Auto-da-fé*, the hero, Professor Kien witnesses the burning of his library, the thing that was precious to him above all else. He had even gone so far as to marry his housekeeper because only she had the skill to dust a book without spoiling it. She even went so far as to wear gloves when carrying out the task!

Here is what Canetti said about his own novel: “It was no longer possible to represent the world in the same fashion as the novels of the past […] The world was disintegrating and it was possible to represent it faithfully only if you had the courage to show its disintegration”. [13]

In Hermann Broch’s novel, Virgil himself is tempted to burn the *Aeneid*. This is not at all because he believes his poem to be bad. It is just that he wonders whether his own age can still understand it, and if such a book, in troubled times, retains any meaning at all.

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Even those who take no interest in literature are not naive enough to think that a writer is free to adopt one style rather than another. Style is what a writer does not choose.

However, a writer is someone who works on himself as much as on the paper. It may even be that he is working the hardest when he is not writing. He also reads newspapers and watches television. Of course, like anyone else, first and foremost he does what he can. When he sits down at his desk, it is nevertheless with the aim of banishing from his mind everything that now seems to him false, superannuated, pointless in the context of the contemporary way of expressing oneself; of composing a book and of representing the world in which he lives. If, whether knowingly or unknowingly, he is not free to do all of this, his room for manoeuvre remains, nevertheless, very real.

This was precisely what enabled Rémy de Gourmont, a soldier in 1915, to launch a violent attack on certain rhetorical devices that, in his view, belong to another age. Or even to another planet. In a short book written in the trenches, entitled *Dans la tourmente*, he inveighs against a seven-line sentence he has just found in a text. It begins with these words: “The sun, slowly, like an enormous, incandescent bomb, falls upon the horizon...”
Rémy de Gourmont comments: “This is how someone goes to the trouble of saying: ‘It is five o’clock, or seven o’clock or eight o’clock’, at a time when every minute is precious. Rhetoric has gone too far. We should close the schools where this method of abusing language is taught, or else make them teach nothing but physics and geometry.”

Rémy de Gourmont admitted that, before the war, he had scarcely paid attention to matters of style. Afterwards, however, they seemed to him to be of the greatest importance: “I can see in this all the signs of a spiritual sickness that is more serious than anyone thinks, a sickness that mistakes for ideas, or even for reality itself, any old emphatic cobbling together of empty words.” He concluded: “It is because of people with minds like his (he means the author of the seven lines) that our offensive was halted several times because of lack of ammunition. I hate lack of precision and I would gladly blame it for every evil.” [14]

When the self is becoming lighter to the point where it reaches what Milan Kundera calls “the unbearable lightness of being”, why would literary techniques and language not also become eminently suspect?

Nathalie Sarraute: “World and form are one […]. I cannot believe that it is possible to place a new vision within an old form”. [15] Edmond Jabès: “Yes, at one time, I did think that I’d found my niche in my words but then, how shall I put it? Words made their presence felt through their difference. […] It was as though, all of a sudden, I could only express myself through silence in that space left vacant by their difference.”

“What difference?”

“Something fundamentally incompatible between man and his words, something that keeps them at a distance.” [16]

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This being so, is it surprising that the painter Barnett Newman was able to discern great similarities between the development of painting and of literature? He was struck, for example, by the fact that both had completely renounced what might be called “depth of field”. Referring to Tolstoy, he pointed out that his prose was the equivalent of Cinemascope. One might add that in many respects it resembled paintings by Delacroix or Géricault, because the characters that appeared existed not only in three dimensions, as in a painting, but in time as well. Tolstoy, Newman explains, uses words in such a way that they resemble an open window. This is exactly the way that a painter uses technique, colour and perspective to give the impression that you are entering a landscape.

However, what the modern writer does, said Newman, is to encourage us to consider the words for their own sake, in the same way that a painter asks us first of all to look at the painting in its own right. [17]

I like Delacroix and I also like Robert Ryman’s white canvasses. Whose fault is it if, between the first and the second, a subtleness and vertiginous depth have disappeared forever? It is tautological to say so but, if Ryman touches us, is it not because his canvas
appears to us, first and foremost, as the essential awareness of this loss?

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I would also like to cite the conclusions reached by the physicist Robert Oppenheimer, one of the fathers of the American atomic bomb, at the end of the 1950s:

We are condemned to live in a world where every question that we ask raises another question, and so on *ad infinitum*. I am afraid that all those who today aspire to reaching a synthesis or a unity are just harking back to a time that has been and gone. I believe that they will only arrive at this synthesis at the cost of either tyranny or renunciation. [18]

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In his study of *L’Espèce humaine*, in which Robert Antelme recounts his experiences as a former deportee in Buchenwald, Gandersheim and Dachau, Georges Perec wrote:

This transformation of an experience into language, this possibility of a relationship between our sensibility and a world that reduces it to nothing, can today be seen as the most perfect example in French contemporary writing of what literature can be. [19]

You would probably search in vain to find a more exhaustive definition. And it appears all the more apt because it applies to a work that lies in the field of narrative or testimony. But it is clear that Perec is here using the word “literature” quite deliberately. He means that literature involves defining realities once and for all, even when those realities come close to being inexpressible and when previous means of expressing them have become totally inadequate.

For what could be more inexpressible than the experience of the deportees? Let us not forget that, in the extermination camps, the prisoners feared that, if they ever had the chance to bear witness, they would not be understood. And that was the Nazis’ last-ditch defence. In a letter sent to Berlin in June 1943, the Reichskommissar for the East wrote: “If we imagine for a moment that our enemies were to get wind of what we are doing and try to use it as propaganda, it would do them no good at all, for the very good reason that no one would believe them.” [20]

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I referred to Robert Antelme as an example of what literature can do when it comes close to fulfilling the greatest ethical demands made upon it. To justify the word “ethical”, I would remind you of the definition of literature proposed by Kafka: “To make possible at last true speech between one man and another”. I could equally well have quoted Primo Levi, Samuel Beckett, Henri Michaux or other writers who, in one way or another, situate us at the very centre of the realities of our time. The feature they all share is that they managed to give word and form to what would otherwise have remained at best
confused, and at worst outdated and therefore false.

For to give form is, by definition, to “inform”. And only literature (and, more generally, art) informs in the truest sense of the word, inasmuch as only literature is aware that form is of the essence. With a touch of humour but a great deal of profundity, Edmond Jabès said that it is only in books that the earth is round. After all, who has ever checked to satisfy himself of the fact?

Obviously, that has nothing to do with what Bertolt Brecht called “digestive literature”, the kind that you enjoy sitting in an armchair after dinner with, if possible, a cigar and a glass of brandy, the kind that is predestined to conform to well-tried formulae.

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Only that to which we can contrive to give form truly exists. And we ourselves only exist because of the form that we manage to give to our existence, whether we are writers or not. This is why saying that you have nothing to say is still saying something. And it is not necessarily a pointless message.

One of the more surprising books that I have read recently is a 150-page book in which the author, Nathalie Quintane, a very young woman, writes of nothing but shoes; indeed, her book is entitled Chaussure (“Shoe”). And the publisher’s blurb does warn: “Chaussure is not a book which, under the guise of talking about shoes, is actually about boats, black puddings, Darwinism or childhood sweethearts. Chaussure really is about shoes”. [21]

So, how is it that, in 1997, a young woman has decided, quite rationally, to speak only of shoes rather than of her childhood sweethearts?

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There is one thing that is certain: to decide to speak about shoes, or any other subject, rather than about one’s “childhood sweethearts”, could very easily be mistaken for happiness, even if we see in it the reflection of an immense void. For it is a form of happiness to find in oneself the strength, the taste, and the determination to give form even to a book about shoes, even to an immense void and even to unhappiness itself. Of course, that is a luxury reserved for the well off.

The real misfortune is no longer to be able to find in yourself the least strength or even the will to deal with the most serious subjects. For a writer, as in the case of Hermann Broch’s Virgil, it is to doubt that writing a book can have any meaning whatsoever.

Well, here is an incident that occurred in Sarajevo in 1995, while it was under siege. A small group of writers, Serbs, Croats and Bosnians, who ought normally to have been at loggerheads about everything, gathered in a public square. This was not in order to protest: they had been doing that to no effect for months. As the great essayist, Predrag Matvejevitch relates, they had got together to burn their own books in a symbolic gesture. [22] This voluntary auto da fe was intended to be the diametric opposite of what the Nazi butchers had done in 1933. At that time, the burning of the works deemed to be
“unhealthy” by the Hitler regime implicitly acknowledged their influence on public opinion. In 1995, however, the authors were convinced that their books could not prevent anything at all, while they themselves had been abandoned to their executioners by the world’s great powers, before the very eyes of those UN troops who were supposed to be protecting them, not to mention the TV cameras of the entire world!

As the twentieth century comes to a close, is it possible to still have doubts about the real power of culture?

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While Napoleon’s troops in Spain were committing the atrocities that we all know about, Goya was going out at night to draw from life the heaps of corpses in the wasteland of war. When the gardener Isidro, accompanying him on his sorties around the Quinta del Sordo, asked him one day why he was so determined to depict such barbarities, Goya replied: “In order to acquire the taste for saying for ever and ever to men that they should not be barbarians”. [23]

Let us think about the kind of men and women that we would have become had Goya, like the writers of Sarajevo, decided to burn The Disasters of War in the belief that there was no longer anyone left able to grasp the meaning of such a work.

Footnotes


2. Rough grape alcohol, similar to grappa or aguardiente [trans.].


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