"We have heard both sides of the case," said Evil Forest. "Our duty is not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle the dispute." Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

I will be discussing the last manuscript version we have of Wilfred Owen's *unfinished* war poem "Strange Meeting," usually dated as written while Owen was back in England suffering from shell shock in 1917. To deliver on my promise to read "Strange Meeting" into Girard's Clausewitzian apocalypse, I need to carefully (but quickly) marshal two principal insights of mimetic theory to stand before what is now perhaps the most well-known Great War poem in English.

(1) Ritual moderates violence by imitating the conclusion of the clash of two groups, or alternately the mêlée released in a single group trying to stamp out violence by stamping out each other's violence. All (accusations of violence) against one, the submission of the last one to the all is what the last previous violence which finally brought peace looked like to the community which survived it, the final, the decisive word of violence.

(2) How does war mobilise violence? Beyond the superior *strategic* value of defense to attack articulated by Clausewitz, defense is a stronger motivation than offense because defense, like ritual, promises to be the last word to someone else's violence. Offense wants peace because it wants its attacking violence to be the last word of war. Defense wants war for the same reason, for peace, it wants its righteous
payback for being attacked to be the last word of violence. The reply of defense to
an offensive then becomes the next attack, and this attack against the attackers
assumes the strength of retribution. Girard knows better than Clausewitz that'
offense' is a myth, that any 'first' move is always in answer to some perceived
previous threat. This Wechselwirkung (as Girard, following Clausewitz, called it) of
retributions fuels the ever onward rise to extremes.

Great War historians seem to have oscillated between the success and failure of
accusational narratives: "Who started it?" or "Nobody (and everybody) started it." The
newest generation of Great War historians such as Christopher Clark and Herfried Münkler
are deeply skeptical of accusation as a form of historical understanding. Rather, they
carefully establish the complex path dependencies which follow from certain local decisions
which then circumscribe the psychological and strategic behavior of individual and national
"actors;" these new historians employ a common-sense understanding of emotional
behavior and motivation, but they do not themselves propose or even refer to a theory of
emotions.

Perhaps the absence of literature as a subject of interest in Clark's The Sleepwalkers¹ (how
can he not even mention Hermann Broch's novel?) and Münkler's Der Grosse Krieg² follows
from their professional skepticism against any overvaluation of individual motivation, any
history written around the solitary decisions of great leaders.³ But Girard's "literary" and
anthropological discussion of Clausewitzean Wechselwirkung and his clarification of its
apocalypse perhaps help us to see how we can put literary study alongside the study of

² (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2014)
³ But see François Furet, The Passing of an Illusion to insist that the period would be very different without Stalin and especially Hitler.
history, in particular the history of 'great' war and its phase transition to neverending war, where, it seems, we are now.

Let's begin with Thomas Hardy's poem "Channel Firing," written in May 1914 before the war began for England. In the poem, gunnery practice out at sea has awakened men buried in a parish churchyard. They sit up from their graves; one of the dead becomes our narrator, telling us what God tells them, that things are going the way they always do,

All nations striving to make
Red war yet redder. Mad as hatters
They do no more for Christés sake
Than you who are helpless in such matters.

Prescient of the escalating fury of a coming war, and the formal necessity of enlisting the dead to say what the living seem unable to say, Hardy's poem concludes:

Again the guns disturbed the hour,
Roaring their readiness to avenge,
As far inland as Stourton Tower,
And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge.

In May 1914, what had England to avenge, and why does Hardy arrange for "avenge" to rhyme fearfully with "Stonehenge"? Hardy's sudden concluding incantatory stanza crystalizes the continuity of archaic to modern retributory violence in perdurable emotional algorithms which we can all verify personally by asking ourselves what we mean when we (provocatively) warn someone not to get us angry. "Don't get me angry" means I am au fond

\^{\text{4 See Appendix I}}
peaceable but it is not my fault if I cannot protect you from the anger you will arouse in me, which I invoke now as a friendly warning. Has this ever worked for anyone?

Any gun, owned by the nation or owned privately, indicates its "hostile intention" (and by using "hostile intention" I am deliberately invoking the Clausewitzian term "feindseligen Absicht")\(^5\). Gunnery roars its readiness to avenge against anyone its owner publicly or privately suspects of attacking. The provocativeness of "avenge" is the defense's threatening warning that any imminent attack it discovers will be paid back with interest.

Wilfred Owen understood very well the difference between acting "for Christés sake" and serving vengeance and retaliation. In mid-May of 1917 Owen wrote a letter to his mother saying that he was becoming

> More and more Christian as I walk the unchristian ways of Christendom. I have comprehended a light which will never filter into the dogma of any national church: namely that one of Christ's essential commands was: Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonor and disgrace; but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill. It may be a chimerical and ignominious principle, but there it is. It can only be ignored: and I think pulpit professionals are ignoring it very skillfully and successfully indeed.\(^6\)

Owen’s term Christendom stands for the national churches, the separate confessions. Owen makes the distinction that Girard makes between the institutions of historical Christianity which like all human institutions are ensnared in violence, faced-off against each other, and


the simple Christian imperative to never answer violence with violence. Is this the
distinction between the two speakers of "Strange Meeting," one of whom is committed to
battling to the end, one of whom has given up fighting?7

The first voice of the poem we listen to finds himself descending into a dark tunnel which
issues into a scene of unmoving, groaning soldiers. He prods them until one arises, "lifting
distressful hands as if to bless." From the risen soldier's face our first speaker recognizes
that he is in hell, but the second speaker (soon to take over the poem) recognizes his face,
recognises him "by his frown," recognizes him as the very soldier who killed him yesterday.
The second soldier recognizes the first because the face of the first speaker has not changed
in hell, he is still frowning, still prodding, jabbing, killing; perhaps the enemy soldier in
answer to being jabbed yet again also makes the same gesture he did yesterday, when he
was killed, but now the first narrator perhaps sees in him not merely inadequate self-
defense but the incipient blessing emerging in that gesture of distressful hands as it leaves
violence behind.

In the version of the poem posthumously published first by Edith Sitwell, then by Edmund
Blunden, then by Siegfried Sassoon, then by C. Day Lewis and finally Jon Stallworthy, the
poem ends with the second soldier’s lines:

    I am the enemy you killed, my friend.

    I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned

    Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.

    I parried; but my hands were loathe and cold.

    

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7 See Appendix II
And then he adds, "Let us sleep now."

The contrast between the two soldiers reveals the persisting frenzy of the first narrator: he is still killing beyond the grave; without any reason left to kill, he is still killing. One might argue that the second speaker, the enemy soldier has reached the end of battle, he could no longer command his body to parry with violence even if it meant that he would suffer violence. For him, no reason, even self-preservation, was enough to persist in this hell of violence any longer.

In discussing hominization, the process by which we became human, Girard observes that animals rarely fight to the death. When one submits, the other relents. What ethologists call dominance patterns intervene or reassert themselves. In the main, nothing another conspecific has or does is worth dying for. But dominance patterns are insufficient to govern the species-specific intensities of human behavior of a greater mimetic intensity; we often fight to the death to get what others have, because of what others do to us. If the distinction between animal and human culture concerning species-specific violence is more nuanced now than it was in 1972, when both Walter Burkert and Girard were writing their breakthrough books, surely it is still true that nothing in nature resembles the colossal mutual kill-off of The Great War. But even that does not mean that killing comes naturally to us (that is, that we could blame our violence on nature, our nature). Girard's anthropological reflections offer another possibility, perhaps more shaming. It is because humans fear

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8 For bioarchaeologists who specialize in forensics, traces of wounds to the forearms which have evidently parried sharp or blunt objects used as weapons are one of the preferred signs of the existence of armed conflict in archaic culture. See Christopher Knüsel and Martin J Smith, *The Routledge Handbook of the Bioarchaeology of Human Conflict* (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2014)
violence, it is because we hate violence, that we find it regrettable but necessary to fight violence with violence, even to the death.

Why did both Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen enter battle in the first place and, once out of battle, return? Neither Sassoon nor Owen could face down the home crowd's insistence that it is cowardice not to obey the law that blood must be avenged. By 1917, everywhere they walked in Edinburgh or London during their convalescence from battle they would be marked out by their uniform as safely "out of battle" to all those who saw them, all who had brothers, fathers, and sons lost, missing, or still suffering in battle.

The Judgment of Solomon (1 Kings 3: 16-38) tells us of a bereaved mother who, if she cannot have another child to replace the one she lost, will not step forward to restore someone else's child to her. They should suffer too. Sassoon and Owen knew that the home front would not listen to their end-the-war arguments unless they proved they were not cowards. They both argued that they would credential themselves as peacemakers by fighting, using their smaller violence to stop a greater violence, to end war forever. What else has violence ever promised except to use a smaller violence to stem a greater one?

In England, the "hostile intention" uncovered by Thomas Hardy's poem "Channel Firing" (which I quoted at the beginning) has become in wartime "hostile feeling" (or "feindseligen Fühlung," another invaluable term from Clausewitz taken up by Girard in Achever Clausedwitz). To recognize the violent role of the home front mob is to recognize what Girard says that Clausewitz recognized, but then buried, in a technical treatise on war. That war can get out of control, "rise to extremes," spread through mass conscription and

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9 (Paris: Carnets Nord, 2007)
national incitement to totalize itself, maddening or "mob-ilizing" country against country, bloc against bloc, to engulf the world in unending war. Owen's second soldier, the "enemy" soldier in "Strange Meeting" recognizes the future rise to unanimity of violence at home, the lockstep "march of the retreating world."

Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.

The retreat from progress will not be resisted by those content with what we have learned to call new war, perpetual, neverending war, and will be fueled by the discontented until they spill blood for blood. The enemy soldier's elegiac lost hope for "the undone years" is Owen's hope and Sassoon's hope described above, that their testimony of pity10 for a common humanity learned through suffering war themselves could turn those who are "out of battle" away from war. These are the second speaker's lustral truths drawn from deep wells "too deep for taint" which bleed from the forehead unmarked by external wounding.

Sven Bäckman has convincingly argued11 that what are usually classified as the first drafts of this poem among Owen's manuscripts (which can be viewed at Oxford's First World War

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10 See Owen's unfinished preface found among his manuscripts, usually published with his poems:

This book is not about heroes. English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, dominion or power, except War.

Above all this book is not concerned with Poetry. The subject of it is War, and the pity of War. The poetry is in the pity.

11 Sven Bäckman, *Tradition Transformed* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1979), 96-117
Digital Archive\textsuperscript{12}) are in fact the remains of a different poem, a more positive poem, where both friend and enemy speakers believe they will be able to withdraw from battle in order to return home after battle, to restore their nations with truths drawn from wells too deep for war's taint. Bäckman also contrasts to Owen's poem the naivete of Shelley's "Revolt of Islam," which most critics accept as the source of Owen's title phrase "strange meeting." In Shelley's poem enemy soldiers simply stop fighting when they recognize the humanity of the other. The revision of the poem (or the new poem according to Bäckman) marks Owen's new distance from whatever hope Shelley's poem gave him. Owen no longer believed he could remove himself from battle to cure war. War was everywhere.

Owen now knew that if the soldier returns to the home front he will enter the frenzied center of hatred (feindseligen Fühlung) which will draw him back again into retaliation. Henri Barbusse's soldiers in \textit{Le Feu} remember that when they return home they can't bring themselves to tell the truth of war, they paper it over. In Great War it comes down to this: if the soldier refuses to fight, he will be killed by his enemy. If he tries to walk away from battle, it will be Lieutenant Owen's responsibility to shoot him.

Where did that leave Owen?

Owen studied German in 1917 while recuperating from shell shock at Craiglockhart, where he first met Sassoon. He alarmed Conal O'Riordan (Hibbert, 420-21) when he returned to battle (as Sassoon did) by telling O'Riordan that the Germans were no more to blame than the Allies. Yet after holding his own aide in his arms while he bled on Owen's shoulder during an attack, Owen fearlessly took over a German machine gun position and killed

\textsuperscript{12} http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/ (visited 6 June 2015)
several German soldiers. Like the battlefield character that Siegfried Sassoon assumed in combat, nicknamed "Mad Jack," whose behavior terrified even his own fellow soldiers, Wilfred Owen, "his tunic soaked in his aide's blood" (as biographer Dominic Hibbert describes it), "inflicted considerable losses on the enemy."

The phrase "inflicted considerable losses" is the language of Owen's Military Cross citation published in *The London Gazette* in 1919; Owen described himself more emphatically, writing to his mother "It passed the limits of my Abhorrence, I lost all my earthly faculties, and fought like an angel" (Hibbert, 438; *Letters*, 4 or 5 October, 1918, 580). I can hardly think of a better firsthand testimony to the rise to extremes, how, also in Girard's formula, violence becomes the sacred. Interestingly, Dominic Hibbert conjectures (439) that it was Wilfred's brother Harold Owen who doctored the citation of his brother's Military Cross award for its inclusion in *The Collected Letters* to read only "took a number of prisoners" instead of "inflicting considerable losses."13

This cleansing of Owen's violent frenzy underlines a difficulty that Girard recognized long ago for the use of the word "aggression" which everyone uses to identify the cause of conflict. Everybody blames human violence on "aggression," Girard said, but nobody ever admits to being aggressive—they see themselves always, only retaliating to another's aggression, "resorting" (as in Owen's phrasing above to his mother) to violence to answer a prior violence.

A decisive revision signalling Owen's new direction for the poem is the line quoted above, where the second speaker finally identifies himself to his killer. The manuscripts show us

13 *Collected Letters*, 580
that Owen changed it from "I was a German conscript and your friend" to "I am the German that you killed my friend" to "I am the enemy you killed my friend." Owen's final revision now astutely opposes one "ami" against his "enemi," as if their enmity is already built into the language. By cancelling conscription and then nationality as the second soldier's excuse for fighting, in other words, a justification for fighting, all the false differences and causations are checked off, stripped away, all the excuses for fighting resolve into Clausewitz's appalling model of war as two soldiers wrestling in hand-to-hand combat.

Line 39, "Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were," (which offers a powerful image for shellshock before such injuries were fully diagnosed or the term invented), concerns the pity of war which Owen wanted to evoke in his poetry. This line is circled in the manuscript, with an arrow pointing to a place below the end of the poem, far enough away from the last line to indicate that moving this line was meant to be the beginning of a new stanza. But the new stanza is not written in or begun at this new place; instead, there is a short line written in-between the last line of the last stanza, marked by a line below it indicating its end, and the point of the arrow for the new stanza. This new line is almost a scrawl, not quite justified to the left edge, and not quite far enough below the original last line to have been planned, its line position almost squeezed in, for lack of space at the bottom of the page: this placeholder is the amazing "conclusion" we all know as "Let us sleep now" which I believe we must think of as Owen's last work on this poem, and perhaps our best clue to the direction of his revisions marked in the last manuscript. But it is important to recognize that Owen doesn't write in what comes at last, the role of pity for war. Does the poem's setting, like Hardy's "Channel Firing," ironically invoke Kant's peace of
the cemetery? Clausewitz didn't see the end of war; do we? Are we still "sleepwalking" (in
Christopher Clark's terms)?

I relate Owen's "Strange Meeting" to Girard's Clausewitzian apocalypse because it captures
so well the path dependency of Great War. In Girard's discussion with Benoît Chantre,
Girard is less interested in individual heroism, more interested in the take-up of resistance
by others. He insists that resistance to the rise to extremes must become collective.

"Strange Meeting" cannot imagine it, although it hasn't given up. "Let us sleep now"\(^\text{15}\) is not
an invitation to sleep forever, but, as we constantly improve our capacity to kill each other
off, our time is not forever either. As Girard says implacably to Chantre in Achever
Clausewitz: "La patience de Dieu est inconcevable, mais elle n'est pas infinie." (100)

"Strange Meeting" is Clausewitzian because it 'abstracts' to what Clausewitz maintains is
the ontological kernel of battle: hand to hand combat, "der Zweikampf," "die zwei
Ringende."\(^\text{16}\) In the twentieth century civil war (Nolte's europäische Bürgerkrieg), then Cold
War logically, psychologically follow Great War. Mutually agreed destruction (MAD), what a
Clausewitzian could perhaps still call "armed observation" works primarily because each
side can depend on the vengeful psychology of "the other mother" facing Solomon's
judgment who is willing to call down on another whatever happens to her.

Our twenty-first century apocalypse, what is usually called "unending or everlasting war"\(^\text{17}\)
or new wars, follows from Great War and then Cold War, and is what we all share, what
makes us identical, but it is also personal in just this sense: as Herfried Münkler reminds us

\(^{15}\) For a very different interpretation of violence and sacrifice in Owen's poetry, see Allen J. Frantzen, Bloody

\(^{16}\) Clausewitz, Vom Kriege, (Bonn: Ferd. Dümlers, 1952), 191.

\(^{17}\) See Ann Hironaka, Neverending War (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
in *The New Wars*, gunnery is cheaper than ever, anyone can become a warlord, any one of us is a target of perhaps a person sitting next to us, fussing with the heel of his (or her) shoe, willing to do to us what has been done to them even if it is at their own expense as well.

History may well be written up as the drama of mutual accusation and recrimination, but history as accusation is bunk. There is no more future in pretending that we don't understand suicide terrorists. Is this unruly violence an opportunity nevertheless for the face à face heroism Benoît Chantre argues for in *Achever Clausewitz* (channeling Levinas)? Do we even know what to do to stop it? We know very well how the first accusing stone snowballs, but do we know how the eldest accuser of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:6-11) becomes the model for leaving her in peace, gathering all her former accusers who were defending the community against her attack on Mosaic law, to follow him?

Scapegoating polarizes a community against a single enemy who is alone responsible for all the crimes. The community is innocent of what the accused alone is guilty. Jesus does not invent lapidation or any of its rules, such as the rule that the accuser or accusers must begin the stone-throwing; he only sharpens their understated significance.

When Jesus requires that the first to throw a stone be without blemish (anamartētos) he has made the first stone thrower in effect the accuser of the others as blemished by comparison with him; the first becomes the single accuser of all. These are not good odds--no one dares to accuse all the others. They understand together now ("upo tēs suneidēseōs elegcomenoi") their misunderstanding, and their unanimity in accusation falls apart. They can no longer achieve their innocent identity and their peace at her expense.
By not stoning the woman taken in adultery, the withdrawal of the eldest accuser verifies 'for Christ's sake' that his attack is without cause, defenseless,\(^{18}\) he has no right to accuse her, no justification for violence to right her wrong as threatening the defenses of the community's values. The text does not say that the eldest was the accuser or the logical first stone-thrower, although that is what we would expect from Athens or Jerusalem. The identity of the eldest as eldest first appears in their departure. They go first, then the rest, one by one ('"eis kaθ eis"'). Their dispersal could have been as minimally ordered as first the eldest, then everyone else, but "one by one" suggests everyone knows who he is, their identity and the identity of who comes next, whether it is a correct birth order or some other identity.

Sadly it is not a permanent solution to accusation, or any lasting version of an identity devoted to peace. They are disarmed but perhaps not converted. Presumably this identity does not spread beyond this departing group. The community is after Jesus, they didn't get him this indirect way, but they will be back at it again, with accusers more difficult to 'parry.'

Yet Girard's Clausewitzian apocalypse is not just the threat but also the promise, which arrives simultaneously with the threat, when all the false differences are deconstructed. For this promise, for the truth, we must 'battle to the end.' Nothing now separates us from each other, for better or for worse. History makes sense, Girard insists; its sense is terrifying. So for Girard Hölderlin's poetry bears on our history more than Hegel, Heidegger, or Heidegger's own Hölderlin:

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\(^{18}\) Also 'defenseless' in the elaborate Clausewitzian sense we have developed here, not just 'unjustified,' but not able to credit itself with the superior strength of responding, defending against an attack.
Nah ist

Und schwer zu fassen der Gott.

Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst
das Rettende auch.19

William A Johnsen

Michigan State University