

# Preface

*The true problem for us Westerners is not so much to refuse violence as to question ourselves about a struggle against violence which, without blanching in non-resistance to evil, could avoid the institution of violence out of this very struggle.* Emmanuel Levinas

This is an attempt at such a questioning, written from South Africa in an uneasy time after the victory of the struggle against apartheid. Written, for that matter, after a century of victorious wars of liberation from colonialism, of revolutionary wars, of struggles against fascism, of violence committed in the name of justice and human rights: struggles against evil which have mostly failed to avoid the institution of violence, mostly failed to achieve the peace that was their deepest dream. It has also been a century in which non-violent resolutions to conflict were sought, both from within those conflicts, as oppressed people made use of the tactics of passive resistance and civil disobedience, and from without, as third-party bodies intervened to limit violence through negotiation, monitored treaties, and sanction. And yet violence fails to be contained. It is merely banal to note that the war to end war has not been accomplished.

Levinas's challenge is a crucial one for those – particularly those Westerners – who would engage in a struggle against injustice. It leads directly to the paradox of just violence, and its consequences. An unequivocal American anti-war slogan of the sixties held that fighting

*8 Helen Douglas*

for peace is like fucking for virginity. If one accepts the simile, and if peace is indeed the point, then one must decline to fight. But there is no peace if “good men” stand by and do nothing to stop the bad guys – bad guys fight to win. One question then, is, what is the significance of “the good fight”? Is there a difference between fighting for peace and fighting to conquer? If not, we're in serious trouble, seriously deluded, stuck in war until the bitter end, as if the best we could do would be to moderate our warfare, conduct it as “humanely” and as “reasonably” as possible. This is certainly not a bad thing, but efforts to contain violence also serve to keep its embers warm. If there is a difference, we need to figure out how to talk about it, and to think of a struggle that could consume itself – “such that from the ashes of this consummation no act could be reborn.” (OB 185)

Another question concerns the peace for which the good fight contends. Will it indeed be virginal? Do we struggle for a peace like innocence? A wholeness or a purity, unbroken, unsullied, untroubled? This is not certain at all. We should question ourselves as well about the peace that may come as a spoil of war.

~

One day in May 1987, two bombs exploded at the Magistrate's Court in Johannesburg. The first was a relatively small blast, and was detonated outside as an alarm, a signal to clear the building which, perhaps fifteen minutes later, was the target of the second and larger bomb. When the first one went off, two security force members were killed in the street.

That is the event as I remember it. I haven't bothered to dig back in the records of the day to fill in the details. The explosives may have been limpet mines and perhaps the first one was concealed in a car. I don't recall if the slain men were members of the police or the defense force. I can't tell you their names. I remember they were young.

At just that time, my husband and I arrived in South Africa to provide a safe house for the underground structures of the African National Congress. Prior to this, we had been active in the anti-apartheid movement in Canada. We had worked and become friends with many of the South African activists and exiles who passed through or settled in Vancouver. We had learned about the history of the liberation movements, watched the documentaries, read the books. From half the globe away we had, with righteous outrage, supported the armed struggle against apartheid.

The deaths at Magistrate's Court rendered that support of ours much less nonchalant, but they also deepened it. The evil of apartheid may have been simplified in its representation overseas, but it had certainly not been exaggerated. The need to fight back was not in doubt. Yet being here, suddenly involved more directly in this struggle, required a more thorough consideration of it. *Magistrate's Court*. Who were those two dead soldiers to me? What does it mean to kill an enemy at war? What does it mean to kill an enemy at war, when one has taken up arms in the name of liberation, freedom, justice? What does it mean, thou shalt not kill?

Nietzsche wrote, *He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster*. I take this warning to heart, but

10 Helen Douglas

notice: it is not the monster-fighting that worries him but the risk it runs. A freedom fighter should be careful. The evil of apartheid was – is – the evil that refuses to recognize the tender human dignity of another person. How can you maintain that you are fighting that evil if you in turn deny the humanity even of your enemies? And if you deny the humanity of your enemies, how would anyone be able to distinguish you from them, to distinguish your justice from their wickedness? A freedom fighter should be careful because armed struggle is an ambiguous and paradoxical act. But I cannot write that sentence without being interrupted by the bold exasperation of a poet: *Need I remind anyone again... that armed struggle is an act of love?* (Kgositsile 1990:25).

This is a strange thing to understand, but to try to sort through the contradictory threads of justification and violence should also be an act of love, or at least one which strives to be careful, to remain true, to not fall in with monsters. Nietzsche's aphorism concludes, "And if thou gaze into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee." The poet calls us back at the abyss's edge, reminding us again, incessantly.

# Part I. The Paradox of Just Violence

It is in a situation which is already violent and which compels a forceful response that the paradox of just violence arises. Justice first condemns and then demands violence, even to the point of killing. In violently resisting unjust violence, one finds oneself ethically obliged to do the wrong thing. This is a difficult position to sustain. The likeliest ways to resolve any consequent tension of conscience are to deny or diminish either the wrongness of the act or one's responsibility for acting, or to use the idea of justice as some kind of metaphysical agent which removes the possibility of censure for acts committed under its banner. In short, to rationalize an irrational situation. One says, *My enemy was a monster, not human*. And so, this killing was something other than murder. Or, *He only got what he, by his own actions, deserved – and anyway, he left me no choice*. And so he, and not I, is responsible for bringing about his own death. The metaphysically inclined just warrior can claim, *I am a soldier for the Good and therefore absolved from moral responsibility by this higher authority*. And so, for me, there is no problem. In short: I was justified to kill, to have done what would be abominable without that justification.

A fundamental dissatisfaction with this sort of thinking has been the impetus of this study. Rationalization seems to somehow miss the point. It does not take the ethical proscription against murder seriously enough and it depends too trustingly upon contingent social conventions and mores. Appalling acts of terror can also hide behind such claims of rational necessity. At the same time, the empirical criteria which have been elaborated for the determination of “just war”

12 Helen Douglas

can themselves be shown to point to a deeper signification. Just war theory already assumes a real difference between justified and unjust violence, as though all that remains is to elaborate the rules of good conduct. What needs to be considered is whether separating the figures of just and aggressive violence does enough to address the paradox. I will begin with a very brief discussion of justification as it appears in just war theory. There has been much careful and thoughtful work done in this field, but my aim here will be to just roughly sketch in the scene, just enough to indicate that something is happening outside or behind the picture, something that matters to us, something that will not be captured by filling in the scene with more and finer detail, and something, moreover, that is vital to the significance and meaning of the scene itself.

# Contents

Notes  
Preface

## **I. The Paradox of Just Violence**

1. Justification as fair play
2. Justification as social warrant
3. Resisting violence: justification and being-justified

## **II. Reading Levinas**

1. Proximity: awakening-for
2. Proximity and the third
3. Falling into being: contact, sensibility, exposure
4. Falling into being: as the other turns
5. The epiphany of the face
6. The appearance(s) of the third party
7. And finally back to the text
8. The third party: contradiction and limitation
9. The origin of appearing
10. The correction of asymmetry: an other for the others
11. The order of justice - and reason
12. Works of justice
13. Philosophy's reason

## **III. The Orders of Violence**

1. What's the problem?
2. The anarchic ancestry of resistance and aggression: "good violence"
3. Bad violence
4. Persecutions and correspondences
5. The witness of aggression
6. Resistance and proximity
7. The resistances and violences of being

## **IV. "When I speak of Justice"**

1. Just cause
2. Just conduct and social warrant
3. Just violence
4. Just violence and goodness
5. Last words