

## ***APOCALYPSE NOW AND AGAIN***

**By Michael Ventura**

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In a time of war, all words are wet with blood, even the commonest greetings, even "Please pass the salt." Because our wages paid for the weapons, our votes elected the leaders, our needs are being interpreted as "the national interest," our morality is being invoked as a reason to kill. It may be a just and necessary war, as the Second World War no doubt was; it may be a shameless waste, as the First World War and Vietnam were; but it is always our war, we are always responsible for it, and, no matter how far from the fighting we reside, it always changes us. As Lawrence Durrell wrote, "If [for noncombatants] war did not mean a way of dying, it meant a way of aging." And we measure this aging with words that cannot help but be bloodstained.

Words that attempt to discuss war ... as soon as they're spoken they sink into the blood, shamed by the blood, unable to express or contain the magnitude of a suffering that those of us far from the fire zones cannot feel and cannot (and do not really want to) imagine. And yet something must be said, if only because to be numbed into silence is also a way of dying; or perhaps merely because we are creatures who are both defined by language and who flee to language for definition -- to make some fragile, temporary sense out of chaos. Through language we bear witness.

But bear witness for whom? For a next generation that will only do it again, as this generation is doing it again? Often "bearing witness" is only a disguised way of bearing guilt. Not the mushy guilt of the wrongness or shallowness of one's nation or one's cause, but a far deeper guilt, felt by soulful people on all sides, whether they support their war or not: the guilt that it is always *our* war by virtue simply of being one of the human race, a species that does unspeakable things to each other -- to itself! -- over and over and over again, generation after generation, no matter what anybody claimed to have "learned" in the last war. The shame of that. The wrenching, unutterable shame of it. Always the senseless waste. Always the compulsion to resort to killing. Again and again.

As individuals, most of us are better than that. But as a race, what we do as individuals doesn't seem to count, doesn't seem to "take," doesn't hold back the race from the next compulsive lurch into atrocity. It doesn't comfort me that those actually committing the atrocities this year, in this war, are mostly Serbs. They are human beings and I am a human being, so they cannot help but act, in part, in my name; I cannot demonize them, I cannot assure myself that what they are capable of I am not capable of, for they are mirror images of me and of mine, we are made of the same stuff. And that is the gruesome sadness of watching it all go down. "Oh, dear God, we're doing it again." Germans, Americans, Israelis, Arabs, Chinese, Japanese, Guatemalans, whatever, we all take our turn, over and over, we are all human beings and we both commit the atrocity and suffer the atrocity in each other's flesh, for the same garment of mortality is issued to each of us at birth, and it encloses the same passions, the same capacities for mercy and mercilessness, and the same longing that one day things will be different. Always, always, it is our war.

A survey, recently reported in *The New York Times*, concluded the following: that during the last 15,000 years, "Western civilization" -- i.e., the Mediterranean countries, Europe, Russia, and the Americas -- has spent one out of every five years at war. Twenty

percent of our precious, precious time. Everybody, on every side of every war, says they're fighting for peace. And everybody knows that's insane. And everybody does it anyway. And no one knows why.

Except maybe my brother Vinnie. He says: "We're children of an explosion. Lots of explosions! The Big Bang explodes, the sun explodes, and all those explosions end up making: us! Why is our behavior any big surprise? How do you expect the children of an explosion to behave? When we make bombs, A-bombs, land mines, we're just remaking, imitating, our parents -- the explosions in which our elements were formed."

I have been reading philosophy, psychology, poetry, and holy writ most of my life, but I have nothing to answer him with. The more I turn over his words in my mind, the more Vinnie seems to have hit upon something true. True and -- if history is our guide, or the headlines of today's paper -- inescapable. And if this condition is inescapable it is also irredeemable. And we have to live with that.

I am the child of an explosion, of many explosions, and I am something called "an American." I cannot help but love my country the way I cannot help but love my mother and father, no matter what abuses they commit -- and no matter if they love me back or not. And every Serb and German, etc., etc., feels the same way, and cannot help it.

I am an American writer, so I use the simplest words possible because I know that fully half the American children who graduate high school can barely read even the simplest words; and if, by some chance, one of those children picks up this page, I don't want that child excluded. I am an American and all I need do is read a newspaper to know that one out of five children in my country lives in poverty, tens of thousands of children are homeless, and 10 million go to bed hungry; and that one in 10 of the municipal water supplies in America are contaminated; and that more than 43 million cannot afford medical care (a decade ago it was "only" 31 million); and that in this great "boom" the media loves to hype, tens of millions slave at two jobs to make ends meet, jobs that give no sense of worth, "dead-end jobs" they're called, and for good reason; and that we wouldn't have a boom at all unless millions of "foreign" workers (human beings, our mirror images) were being paid bare subsistence wages to make the pretty things we flaunt -- so that we have all, all, become slave owners by proxy; and that a far higher percentage of my fellow citizens murder each other than anywhere else in the world, a higher percentage take drugs to alter their unbearable reality, and a higher percentage are in prison and in mental hospitals than in any society in history.

Yet we spend -- what is it now? \$500 billion? -- on our "defense," when it is clear that we cannot defend ourselves against ourselves.

"It is criminal to counsel despair," James Baldwin wrote. I beg you not to mistake these thoughts for despair, and not to use these words to excuse your own despair. I am the child of an explosion, and the light in my eyes began as the light of an explosion. Yes. But despair is not an option. Despair is safe, because it requires nothing of us; beauty, on the other hand, is dangerous; it's scary to keep alive our sense of beauty; because beauty reminds us of possibilities that are frightfully difficult to live up to, live into. We cannot excuse ourselves from responsibility. If we are tainted with each other's crimes, if our words are stained with bloodshed, then beauty -- yes: beauty -- becomes all the more our responsibility. The most powerful forces in the world are bent upon destruction of every kind, and yet beauty persists. Mercy, tenderness, gentleness, concern, regard, the poetry of life -- human beauty. Nothing "official" is on its side so we, very unofficially, must be. Nothing we call "power" supports it -- so how strong must human beauty be, really, to persist unaided, largely unheralded, and with nothing but itself to rely upon? We cannot

be deceived by the "power" that poses as power, when the power of beauty is evidenced precisely because it persists in spite of everything and without protection.

Randolph Bourne, appalled at the war of his era, wrote: "One keeps healthy in wartime not by a series of religious and political consolations that something good is coming out of it all, but by a vigorous assertion of values in which war has no part." And he asked: "Now, while everything that is respectable ... seems to be putting its effort ... into the techniques of destruction, are there no desperate spiritual outlaws with a lust to create?"

The question is not whether this Serbian war is "right" or "wrong." Genocide must be challenged, "ethnic cleansing" cannot be tolerated. But those committing the atrocities are human beings, just like us, so their shame is ours. The blood they shed stains our lives. And only "a vigorous assertion of values in which war has no part" can be an antidote to that unavoidably shared madness. What can be saved is more delicate, yet stronger, than the rapacious brutality that calls itself "civilization." What can be saved is: the capacity within any human action, within any moment, to blossom rather than explode, and for each moment's ability to invigorate the next moment, and the next, defiantly beautiful, so that our sorrow is borne not by resignation or bitterness but by the wonder that even in such a world beauty can exist at all.

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