

It is unwise to be too sure of one's own wisdom. It is healthy to be reminded that the strongest might weaken and the wisest might err.

In leaking the classified material, he added, "I felt I accomplished something that would allow me to have a clear conscience."

I've wanted us to breathe ashes and smoke, / but we cannot. This, too, is atrocity.

Never ruin an apology with an excuse.

Doomsday and the Echo

A great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep.

Even futile gestures matter if done with purpose or passion; meaning lies in motive, not result.

We die to stay alive / we'll kill to survive.

We shall have to repent in this generation not so much for the evil deeds of the wicked people but for the appalling silence of the good people.

1. Abacus Haunting Me

I lived in Glendale during my first year out of college. You may be aware that the city is home to significant Armenian and Armenian-American populations. While these populations have mainly grown in the last few decades, their origins lie in the wake of the atrocities perpetrated upon the Armenian people during and directly after World War I. They came here for the same reasons people seemingly always come to these shores: to escape the dangers, problems, and miseries that threatened them before, and to find new lives in a relatively safer harbor. But for Armenians, the dangers, problems, and miseries added up to something far more insidious than what other groups had faced: an attempt by the Ottoman Empire (now, essentially, what we call Turkey) to exterminate their people. They came here seeking refuge from genocide.

I spent time discussing what had happened in the former Ottoman Empire with several people in the city. And in conversation after conversation, the same point recurred. What struck me wasn't even that my counterparts unanimously felt that genocide had occurred, but that they felt the rest of the world had a moral responsibility to call what their ancestors had faced by its rightful name. By not doing so, the argument went, we were complicit in the crime: you don't have to fire a shot to contribute to evil.

A huge number of countries do, in fact, unambiguously and officially recognize the Armenian Genocide.

We do not.

This isn't to say that we haven't made our recognition of the genocide fairly obvious. Most of our states have individually recognized it, and most of our leaders have individually recognized it before taking power. But once they take power, they typically move from explicit statements to hints and innuendos. (This includes all three men who have held the presidency in my politically-aware lifetime.) Deviations into on-the-nose references tend to elicit recriminations from Turkey, which has seemingly no incentive to have the horrors of its past given an official label.

We have what can be charitably described as a complicated geopolitical and diplomatic partnership with Turkey. In the simplest terms, we need them, and they need us. Our relationship with them isn't simply one we can torch; too many of our necessary interests are intertwined. They understand what we believe; we understand that they don't wish to have the dishonor of recognition applied to their forefathers, any more so than we're all that eager to have people talk about our systematic destruction of Native American societies a couple of centuries ago.

Yet we teach our children about the Trail of Tears and the like. Over the years, we've actually gotten admirably more frank in our educational message: *We're a great country, but yes, we did these terrible things. We study them not to justify them, but in order to better recognize the factors that drove us to do them – and in order to avoid repeating our mistakes if those circumstances arise again.* In certain ways, this is how we've treated the Hiroshima and Nagasaki attacks, or even our campaigns in Vietnam.

While this information isn't treated the same way in every state – the perspective you're offered in Californian schools differs from what you might find elsewhere – I don't think it's a stretch to say that the majority of today's schoolchildren grow up with a far more nuanced view of their

country, its policies, and its histories than they would have even sixty years ago. We've come a long way and taken a lot of hard looks in the mirror.

But we still rarely call the Armenian Genocide, well, that. We cajole and negotiate behind the scenes, trying to get Turkey to recognize it themselves, not wanting to get out in front of them...or, frankly, not wanting to end a valuable strategic relationship over a couple of words. Some marriages only survive because the spouses involved agree not to talk about their problems, and it strikes me that we have a similar relationship with Turkey right now: we both recognize what could be said, but neither side will say it.

And I can see people conceivably thinking *So what?* The people I spoke with in Glendale may see recognition as a moral imperative, but does that make it so? And even if, after all our deliberations, we decide that yes, it is a moral imperative, is the greater good served by that recognition? Are our other interests worth jeopardizing so we can call a spade a spade?

Must we call the _____ what we believe it to be?

If the cost of honesty is high, is it fine to lie?

2. The Message Fades, But the Mess Prevails

William Heyen spends *A Poetics of Hiroshima* seemingly writing in circles. Certain things stick out horribly – the image of the baby's head turns my stomach each time I read – but the poem, at first blush, just looks like a jumble. For some of you, it probably doesn't even seem like poetry. We can sense its patterns, can understand that Heyen's centering broken lines as a means of showing how we struggle to make sense of the senseless, and so on.

On some level, though, the work just feels like a digressive paragraph that the writer, upon finishing, proceeded to chop into "poetry" by going back and hitting the Enter key a bunch of times in the middle of his sentences. That this is somewhat the point – that we don't make chaos randomly, but as the consequence of ordered, sequential decisions that turn the expected into something new and broken – doesn't change the fact that *Poetics* is a tough read.

T.S. Eliot closes a far more famous poem, *The Waste Land*, by referencing the "fragments shored against [his] ruins" – the chaos of the work he's just written. That line in particular always stuck out for me: a man trying to make sense of his world's wreckage, trying to trace a line back through the catastrophe to the way things were before. If he can understand how we went wrong, how we lost what made us us, he – we – can work to recover. Until then, he (and, by extension, we) will be stuck in this weird twilight zone, wandering through a world that doesn't make sense anymore because we never learned how to reshape it.

That seems to be the message of much historical study: *This is worth learning because we can't let it happen again, or Understand where you came from so you can understand how to move forward.* The problem, of course, is that Eliot wrote in an age defined by horrors previously unseen and inconceivable. Those horrors also seemed, in defiance of history's tendency to circle back on itself, unrepeatable. It did not seem possible for us, as a world, to put ourselves through something like that again – to smash a generation to bits in the trenches and barren fields of so many countries. To do so would be to court global suicide.

You know how the story goes: *of course* we put ourselves through that again. In certain ways, the second World War was a response to the first one, even though nobody was still firing shots. The humiliations, perceived or real, that the Germans suffered in the reconstruction years immediately following the conflict directly contributed to the new hostilities that flared two decades later. We (the victorious Allies, not the United States exclusively) never intended to let Germany forget their role in precipitating a war that nearly tore the globe apart. The shell of a nation we forced into being following World War I's end had a tragic excuse for an economy (you've undoubtedly heard the anecdotes about people pushing wheelbarrows of worthless currency around), had its global ambitions curtailed, had its international voice silenced, and had its internal affairs monitored.

A proud nation was forced to remember its crimes. And in forcing it to remember, we not only shamed it: we opened the doorway for resentment, for a feeling of persecution and injustice, for a desire for revenge. This was never our intent, and we certainly never would have courted the consequences of those decisions. But those decisions, so logical in a vacuum, gave rise to chaos when arranged in sequence. Our message – This can never happen again – faded. Only the mess remained.

That desire for revenge isn't a logical response. The Germans could not deny their role in the first war, yet they still acted aggrieved. And it's that tendency towards self-blindness, towards irrationality, when confronted with evidence of one's own wrongs that's both so maddening and so important to consider. Heyen's lines are broken not only because he does not have the words to describe what he's trying to describe, but because we're exceptionally bad at looking at things that shake our self-conceptions. It's like looking through a telescope at Mercury; what you're trying to see gets blotted out by the blazing sun.

We avert our eyes from the baby's head, because it's hard to stomach.

There's a reason Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's model begins with denial and anger.

3. All We Have is This Chance Called Memory

We haven't really had another Hiroshima or Nagasaki, or a Dresden or Tokyo, for that matter. Not just us, but any other nation. The technology for annihilating a city in one pitiless strike exists, has existed for decades – we used it four times in half as many years, including the atomic attacks discussed in Hiroshima – and yet we remain the only ones since the early 1940s who are willing to level an entire city with a single blow, killing however many civilians we can.

How do we square that with our self-conception of our nation and our society as a fair and just place, one that is motivated by righteousness, one that wants to serve forces of goodness? How can we say, however bluntly or obliquely, with words or with actions, "We will kill to survive," and then condemn other nations for committing atrocities – wrongs they justify to themselves as necessary to ensure their own future? How can we justify our misdeeds any more effectively than those aforementioned parties who would deny their own?

We avert our eyes from the baby's head, because it's hard to stomach, because seeing it forces us to fit it into a paradigm we built without it. We are compelled to justify it.

Benjamin Franklin urged us to never ruin an apology with an excuse. We have apologized for Hiroshima and Nagasaki, for Dresden and Tokyo. But we have always also given context. It was not enough to simply apologize; we had to explain to the world, and, more importantly, to our children, why we did these things.

Whether those explanations do, in fact, undercut our apologies remains up for debate. That's not really the main point I want to highlight. Instead, I want to call attention to the thing that Eliot and Heyen grappled with, the issue that confronts our historians and our diplomats today: **How** do we remember? **Why** should we remember? **Can** we remember?

At this point, Hiroshima matters less for ending a war – or for ending lives – than in existing as something to be remembered. It irrevocably changed the courses of two nations forever. It announced to the world that the Americans would stop at nothing to survive – that we would kill innocents by the hundreds of thousands in order to achieve victory and still see ourselves as standing on the side of good. If that wasn't the stated purpose of the attack, we certainly didn't complain when it achieved that aim, particularly during the Cold War decades of tension and terror that followed. There's a reason no nation has launched a direct attack on us since: Out of all the nations that built an atomic, then nuclear, arsenal, we're the only ones who ever used theirs.

Yet we read books about history; it feels like the responsible thing to do. And we seem to learn, or at least try to learn, the lessons of the past. We keep building weapons, but now we avoid using them; we seem to have stepped past a line where we'd still be willing to level a city with a single blow. One gets the sense that if a nation was somehow foolish enough to engage us in unilateral state warfare, we would try to fight conventionally rather than simply turning their entire nation into a nuclear wasteland.

We get that sense, even though our history proves that we will kill, because it's what our memories have made of us.

Having annihilated cities and civilians, we produce poets like Heyen and give them voices, uncomfortable as it can be to listen to them.

Having suspended our normal moral standards long enough to leave innocent people burning alive, skin sloughing off their bodies, we seem hell-bent on ensuring that nobody – not ourselves, not anyone else – ever unbalances the scales of justice like that again.

This may strike some, particularly elsewhere, as a particularly vulgar form of hypocrisy. But I don't see it that way.

For if Hiroshima is to matter, it cannot be simply as an end, an end to lives, an end to the world wars, an end to whatever age it ended: it must be a beginning as well.

It must be remembered. And, in remembering it, we must change, because even if we're sickened by what we see, we feel the responsibility of memory.

4. Why Do You Stay Until You See Blood?

Oceania feels no such responsibilities. If anything, the Inner Party gives every indication that it's perversely uninterested in memory. That this isn't true, insofar as Winston recognizes it – that “I understand HOW; I do not understand WHY” bit matters – doesn't change the fact that Orwell's horrifying dystopia rests on a bed of willful ignorance.

I revised this post last year shortly after attending a midnight screening of *Hot Fuzz*, a fairly sharp send-up of action movies that aren't nearly as intelligent. Without spoiling much of anything, the middle of the film finds Simon Pegg's protagonist, a by-the-book and hyper-efficient police officer, struggling to solve a series of interconnected murders. I say “struggling” because the film takes one particularly aggravating action-movie cliché – the person in charge who irrationally refuses to listen to the hero – and pushes it to ridiculous extremes. Time and again, people are killed; time and again, Pegg suggests they were murdered; time and again, the other police officers label the deaths accidental, ignore any proof to the contrary, and devote most of their time to mocking the protagonist and impeding his efforts to investigate. It's mentioned offhandedly that Pegg's predecessor cracked under similar pressure and suffered a nervous breakdown, and as the viewer, you feel that same creeping insanity as you watch a person who speaks truth to power crushed over and over by ignorant, implacable forces. They're so clearly wrong, and you crave the presence of an authority who can show them what's right...except they *are* the authority. To whom can you appeal when those who should shape your world go mad? How can you hang on to what you believe makes sense when everyone acts like you're crazy?

I'm pretty sure that *Hot Fuzz* isn't supposed to make its audience think of Oceania, but I couldn't help it. Pegg wears this flabbergasted expression when he's dealing with the obstructionists, like he's trying to find words in the language these people speak and coming up empty. It's the exact kind of expression that'd get him vaporized in *1984*. It's the face Winston Smith can't ever wear, or even be capable of making.

Winston doesn't just have to live with the lie. He has to live the lie, and live it so convincingly that everyone around him believes it's the truth. Not only does he have to take the things he knows are real and destroy them, he has replace them with fabrications; he becomes complicit in the destruction of sanity. A man who treasures memory is made to eradicate it for a living. And that's the choice the Party forces on its members: which parts of yourself will you kill to survive?

So much ink has been spilled over whistle-blowers in the past decade: Thomas Drake, Bradley/Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden. Before them, it was Daniel Ellsberg with the Pentagon Papers, or Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite leveling with a nation on the news rather than repeat fabrication after fabrication. Individuals are asked to cover something up, to pretend it never happened, to replace the information with falsehoods, to lie and distort and misdirect and discredit. Eventually, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for bad ones, they stop. The truth spills out. True, it's ultimately set upon by those who hope to spin it and shape it for their own ends – but it's out.

The counter-attack to any release of classified information is that disclosure puts good people at risk – that ignorance isn't simply bliss, but that some degree of it is necessary in a populace if the

larger society is to thrive. You *can't* know everything that's being done, and you *definitely* don't want your enemies to know. You're kept in the dark for your own good.

Honestly, I can see some truth in that statement. There is something to be said for shaping information before it's released, and the overwhelming information dumps seen in the past decade are more like a firehose shooting out of control. There's no context, no organization, no overarching perspective. It's really easy to misunderstand what you're reading. And I'm convinced that there were other ways to try to achieve the same ends.

I wonder whether I should be bothered by what Manning did, or by what Snowden did. Because it feels somewhat hypocritical for me to feel that way when I've always applauded Ellsberg, or praised Cronkite for taking a stand in front of an audience of millions.

It matters what we see when we look back, when we look forward, and when we look in the mirror. It matters if there are gaps, intentional or not, in our understanding. It matters if we deny our atrocities out of pride, or patriotism, or shame, or a feeling that they were, in fact, justified. It matters if we lie, or redact, or delete, or forget. It matters if we attach asterisks to our apologies.

And it matters if, having seen all that we've seen, we stay silent when it starts to happen again, when circumstances start to take familiar, terrifying shape.

It occurs to me, then, that perhaps the only thing more important than something like the Hiroshima attack is how we remember it, how we understand and define its causes and effects: what we're willing to say, and what we're willing to hear, and what we're willing to stand for, and what we're willing to change in the aftermath.

It occurs to me that perhaps the only thing more important than Doomsday itself is the echo.

+ In the past, I've assigned an *Establishing a Philosophical Baseline* prompt that read "If the cost [of honesty] is high, it's OK to lie." I wanted my students to consider the statement on an individual level: *Should I lie to my family to keep them happy? If I make a mistake, should I push blame elsewhere? If my boyfriend or girlfriend will worry unnecessarily or lapse into paranoia unless I'm not totally honest about where I'm going or what I'm doing, should I be less than honest?*

I want to raise the stakes a bit. Take our complicated treatment of the Armenian Genocide, for example. It clearly matters to people, one way or the other, how we recognize these events. A label won't revive the dead, won't restore the damage done to a culture – but it still matters. Yet our relationship with the country that doesn't want us to recognize said events matters as well. Real damage and fallout would result if we pushed on this measure.

So I want you to consider this question on a more global, macro scale. Do countries have a responsibility to maintain their alliances, even at the expense of honesty and integrity? Must we be transparent with our allies, even if that transparency damages those alliances, because then at least those partnerships' foundations rest on a bedrock layer of truth?

This isn't just a question of "if you're the head of state in America, do you officially tell the world that the Ottoman Empire – Turkey – is guilty of genocide if you believe them to be?", but of other matters as well. Consider carefully.

+ Similarly, if we take people like Manning or Snowden at face value, they sincerely believed their actions were patriotic – that our country had gone astray, and that it could only be rescued through honesty. In their estimation, people were unwittingly participating in, encouraging, or abetting tragedy and atrocity through patriotism, through belief that our actions were good and our motives were pure. In pulling back the veil of secrecy, Snowden and Manning hoped to force its citizens to confront its actual deeds – not to rub their noses in all the bad things we've done, but to get them to have a more nuanced, realistic view of ourselves.

But both did so through indisputably criminal means. To our authorities, our diplomats, our military, our leadership, these people did not help us see ourselves more realistically: they damaged our self-perceptions by releasing a bunch of information free of context, injected confusion where it previously wasn't, and aided and abetted our enemies by doing so.

Two questions here: a) Is the release of information regarding our actual activities an aid to our enemies? B) Do we deserve to know the full extent of our nation's/government's/society's aims and activities? Would it be better to trust others to decide which information is appropriate for you to know?

+ Could you survive the way Winston does – living the secret inner life and the agonizingly fake outer one?

+ Is Franklin correct? Does an excuse, an explanation, a context, undermine an apology? Or is an apology without context even less appropriate?

+ Warfare, and the global backdrop behind it, has changed significantly in the decades following World War II. In fact, nowadays, it seems like most of the most vicious attacks on cities occur during civil wars – the recent examples of Libya and Syria standing out as particularly relevant.

As I've alluded to before, the attacks on Dresden and Tokyo (fire-bombing), as well as the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic-bomb attacks, occurred in a very different media age. Information wasn't shared as widely nor consumed in the same manner. One wonders, in retrospect, how the present media/pop-culture complex would've responded to a World War, let alone the destruction of a city (and the innocents within it) or a Pearl Harbor-style attack by a foreign power.

Do you believe a nation will ever do to another nation's city what we did to the four I mentioned above – decimate it in a single attack, a single act of war, killing thousands upon thousands? If so, what circumstances could conceivably lead to this happening, particularly in a media age that captures and shares – and, yes, distorts – far more than it once did? Could *any* nation justify taking such a striking, single step today? Or have we indeed changed the world with Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Dresden, and Tokyo, rendering the total destruction of an opposing nation's city an obsolete tool of warfare? Are the horrors, in fact, unrepeatably this time?

+ Does a nation have a responsibility to remember its history accurately? Can we learn from histories we shape and share ourselves? Or do we depend on others' interpretations of our histories and cultures to see them in a properly nuanced light?

Blog Title: "Doomsday and the Echo," Lovedrug, *Everything Starts Where It Ends*

Section Titles #1-3: "A Heavy Abacus," The Joy Formidable, *The Big Roar*

Section Title #4: "Self-Starter," Anberlin, *Vital*

Quotes on the First Page: Mohandas Gandhi, Bradley/Chelsea Manning, William Heyen, Benjamin Franklin, Saul Bellow, EaPB: C), The Receiving End of Sirens, Martin Luther King, Jr.
