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Drug/War: Anthony Loyd and the Hero(in) in Bosnia

Perhaps the intense discomfort of withdrawal is the transition from plant back to animal, from a painless, sexless, timeless state back to sex and pain and time, from death back to life.

—William Burroughs, *Junky*

It was a three-bag day for me. Without the war to go back to, my habit was gathering momentum like a runaway train.

—Anthony Loyd,
My War Gone By, I Miss It So

Anthony Loyd's *My War Gone By, I Miss It So* renders his experiences between 1993 and 1996 as a frontline reporter and photographer in Bosnia and Chechnya. Loyd depicts a world dominated by brutish savagery and arbitrary loss, leavened with gallows humor and copious quantities of *slivovitz*. Bravery is not in short supply, but it is frequently indistinguishable from recklessness. Heroism makes cameo appearances in the 300+ pages of Loyd's book, frequently in Bartleby-esque guise: David Bowie look-a-like Momcilo, a Serb sheltering in a bombed-out Sarajevo apartment who refuses to be conscripted by any side, or the teenage Croatian conscript with the temerity to claim before drunken nationalist thugs that the war between Muslims and Croats was *shit*. As Loyd states of the boy "I bet he is dead now. He had the vulnerable purity and courage that would ensure he was among the first to get whacked on the front."¹ Chris Hedges asserts in *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* that "[t]he myth of war entices us with the allure of heroism."² But heroism was almost always wasted in Bosnia, Loyd tells us, in all senses of the word.

My War Gone By is a chronicle of Loyd's deepening understanding of the nature of civil war in an indifferent world. It is also a chronicle of Loyd's deepening addiction to heroin, a habit he can only seem to slake by returning to war. War is the contact high capable of canceling Loyd's yen. In a conspicuously unheroic self-depiction, the ultimate act of heroism on Loyd's part is withdrawal—drug withdrawal and withdrawal from war.

Loyd's narrative begins where stories frequently must—at the end. The Dayton accord has been signed nine months previous, drawing open hostility to conclusion. Loyd is wandering the forest outside of Srebrenica, the former UN safe-zone, where the year before 8000 Muslim men were removed and murdered by Serb forces in this same forest. Loyd is kicking, “in an opiate backblast... raw and hyper-sensitized, thoughts surging and abating like the swell of the sea.”³ William Burroughs' statement from the prologue to *Junky* comes to mind: “[sick junkies] knew that basically no one can help anyone else” (xxxix).⁴ Loyd is wandering a shrine of anti-heroism—a tribute to the impotence, inability, or unwillingness of the West to meaningfully intervene in genocide. Adding to the abrasion of Loyd's junk sickness are the sentiments of the leader of a UN war crimes investigation team whom Loyd has been observing. As Loyd states,

...[h]e seemed incapable of communicating without delivering some holier-than-thou aside, twinning piety with pathology in a mix that would have had a saint reaching for a bucket to throw up in. He could make the connection between the victims at the bottom of the bank and the absent killers that pulled the triggers. Anyone could do that bit. However, the links fell apart between himself and “the beasts” he demonized. He seemed to think it took something really special to kill prisoners.⁵

It was too late for heroism outside Srebrenica—the opportunity passed through the hands of Dutch peacekeepers and the UN command in Bosnia a year earlier. The presence of defanged “peacekeepers” combing the human remains of their own incompetence gags Loyd. But Loyd himself can't yet withdraw. No less than the UN forensics experts, he is drawn back to the scene of the crime, to Bosnia as the scene of his own failure, the scene of his own impotence and fear in the face of barbarity. Loyd has kicked heroin one more time to return to Bosnia, but he has not yet kicked Bosnia.

The nature of Loyd's attraction to frontline combat had been nurtured for years, but like his dalliance with heroin, had been brought to a head by the wars in Bosnia

and Chechnya. Born in a line of British soldiers bordering on mercenary in their enthusiasm for combat, Loyd had drifted out of British public schools and into officership in the British Light infantry, only to out-process after tours in Northern Ireland and the Gulf without having seen anything amounting, in his eyes, to action. Feeling untested and at loose ends, Loyd enrolled in a photography course, his subsequent and thin justification for gaining press credentials and passage to besieged Sarajevo in early 1993. Accident, propinquity, and free-agent status lead him into the midst of the bitter conflict between former allies, Bosnian Croats and the largely Muslim Bosnian government forces, in the isolated mountains and valleys of central Bosnia in the summer of 1993. It is here that his schooling in the nastiness of a civil struggle characterized by indistinct lines between territory and combatant status accelerates. There is considerable bravery in evidence—a Swedish UN major who offers to face down Croatian extremists in the face of certain annihilation, a Bosnian government army squadron barbequing in the midst of battle, a psychotic, charismatic Croatian paramilitary leader begging opposing forces to fire on him. Heroism, however, and the selflessness it implies, is in short supply. And when it does appear, it is in a negative capacity. Swedish Major Ekberg's courage is evident in preparing to engage a superior Croat force, but his heroism manifests itself in his backing down from this confrontation. In Bosnia, withdrawal was sometimes a forward motion, a move in a positive direction.

There *are* traditionally heroic figures in Loyd's account. General Dudakovic and the Bosnian 5th Corps, surrounded by armies of three different ethnicities, cut off from supply and command in Sarajevo, go on the offensive and win their pocket war in Bihac. Chechen General Aslan Maskhadov calmly withstands a Russian artillery assault of 30,000 rounds a day, only to return with consolidated rebel forces the next year and retake Grozny from the Russian army. These figures display the archetypal attributes of the hero—courage, competence, stoicism, a steadfast resolve, a wry sense of humor, and an attention to task. One of Maskhadov's Chechen irregulars makes a statement we have been conditioned to expect from the heroic: "The Russians have made a bad, bad mistake" (258). Loyd agrees, adding that the one positive lesson of Chechnya was that "the power of man can withstand the might of the machine, and it threatened the complacency of Western societies whose children, like me, are corrupted by meaningless choice, material wealth, and spiritual emptiness" (260-1).

Perhaps it is not coincidental that the two figures Loyd identifies as capable of sustained heroism in the course of *My War Gone By* are Muslim. No action of the West or of an individual Westerner in Loyd qualifies as heroic. Heroic action requires a significant degree of selflessness, thus disqualifying the vast majority of participants in Bosnia and Chechnya. As Loyd states, "[I] grew to see [courage] as

a meaningless term of glorification used by the ignorant to describe the actions of others whose real motivations are far more instinctive than altruistic" (91). Loyd certainly does not account himself an authentic hero, despite saving the lives of several wounded children in the midst of combat. His decision to act beyond his professional capacity as a journalist in saving these noncombatants results from what he terms "humanist logic." Loyd states that "to do anything else would have been indefensible" (228). It is the instinctiveness of his actions which disqualify Loyd from being considered heroic in his own mind. In reflecting on the incident and the circumstances, he concludes that he had no choice. As Loyd states, "It was all a confused blunder and when I realized the real danger, it came down, once more, to an absolution of responsibility, simple, rough-worded, fuck-it logic: Shit. Fuck. Here we fucking go. Hope we fucking make it" (229). Pressed at a later date in a Zagreb bar to acknowledge the courage of his actions, Loyd, while "tempted to play the clichéd role that was expected of me," passes on the option. "Courage," Loyd suggests, "is seldom what it seems. The word pisses me off so much that most of the time it is not even worth getting laid for." His companion, a Red Cross worker, opines: "You really know how to spoil a story" (232-3).

In Loyd, both courageous acts and the decision to do another bag of heroin are instigated by an "absolution of responsibility," and both actions lurch forward of their own momentum and illogic. They are both acts of annihilation at heart, defying instincts toward self-preservation, acts of a civil war, like the destruction of Mostar's signature Ottoman bridge in the Bosnian conflict. As Burroughs notes, "Junk is not, like alcohol or weed, a means to increased enjoyment of life. Junk is not a kick. It is a way of life."⁶ War, as Hedges suggests, is not aberrant behavior, but rather—as junk in Burroughs' view—a way of life, or a prime means to *feeling* alive. "War, just as it tears down old monuments, demands new ones," Hedges asserts.⁷ Every war, just as surely, demands heroism. We can't read war as a story unless we read some degree of heroism into the actions of at least some participants in the war. Without heroism, our impulse is to read violent conflict as mere psychosis. "There is no cost to imagining glory,"⁸ Hedges states, but there is a clear cost to imagining war without glory, and that cost is to our self-image as rational, compassionate human beings.

Heroin addiction, to Burroughs, amounts to absolving oneself from being human. One vegetates, content, sexless, beyond pain. Withdrawal amounts to a traumatic return to the animal, "to sex and pain and time, from death back to life."⁹ War is what brings Loyd back to the campfire ring with other sentient beings. Loyd's war reporting, his witnessing, is a courageous (if self-serving) act, but it is not heroic. Loyd's only act of heroism is withdrawal itself—from heroin, to become human, and from war, in order to *write* war.

Perhaps heroic acts are always conflicted phenomenon—played out locally, in real time, with some central degree of self-interest. Loyd’s courageous act in risking his life to save children under fire was perhaps heroic to an on-looker, or a reader of Loyd, but the result of “humanist logic” in his own view, removed as it was in time and place in its retelling. It (the “heroic” act *and* its retelling) were actions Loyd had to commit to remain human in the midst of his circumstances, an act of self-deliverance from a vegetative junk-sickness, “from death back to life” in Burroughs’ depiction of retreat from addiction.

Heroism thus becomes a literally death-defying act, but as self-serving as it is altruistic, for in risking annihilation it is the life of the hero who is saved—in the flesh, or in the telling. At which point the telling of the story, if it engages the qualities of heroism—courageous self-disclosure, stoic self-effacement, competence, resolve, humor, attention to task, bravery—can become an heroic act in itself, and perhaps it is most heroic in the degree to which the narrator reveals the self-interest and self-preservation at the heart of the story. It is, as Tim O’Brien noted in concluding *The Things They Carried*, a matter of “Tim trying to save Timmy’s life with a story.”¹⁰ What Loyd reveals is that we (and he) had an opportunity to act heroically in Bosnia (if not Chechnya) and that we failed to do so. The only way to save Bosnia (and ourselves) now is in the retelling. The heroic act Loyd engages in is not that of risking his life to save innocent victims, but in the act of self-disclosure and withdrawal from his and our failure, acknowledging that it was so.

Notes

1. Anthony Loyd, *My War Gone By, I Miss It So*, (New York: Penguin, 1999), 72-73.
2. Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force Which Gives Us Meaning*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 83.
3. Loyd, 7.
4. William Burroughs, *Junky*, ed. Oliver Harris (New York: Penguin, 2003), xxxix.
5. Loyd, 4-5.
6. Burroughs, xxxix.
7. Hedges, 73.
8. Hedges, 83.
9. Burroughs, 138.
10. Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, (Penguin: New York, 1990), 273.

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