

Sharon H. Nelson / ESSAY AND POEM

War Fury: A Meditation on *Psalms* 137

Psalms 137¹

By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
we wept when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars,
we hung up our lyres.
There our captors required of us songs,
and our tormentors mirth, saying:
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How shall we sing
a song of the Lord
on alien soil?
If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither;
let my tongue cleave
to the roof of my mouth
if I cease to think of you,
if I do not remember Jerusalem
even in my times of greatest joy.

¹ This version of *Psalms* 137 combines the material that appears in *The Holy Bible*, revised standard edition (World Publishing, 1961) and the materials of *Tanakh – The Holy Scriptures, JPS Translation* (Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they cried: "Strip her, strip her,
to her very foundations!"
O Daughter of Babylon, you predator,
happy shall be he who requites you
with what you have done to us.
Happy shall be he who takes your little ones
and dashes them against the rocks!

Among all the psalms, this one more than any others has become the writer's psalm. Its opening lines have been used by a diversity of contemporary authors for title materials. Its second stanza, notably the fourth and fifth lines, have been adopted as a *cri du coeur* in a variety of literary circumstances. The notion of the right/writing hand withering and the tongue cleaving to the roof of the mouth are the emblems of silencing for any writer with a background that includes even passing acquaintance with this verse.

What, though, of the third and final stanza? It is seldom quoted. Is it ever remembered in a literary context? It is so politically incorrect in its call for vengeance, so graphic, so powerful in its final image, so unfashionable. War is supposed to have become a matter of military offensives against military targets. It is not supposed to be a call for vengeance against a people. It is not supposed to be about the maiming and killing of children. It is not supposed to reverberate with the lines: "Happy shall be he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks!" But it does.

Ours is a culture that holds as a major precept that "seeing is believing". When it comes to media reports of violence, especially those seen on television, "seeing is believing" becomes a literal truth. Just as the repetition of any liturgy produces a lifelong resonance for those who attend religious services, so the repetition of visual images on television produces an ineradicable resonance in those who

watch. The rebroadcast of the collapse of the World Trade Center, for instance, has turned that imagery into a kind of cultural iconography. Unlike the texts of liturgies, however, the images replayed on television are seldom interrogated critically. Like miracles, they are seen, accepted, and become a matter of faith, stored in the living memory of believers.

Because of the immediacy of televised images, it appears to those who sit and watch that the act of watching makes them participants in the events they witness. This is an illusion. *Witnessing*, after all, is a public if not a political act. And yet, there is a sense in which this kind of watching, however private and domestically contained, is a kind of witnessing, for it valorizes what is shown. The images that are seen become shared cultural artifacts. Their truth and their value are legitimated by the act of being shared — seen again and again by vast numbers of people. In this context, and for all practical purposes, what is not seen does not exist. A shared reality is constructed in which huge lacunae are purposefully created in the scripted imageries of what is shown.

The failure to broadcast images of some acts and events and the repeated broadcasting of images of other acts and events is a method of direction and control, a technique for manufacturing consent. And heaven help anyone who dares question. That is blasphemy, as Sunera Thobani, for instance, discovered. As Thobani incisively observed in “War Frenzy” (www.zmag.org/thobanireplies.htm), an essay that appeared after she had been viciously attacked for a speech critical of American foreign policy:

Rendering invisible the humanity of the peoples targeted for attack is a strategy well used to hide the impact of colonialist and imperialist interventions. Perhaps there is no more potent a strategy of dehumanization than to proudly proclaim the accuracy and efficiency of “smart” weapons systems, and of surgical and technological precision, while rendering invisible the suffering bodies of these peoples as disembodied statistics and mere “collateral damage”.

Thobani points out that her “use of embodied language, grounded in the recognition of the actual blood running through these bodies, is an attempt to humanize these peoples in profoundly graphic terms.”

In “Rock Candy,” a poem for A.M. Klein, I myself make use of lines and resonances from *Psalm 137*, in particular “let my right hand wither; let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth”. Implicit in my use of those lines is the rest of the psalm, an example of that “embodied language, grounded in the recognition of the actual blood” with which the psalm ends: “Happy shall be he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks!” It is only when we have read and attended to and made sense of that embodied language, when we have recognized the call for actual blood and actual violence in the final image, that we realize that the opening stanzas are designed for exactly the same purposes as the inflammatory rhetoric and selected images replayed repeatedly on television networks worldwide.

In *Psalm 137*, the weeping, the sentiment, the reminiscence and recounting of the cruelties of oppression and the cruelty of oppressors, the pledge to remember history and enmity are set as prelude to the graphic call for violent revenge. There is no dissimulation here, no hypocrisy. In a tradition in which saying is doing and vengeance serves for justice, the psalm moves to a resonant and inexorable conclusion. Just as Pharaoh once decreed that all Hebrew male children should be drowned, so the psalmist demands that Edomite children shall be slaughtered. And not only shall children be slaughtered, but such bloodshed should be accompanied by rejoicing: “Happy shall be he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks!”

Since I began this writing, there have been more bombings, more killings, more blood shed, more bodies broken, more lives altered and ended, more particular, beloved voices silenced. And everywhere, and on every side, there have been more and ever-increasing calls for vengeance and violence.

Verbal violence leads directly to the embodiment of thought in acts and deeds. The escalation of verbal violence leads to the escalation of physical violence. There is and always has been a direct

connection. The repeated broadcast of the images of the violence and of the rhetoric of vengeance and violence attendant on the events of September 11th have led to “war frenzy” just as images of violence — written, spoken, broadcast — have provoked it throughout history.

It is possible that foreign policies are simply vehicles for bloodthirstiness. It is possible that our problems are not those of nationhood but of the nature of humankind. It is possible that though we may increase our stores, we may not improve ourselves sufficiently to achieve a less violent world. It is certainly true, as Sunera Thobani observes, that: “Men who kill women and children abroad are hardly likely to come back cured of the effects of this brutalization.” It is also true that channeling violence into other places and onto “othered” peoples spares those of us who are not “over there”. The events of September 11th brought the violence from “over there” home to North Americans. Those events also provoked the realization that we, here, now are just as vulnerable as they, there, then. And “we” may be anyone. The rhetoric of violence and vengeance, like war itself, is aimed at whole populations. Individual attributes and accomplishments — talent, training, insight, charity, personality, a happy disposition or a miserable and miserly one — count for nothing. There is no immunity. All members of a target population are equally demonized, equally dehumanized, equally at risk. Such is democratization by ideology.

I had thought to annotate my poem for Klein to make explicit some of these ideas, which are embedded in that work. Rereading some of Klein’s essays in conjunction with *Psalm 137* convinced me to desist. Klein’s own work is effulgent with brilliant arguments, great learning, important insights, wisdom. Though he was a most political and polemical writer, he attended carefully to the work of other authors. It would be a shame to spoil my homage to Klein by refitting it to suit a publishing occasion.

The loss of Klein’s voice, its silencing, which I have long associated with the violence done in the world, continues to sadden me. Even Sunera Thobani’s brilliant arguments and important insights, appearing as they do in the tradition of intellectual engagement and search for social justice that Klein practiced, do not

console me. The engines of war grow larger and more efficient over time. The distribution of the graphic images of violence and the rhetoric of vengeance grows more efficient over time. Those images and that rhetoric are chosen and orchestrated for carefully determined political ends.

As far as human behaviour is concerned, not much has changed in a couple of thousand years. As far as the purposes of writing and the uses of rhetoric are concerned, not much has changed in a couple of thousand years. As far as the graphic calls for vengeance and slaughter are concerned, not much has changed in a couple of thousand years. It is difficult to read *Psalms 137* and to be consoled.

Rock Candy

for A.M. Klein

The last of this year's apples catch the light
in a transparent dish, where they baked soft.
Their flesh, now melted, seems no longer flesh,
scented with cinnamon, cored and filled
with dates and apricots and raisins steeped in wine,
changed by transubstantiation — or some alchemy at least —
performed by heat, and wine, left over from a previous feast,
pressed into service for the next.

We are adept,
who set pen to paper,
tongue to palate, lips to air,
at using and reusing,
at reinventing use and usage,
at demonstrating usufruct,
who weave skeins of language into cloth,
deftly cut a suit or stitch a dress,
describe the body that would inhabit it,
and with our tongues
explore the textures of its conjured flesh,
and then concoct
an argument, a fiction, a drama,
all from air:
speech is the vibration
of a membrane against air;

borrowed, inhaled, and then returned
to the atmosphere, the common pool,
the understanding that we share.

Is there truth
or only stories that we tell?

Language becomes a poem
the way sugar becomes rock candy,
an old-world, children's treat:
molten in solution,
sugar changes form on cooling,
turns crystalline;
each crystallized piece
adheres around a string
the way each word accretes
around the stem of an idea,
each separate shape,
each separate sound,
distinct.

However clear the logic,
honed the argument,
it is the poem's music
that remains with us,
each song
the echo of the throat
it issues from,
an after-image
of the flesh.

In your poems,
the apples are all metaphors,
and when the lily and the rose appear,
they are less florescent than scriptural.
The voice seems numbed,
as if the form produced paresis of the tongue,
as if sensation had been overtaken
by ratiocination,
and books obscured the crux of history,
its taste of blood,
its gross brutalities.

In essays,²
 your voice is warm,
 your language luminous.

There, you sketch
 the lineaments of Justice,³
 gather threads,
 weave cloth of gold to dress
 that figure,
 your best-beloved,
 in sumptuous rhetoric,
 glad raiment,
 crafting argument
 not for the sake of argument
 but to create
 a community of discourse where
 a core of understanding, shared,
 makes just action possible.

Lantzman,⁴ lend me a breath, a word, a thread,
 to give each syllable voice, each syllable life.

² See A.M. Klein: *Literary Essays and Reviews*, ed. Usher Caplan and M.W. Steinberg (University of Toronto, 1987).

³ Klein was educated for the practice of law, for a time worked as a lawyer, and was deeply committed to justice. He was active politically and wrote prolifically, often weaving literary and political allusions together. Klein served as editor of *The Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, at that time an influential English-language Jewish voice in Canada, where many of his essays appeared.

⁴ The Yiddish word *Lantzman* can be translated literally as 'countryman' or 'compatriot' but refers less to nation of origin than to shared culture and shared values, to a sense of shared community, and in this instance, to shared literary geographies.

The apples split their skins
 and spill their flesh into the pan,
 their shapes spoiled, their lustre gone,
 like an argument too tightly formed
 or a thread too elegantly spun.

*What does it profit a man*⁵ to think
 if he lose the feel of the world in his hands?

What does it profit a man to think
 if he lose the taste for the world from his mouth?⁶

What does it profit a man?

Hath not a Jew?⁷

Hath not a poet?

⁵ See Matthew 16:26: "What will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?" See also Job 34:9: "For he has said, 'It profits a man nothing/that he should take delight in God'" and James 2:14: "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works?"

⁶ After 1955, Klein withdrew from what had been an extremely active public life, stopped publishing, and became increasingly reclusive. My sources for biographical information include, among others, the University of Toronto website and Zailig Pollock's on-line biography.

⁷ See A.M. Klein's *Hath Not A Jew* (Behrman, 1940), a line borrowed from Shylock's speech in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

The tongue presses against teeth,
sticks to the roof of the mouth.
Lips close against speech,
and air is expelled through the nose;
no sound leaves the throat.

Who can understand?