

## Verlesen as a Hermeneutic of War: Getting Real in Wars of Words

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Many people, including Freud himself, have been dissatisfied with his efforts to make theoretical sense of the phenomenon of war. Freud reportedly called his 1932 essay, “Why War?”—written in response to a request from Albert Einstein and the League of Nations—a “tedious and sterile discussion.”<sup>1</sup> And Freud commented in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that he “bowed to the reproach of his fellow humans that he could offer no adequate response to the fateful question of human aggression and self-destruction.”<sup>2</sup>

But some of Freud’s more spontaneous responses to war provide an excellent starting point from which to discuss war. When Freud says at the beginning of “Why War?” that he is “scared at the thought of his incapacity for dealing with the curse of war,”<sup>3</sup> can we not empathize? In fact, Freud had articulated similar sentiments in 1915. During the First World War, he wrote:

In the confusion of wartime in which we are caught up, relying as we must on one-sided information ... we ourselves are at a loss as to the significance of the impressions which press in upon us and as to the value of the judgements which we form....

The individual who is not himself a combatant ... feels bewildered in his orientation, and inhibited in his powers and activities. I believe he will welcome any indication, however slight, which will make it easier for him to find his bearings within himself at least....<sup>4</sup>

The desperate need in times of war is for information by which people can construct coherent narratives about what is going on. Freud was not only

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<sup>1</sup> Comment by James Strachey, in Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), 22: 198. Subsequent citations of this work will be given in an abbreviated form, containing the title of the work and the number of the volume.

<sup>2</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21: 145.

<sup>3</sup> Freud, *Why War?* 22: 203.

<sup>4</sup> Freud, *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, 14: 275.

aware that available information is one-sided—he had little hope that this fact could be taken into account when information was received. In fact, Freud noted that the anxiety of war made people less rational. He observed in the summer of 1914 that people were prone to “the most authentic symptomatic acts”<sup>5</sup> in times of war. And the symptomatic act which most interested Freud was the very one which people lacking information could least afford to commit: misreading or *verlesen*. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud wrote:

I have an impression that no parapraxis was so greatly encouraged by war conditions—which brought us all such constant and protracted preoccupations—as this particular one of misreading ... [a text] ... contains something which rouses the reader’s defences—some information or imputation distressing to him—and which is therefore corrected by being misread so as to fit in with a repudiation or with the fulfillment of a wish....<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the stress of wartime, like any trauma, makes people vulnerable. Faced with horror, chaos, impaired living conditions, and loss of family, the capacity of human beings, including “noncombatants,” to assimilate and comprehend information is compromised. In such circumstances, people believe what they need to believe, and create narratives to suit themselves.

Freud was well aware that governments and nations also manipulate narratives to suit their purposes. During the First World War he commented on “the cruelties and injustices for which the most civilized nations are responsible, the different way they judge their own lies and wrong-doings and those of their enemies.”<sup>7</sup> And more than once, Freud wrote to his colleague and friend Ernest Jones in England, warning him not to believe the lies being spread against the Central Powers.<sup>8</sup>

As communication capabilities have increased, notably in the years since the First World War, “lying” or *propaganda* has played an increasingly important role in war. The propaganda efforts of the Nazis in the Second World War are well known. The “Cold War” can be easily characterized as essentially one of propaganda. America’s role in Vietnam depended in important ways on propaganda. And now, in the war against Yugoslavia, “propaganda” has assumed center stage. It is worth keeping in mind that official positions

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Anchor, 1989), 350.

<sup>6</sup> Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 6: 113–14.

<sup>7</sup> Freud, *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, 301–02.

<sup>8</sup> Gay, 353–54.

that purport to fight against lies and propaganda can themselves be part of a propagandistic strategy.

Prior American experiences illustrate my point. It is not widely discussed that the U.S. made substantial propaganda efforts of its own in the Second World War. With the excuse of “re-educating” the German people who had been corrupted by Hitler, the U.S. government consulted prominent scientists and social scientists, including anthropologist Margaret Mead and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. Erikson pointed out that American “democratic” propaganda dates to confrontations with native Americans.<sup>9</sup> And in the case of propaganda efforts directed at the Germans after the Second World War, he said:

... [T]he material sent to me so far and the questions which I have been asked to answer do not indicate ... the information ... on which such far-reaching planning must be based. What impresses me in some formulations is their daydreamish totalitarian character. On occasion, I discern Goebbels himself in psychiatric clothing.<sup>10</sup>

Propaganda designed to deceive the American public during the Vietnam war is well documented, including in State Department papers.<sup>11</sup> Paradoxically, that war was presented as a war for “free speech.”

Analyses of the rhetorical structure of the war on Yugoslavia have recently begun to appear. Kalinich<sup>12</sup> addresses the sensationalism and falsification that has been involved in demonizing war participants. Fleming<sup>13</sup> argues values and truth are distorted when considered at a distance from the conflict site, and Rosenthal<sup>14</sup> reviews and analyzes the use of historical analogy as a justification for war.

If Freud failed to illuminate the nature of certain social symptoms, especially that of war, I believe it is because he had difficulty articulating a conception of a speaking *social* body. Although the social bond is implicit in Freud’s famous remark, “the man who first flung a word of abuse at his

<sup>9</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *A Way of Looking at Things*, ed. Stephen Schlein (New York: Norton, 1987), 367.

<sup>10</sup> Erikson, 369.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision making on Vietnam*, vols. 1–4 (Boston:Beacon, 1971).

<sup>12</sup> Lila J. Kalinich, “Beyond Horror: Sensationalism and the Hermeneutics of War,” *Serbian Studies* 14, no. 2 (2000): 143–55.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Fleming, “The Morality of Mass Murder,” *Serbian Studies* 14, no. 2 (2000): 157–64.

<sup>14</sup> John Rosenthal, “Kosovo and ‘The Jewish Question’,” *Monthly Review* 51 (February 2000): 24–42.

enemy instead of a spear was the founder of civilization,”<sup>15</sup> and although a speaking social body is implicit in Freud’s insistent belief that political bodies lie, he did not extrapolate his own discourse from that of the individual to that of a speaking social body itself capable of expressing symptoms. Fortunately, other theorists have elaborated some of the implications of Freud’s work.

For example, in 1979 Lyotard summarized the development of warfare through Vietnam, and predicted the nature of future wars:

Knowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to produce power is already, and will continue to be, a major—perhaps *the* major—stake in the worldwide competition for power. It is conceivable that the nation states will one day fight for control of information, just as they battled in the past for control over territory, and afterwards for control of access to and exploitation of raw materials and cheap labor. A new field is opened for industrial and commercial strategies on the one hand, and political and military strategies on the other.<sup>16</sup>

With respect to a psychoanalytic understanding of the essential role of propaganda in current warfare, what is crucial about Lyotard’s formulation is that it brings to the discussion of war certain crucial elements underdeveloped or missing in Freud’s own attempts to grapple with the phenomena of war. In the postmodern world, cultures and societies themselves are conceptualized as speaking bodies which participate in “language games.” In fact, “vast clouds of language material” are what constitute a society. Power is achieved by discourse and the manipulation of available data. It is important to be clear about the nature of narrative in Lyotard’s model: he eschews grand- or totalizing- or meta- narratives. The currency of postmodern knowledge is “little narrative” (*petit recit*). Although Freud is usually characterized as a modern advocate of a totalizing narrative theory, the opposite claim is better supported by his work. From *Studies on Hysteria* to *Civilization and Its Discontents* and beyond, Freud was insistent that there was no way to say it all. Freud’s demonstration of the endless exercise of condensation and displacement in human life, his insistence that symptoms are multiply determined, and his belief that mature ego psychology consists primarily of finding “new ways of looking at things and arranging them”<sup>17</sup> make him a postmodernist *par excellence*. And

<sup>15</sup> Freud, *On the Psychological Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena: A Lecture*, 3: 36.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Freud, *New Introductory Lectures*, vol. 22, 60.

Lyotard's invocation of *petit recit* seems only to confirm an acceptance of the Freudian concept of castration in language. Freud himself was "often astonished to realize in what a mutilated manner all the ideas and scenes emerged" in the course of an analysis.<sup>18</sup> Such areas of fundamental conceptual agreement between Freud and Lyotard can shed light on the situation in Yugoslavia.

In particular, we can return to the concept of the symptom as illustrated in Freud's remarks on *verlesen*. In Lyotard's terms, since knowledge is constituted by linguistic utterances, and these are limitless, knowledge is not a zero-sum endeavor. Power is a relative rather than an absolute entity. In the postmodern world, the only symptom which is possible is the limitation or fixation of knowledge. But Lyotard goes further than the symptom of *verlesen* articulated by Freud. For Lyotard, reformulation of meaning, re-interpretation of signifiers, constitute fair play since these leave open the field of understanding. The extreme symptom Lyotard speaks of is that of "terrorism": the removal or the threat of removal of the opponent from the dialogue. This, of course, amounts to war. In the postmodern world, real war is the manifestation of the symptom of terror. It is an attempt to cheat at language games—to take the opponent and the matter itself out of the realm of discourse and out of symbolic understanding.

I will illustrate these points and further elaborate in the nature of symptoms with an example from the propaganda war in Yugoslavia, but first let me summarize. For Lyotard, as for Freud, what is symptomatic in human experience is the fixation of signifiers, or the attempt to fix the rules of signification. Parapraxes, especially that of "misreading," represent attempts to fix the bewildering signs one faces in the context of war. As meaning itself has become a commodity and an object of struggle, war has become an effort to force signifiers into rigid, particular arrangements, i.e., to create singular readings. This has become more clear as warring parties have increasingly targeted opponents' capacity to speak.

In conventional war, wounds and death are inflicted upon the individual bodies of the enemy. War's symptoms are manifested in real ways. The symbolic is invoked, almost as an after-effect, as a way of making sense of and representing real destruction. In postmodern war, attacks are made upon the body of knowledge and on the social body. But the killing of biological individuals is incident and is insufficient to achieve the objective of silencing the opponent. This is because the social body continues to speak beyond the lifespans of individuals. In the same way that the biological body may express and record the subjective experiences of the individual, monuments constitute

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<sup>18</sup> Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, Standard Edition, vol. 2, 281.

a real aspect of the social body. In postmodern war, then, combatants who wish to terrorize (silence) opponents must aim their strikes at speaking social bodies.

My argument may be illustrated in a specific way that will also shed light on the crux of the problem in the Balkans. The Orthodox Christian monastery at Dečani, Serbia (Plate 1 on the insert following page 142)<sup>19</sup> was built in 1327. The original Cyrillic inscription over the southern entrance reads:

Fra Vita, Friars Minor, from Kotor, city of Kings, built this church of the Holy Pantocrator, for Lord King Stefan Uroš, the Third and his son, the eminent and all-great and all glorious Lord King Stefan. Built in eight years. And the church is finally completed in the year 6843.<sup>20</sup>

Both western (Romanesque and Gothic) and eastern (Byzantine) influences in Serbian art can be discerned in the monastery's architecture. The interior is intensely decorated. Frescoes of many aspects of daily life show that this is the structure of a speaking social body. For example, texts on the walls (Plate 2 following p. 142)<sup>21</sup> testify dramatically to this body's ancient linguistic constitution as well as to its real presence.

Other kinds of speaking social bodies exist. A 1996 Albanian pamphlet claims to correct alleged "distortionism in historiography." Inside the pamphlet the monastery at Dečani is depicted (Figure 2 opposite),<sup>22</sup> and is claimed as an Albanian landmark, and called by an Albanian name. The text of the pamphlet makes the incompatible assertions that the Dečani monastery is built on land belonging to the ancient tribe Gashi, and that the name Gashi is part of the Orthodox religious heritage.

In terms of postmodern discourse, the Albanian pamphlet could be said to represent a "move" in a postmodern "language game." The Albanian move is ineffective, since its claims cannot be substantiated in light of existing knowledge. But the pamphlet not only fails to present an alternative version of truth, it seeks to disavow extant knowledge and preclude other readings. In this sense, the move is symptomatic.

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<sup>19</sup> Gojko Subotić, *Art of Kosovo* (New York: Monacelli, 1997), Plate 55. Photograph by J. Stojković. International copyright by Editoriale Jaca Book spa, Milan, 1997, all rights reserved.

<sup>20</sup> Subotić, 181.

<sup>21</sup> Subotić, Plate 62. Photograph by B. Strugar. International copyright by Editoriale Jaca Book spa, Milan, 1997, all rights reserved.

<sup>22</sup> Muharem Cerabregu, *Distortionism in Historiography* (New York: Institute of Albanian Studies, 1996), 84.

Figure 2. Albanian claim on the monastery at Dečani

When propaganda such as this fails, terrorist enterprises may attempt to eliminate opposing humans from the discourse. Monuments especially must be destroyed because they continue to speak in memory. Thus, Luke 22:19 says, “This is my [social] body ... remember me.” Terrorist organizations know all too well that the social body is the soul of a people in the same way that an individual’s soul is inseparable from his body. The soul (social body) is more difficult to dispose of: “... do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body...” (Matthew 10:28). What is at stake in Kosovo is truth as inscribed in the social body. Dečani and other sites are living social bodies. Figure 1<sup>23</sup> opposite the first page of this article (p. 132) illustrates a dismembered social body, one

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<sup>23</sup> Slobodan Mil@@, *Spiritual Genocide: A Survey of Destroyed, Damaged, and Desecrated Churches, Monasteries, and Other Church Buildings during the War 1991–93* (Belgrade: Muzei Srpske pravoslavne crkve, 1995).

that paid a price for refusing to submit to terrorist rhetoric. In the “peace” which follows NATO’s war, it is precisely monasteries such as Dečani upon which terrorists continue to exact violence.

Following Freud, Lacan reminds us that monuments, archival documents, traditions, and semantic evolution are the places in which the *unconscious* is inscribed.<sup>24</sup> In postmodern war, then, the goal is to gain control over the unconscious or to erase it altogether. This lawless pursuit can only produce death or psychosis.

In postmodern war, the “front,” as it is called, nevertheless advances relentlessly from the symbolic to the real. But why cannot wars of words remain wars of words? For the answer to this question we can return to Freud directly. In the case of “Dora,” as he was struggling with the nature of symptoms, Freud wrote:

The hysterical symptom does not carry ... meaning with it, but the meaning is lent to it, soldered to it, as it were; and in every instance the meaning can be a different one, according to the nature of the suppressed thoughts which are struggling for expression. However there are a number of factors at work which tend to make less arbitrary the relations between the unconscious thoughts and the somatic processes that are at their disposal as a means of expression.<sup>25</sup>

In symptom formation, the relationship between the unconscious and the body is not arbitrary. Meaning is soldered onto the body. This tendency can be seen even in the now common expression, “slip of the tongue.” It is not the tongue which has slipped. What is meant is “slip of the mind,” but the meaning is soldered onto the body, in this case in a metaphorical way.

Again, to summarize. Social bodies also have meaning. Significance in social bodies circulates freely with discourse. Symptoms of war, such as propaganda, seek to limit, deny or reconfigure the meaning of social bodies. War is symptomatic because it attempts to “solder” particular meanings onto social bodies, or obliterate them. The only way to do this, the only way to “win” the language game is to render the opponent and his monuments mute in the Real.

In postmodern terrorism, the assault on signifiers is seen in attacks on language itself. Even during NATO’s “peace,” the murder of a Bulgarian UN official who was thought to be speaking Serbian<sup>26</sup> and the murder of a UN

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 50.

<sup>25</sup> Freud, *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, 41.

<sup>26</sup> “Protecting the UN’s Rescuers,” *New York Times*, 17 October 1999. The story had been earlier published in the London *Independent* as “Albanian Mob Kills UN Official for Speaking

translator<sup>27</sup> make clear the literalness of these attacks. In cases like these, Saussure's ideas assume immediate, here-and-now relevance. Diachronic shifts in the meaning of "barbarity" yield in this instance to the original Greek designation of the word: violence between speakers of different languages. The synchronic durability of the signifier asserts itself by virtue of its social slipperiness: Serbian is a linguistic convention among many nationalities. It cannot be eliminated by bullets.

The text of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* illustrates in a summary way the folly of trying to omnipotently control meaning. What cannot be tolerated by Oedipus and his kin is uncertainty. "Vague and ancient rumors"<sup>28</sup> and "riddling and obscurity"<sup>29</sup> can only be taken literally by them. The infant Oedipus is left to die because of a prophecy interpreted concretely and singly. Oedipus the young man leaves his foster parents after a drunken man's remark leaves him deeply vexed; on his journey he kills his father in anger. He gains access to his mother's bed by answering the sphinx "correctly." When he begins his inquiry into the truth, he is intolerant of uncertainty. What infuriates him about Tiresias is the latter's "inflexible inconclusiveness."<sup>30</sup> Oedipus thinks he knows everything, he thinks he can know everything. He has no respect for the unknown. That is why his name is "Oedipus." This name is commonly glossed as "swollen foot," a reference to the wounds he suffered when cast out by his parents (this is to emphasize the *real* nature of his injury). But it is important to also consider that οἶδα is the first person perfect of the verb εἶδω 'to see', and to know. Thus, phonetically contained in Oedipus' name (Οἰδιππος) is the assertion "I know."

And when we commonly accuse Oedipus of "hubris," it is important to understand the Greek implications of this word, implications which are only latent, if even still present, in our use of the word. ὑβρις did not mean simply arrogance or pride as we know it. "Hubris" meant wanton violence. An "hubristic" person was violent and overbearing in an "unbridled and ungovernable way."<sup>31</sup> Implicit in this conception is the notion that hubris involves forcing the meaning of a situation and then acting on that presupposed meaning; it involves foreclosing other meanings. The chorus in Oedipus

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Serb," 13 October 1999, 12. This story had also been earlier published in the London *Guardian* as "UN Worker Killed By Mob in Pristina"; it is available on line at: <http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/Kosovo/Story/0,2763,91542,00.html>

<sup>27</sup> London *Guardian*, 22 October 1999, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *Sophocles: Ajax, Electra, Oedipus Tyrannus* (Cambridge: Harvard/Loeb, 1994), line 290.

<sup>29</sup> *Oedipus*, line 439.

<sup>30</sup> *Oedipus*, line 336.

<sup>31</sup> *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1984), 723.

brings this out: “[Hubris], if vainly satiated with profusion that is not right or fitting ... is forced ... into sheer constraint where its feet can do no service.”<sup>32</sup> It is the reckless assignment of singular meaning that constitutes the lawlessness of Oedipus’ hubris. And it is in this particular way that the injured feet of Oedipus are themselves implicated in his conflict.

By the end of the play, Oedipus is desperate to eliminate all testimonial to his misunderstanding and his “crime.” As if to renounce his name, and because he has disavowed his symbolic castration, he puts out his eyes. Freud called attention to the eyes as objects of castration: the eyes are erotogenic zones,<sup>33</sup> and blinding is a castration equivalent.<sup>34</sup> Freud’s intuition rewards further exegesis, for the linguistic heritage of this condensation is inscribed in the ancient texts. Indeed, “the eyes are the lamp of the body ...” (Matthew 6:22, Luke 11:34). Eyes bear witness. But Oedipus’ self-inflicted re-castration reverberates even more deeply. In the ancient world, testimony was sworn to while holding the *testis* of the interlocutor: “So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and swore to him concerning this matter” (Gen 24:9). Oedipus is defeated by language again—he has symbolized more than he can comprehend and he still does not recognize it. The displaced mutilation of his real body stands as a testament to his hubris, his refusal to accept that signifiers cannot be singly ascertained and manipulated.

Oedipus’ problem is our problem still. How to move in the world and assert truth and identity? How to read the myriad signs and meanings that run through our lives? We learn from Oedipus that insisting on particular readings and interpretations is a path to destruction. Freud’s observation that “a person may read something ... different from what is actually before his eyes”<sup>35</sup> ought to be reminder enough in our own time. But instead, as information capabilities have increased, so has the ability to deceive. Simple misreading (*verlesen*) is symptomatic in that it is an expression of the mind’s attempt to control meaning. The phenomenon is being exploited in large scale (propaganda) to justify and conduct wars. In fact, misreading (*verlesen*) has become a major mode of war itself. The “terror” which is symptomatic of postmodern war is that it attempts to obliterate truth and meaning. The destruction of the speaking social body, the attack on language and monuments, is an attack on the unconscious.

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<sup>32</sup> *Oedipus*, lines 873–79.

<sup>33</sup> Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 7: 169, 209.

<sup>34</sup> Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 5: 398; Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 13: 130; and Freud, *The Uncanny*, 17: 231.

<sup>35</sup> Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, 15: 25.



Kisha e Gashit (Deçanit)

Kisha e Gashit e ngritur në pjesën perëndimore të Deçanit (që thirret sipas emrit fisnor Gashi ose vendbanimit Deçani), përfaqëson një ndërtesë të madhe të rrethuar me mure të larta. Ajo është e vendosur në rrëzë, po ashtu të Alpeve të larta shqiptare, në bregun e djathtë të Bistricës, që ballafaqohet me Grykën e Deçanit. Në fakt, pjesa malore perëndimore bjeshkore, është e njohur për blegtori (kullosa të gjera bjeshkore) dhe prodhimin e lundëra, ndërsa pjesa lindore është një hapësirë e qelhtë e Rrafshit të Dukagjinit.

The Church of Gashi (Deçan-i)

The Church of Gashi (Kisha e Gashit) erected in the western part of the settlement Deçani (that is called following the tribal name Gash-i or settlement Deçan-i), represents an immense building encircled by high walls. It is situated in the foothill of the Albanian Alps, on the right bank of river Bistricë-a, facing the gorge of Deçan-i. In fact, the western mountainous part of the Albanian Alps is notable for livestock (vast alpic pastures) and lumber products, while the eastern part is an open space of the Dukagjin Plain, suitable for farming.

Figure 1. Albanian claim on the monastery at Dečani

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<sup>1</sup> Slobodan Mileusnić, *Spiritual Genocide: A Survey of Destroyed, Damaged, and Desecrated Churches, Monasteries, and Other Church Buildings during the War 1991–93* (Belgrade: Muzej Srpske pravoslavne crkve, 1995).

submit to terrorist rhetoric. In the “peace” which follows NATO’s war, it is precisely monasteries such as Dečani upon which terrorists continue to exact violence.