Reflections on *Waltz With Bashir* (Ari Folman/Israel/2008)

*WALTZ WITH BASHIR*

*With God on Our Side*

“*The Scream*” 11/98
(Kristina’s adaptation of Edvard Munch’s more famous work)

Don’t ask me for formulas to open worlds
for you: all I have are gnarled syllables,
branch-dry. All I can tell you now is this:
what we are *not*, what we do *not* want.
Eugenio Montale,
*Cuttlefish Bones*

Destiny is not always transparent, fated, or fixed. Artists are driven to do what
they know needs to be done; they act for the race as a whole, driven to
compensate for a lack that goes far beyond the deprivations in their own
personal history. Beyond psychology.

Mark Chapman
*Realm of Unknowing*,

It is upon us to begin the work, it is not upon us to complete the work.

Talmudic saying

Ari Folman’s “Waltz with Bashir” (Israel, 2008) is an eerily moving thing, film animation that is
also documentary. It is a story about forgetfulness of being and the trauma or war, memory and
conscience, guilt and penitence—all elements that constitute what I have called elsewhere “a Middle East
of the heart.” It is also takes its place on a short list of compelling filmic representations of the power of
the psychotherapeutic and a much longer one of those recalling psychology to the imperatives of complexity and bona fide art. The film’s focus is timely and stark: the massacres perpetrated upon Beirut’s Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in 1982 by Christian Phalangist militias under the watch of the Israeli Defense Force in reprisal of the murder of Lebanese President Bashir Gemayel only days before. Waltz with Bashir is a compelling meditation on vengeance and complicity and what the 18th century Scottish poet Robert Burns had called, aptly, “man’s inhumanity to man.”

Film animation may seem a strange vehicle with which to convey such a rueful event. We are, however, far away here from the escapism of Japanese anime or Anglo-Saxon graphic novels turned into pulp entertainment for the stupefied masses. And there was, in any case, according to Folman, no other way to accurately tell his story. “Animation,” the filmmaker reflected when speaking recently about his artwork, “functions on the border between reality and the subconscious.” And, so, forgoing the glare of daylight, we enter the nocturnal realms of the psychological: surface realities and depth, trauma and recovery, and a desperate (even Proustian) remembrance of things both disturbing and past. The result, to quote New York Times critic A. O. Scott, is a work of “astonishing aesthetic integrity and searing moral power,” a meditation on ethics no less than a searing personal examination of the nature of modern war.

The components of the narrative are straightforward enough: lost memory and its retrieval; dreams, hallucinations and subterranean phenomena; drugs and lost youth. Folman, a youth of seventeen interested more in the girlfriend who has just left him than combat or politics, ends up with many of his fellow soldiers of the Israeli Defense Force in western Beirut during the Israeli-Lebanese War of 1982. Twenty-five years later, at the beginning of the film, he has little conscious recollection of what had at that time taken place. He meets at a bar with a former comrade in distress who relates to him a recurrent nightmare of being pursued by twenty-six fierce, barking dogs—a harrowing reminder of the exact number of dogs this man had to shoot during the conflict 25 years ago so as to silence them and, in so doing, not alert the enemy to the army’s advance. The man is surprised to find that Folman himself has no such recriminations from the past and, even more, seems not to remember much of what happened during the conflagration at all. Later that night, after taking leave of his troubled friend, Folman has his first flashback of the war. “Consciousness,” muses Nietzsche, “is a surface.”

And, so, Ari Folman, a man in midlife, sets forth in search of lost time. His film—a grave cartoon, really, for conscious adults—consists essentially of a series of conversations with aging Israeli men, now graying or bald, who were with Folman in west Beirut during that fateful summer of 1982. Animated facsimiles of the interlocutors accompany each voice followed by images of the various scenes and memories each now relates. In all but two instances, the voices we hear are those of the actual men recalling them. What results is a haunting gathering of images portraying memories, fantasies, horrors and dreams. All in all, states the filmmaker, “a very bad acid trip,” a truth-taking stare at “a not very flattering war.” Israeli youths emerge naked from a nighttime swim in the Mediterranean under a gold-
tinged sky illumined ominously by flares; a soldier at the end of his tether fires his rifle crazily at unseen snipers while dancing spasmodically in the streets of Beirut; a youth on board a military transport ship dreams of being rescued from sheer anxiety by a gigantic woman who emerges mysteriously from the sea and carries him off in her gargantuan arms. Memory, fantasy, hallucination, and dream, the hand-drawn, computer-enhanced images underscoring the oftentimes bizarre and fragmented nature of memory—indeed, life—itself. A “completely non-political film,” “personal” with a message, states Folman, “prosaic” and “banal”: the brutality/inanity of war. Vonnegut and Heller and Styron are Folman’s literary compatriots (with Full Metal Jacket and Apocalypse Now—“a total masterpiece,” concedes Folman—and Dr. Strangelove as filmic antecedents) in unsettled waters that are murky and deep and, hence, not amenable to easy explanations or answers.

We are “creatures of the in-between,” observes Buber somewhere. There is, somehow, a hallowed message herein about our shared human fate and, hence, our responsibility for moving cautiously through life, trying hard not to cause harm to others. We are, even within ourselves, caught between present and past—the mystic vagaries of history and the evanescence of the present en route to an uncertain destination. “Memory is dynamic; it’s alive,” muses the psychotherapist our filmmaker consults for guidance during the course of his voyage into mind and the past. Folman, at the end of remembrance, is left maimed, even shattered, yet chastened and pacifist. In the final images of the film we are confronted with actual newsreel footage of the aftermath of atrocity in which approximately 700 unarmed civilians were brutally murdered and died unseemly deaths. Harrowing images of Palestinian corpses and grieving survivors, the undisguised obscenity of war. Death and destruction undiminished by a compounding of blunders, callousness, and ethnic self-righteousness on very nearly all sides. The ravages of politics and ancient enmities, rhetoric and wars between factions and sects who all bow down to more or less the same gods.

In the same year that the massacres occurred in the Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut, Bob Dylan released an album entitled Infidels. It was to be, arguably, his best recording of the decade. On the cover is a very Jewish-looking Dylan overlooking, if memory serves me, the hills surrounding Jerusalem. Dylan’s first non-evangelical album since the middle 70’s, the album included the song “Neighborhood Bully,” a thinly veiled defense of Israel and its foreign policies:

Neighborhood bully been driven out of every land
He’s wandered the earth, an exiled man
Seen his family scattered, people hounded and torn
He’s always on trial for just being born
He’s the neighborhood bully . . .
Well, the chances are against it, and the odds are slim
That he'll live by the rules that the world makes for him
'Cause there's a noose at his neck and a gun at his back
And a license to kill him is given out to every maniac
He's the neighborhood bully . . .

What has he done to wear so many scars?
Does he change the course of rivers?
Does he pollute the moon and stars?
Neighborhood bully, standing on the hill
Running out the clock, time standing still
Neighborhood bully.

Passionate, indignant lyrics. I remember reading at the time of the album’s release a critic who pointed out that a man of Dylan’s perspicacity might have understood that he could have been writing as easily about the Palestinians of the Gaza and the West Bank as the Jews of Israel. A very good point, I recall thinking.

In my book Ethics and Lao-Tzu, I ponder the interrelatedness of war and presumption and what we may call, with the French existential theologian/philosopher Gabriel Marcel, a “metaphysics of care,” quoting these lines out of the Tao te Ching:

Weapons are the tools of fear;
a decent man will avoid them except in the direst necessity
and, if compelled, will use them only with the utmost restraint.
Peace is his highest value.
If the peace has been shattered,
how can he be content?
His enemies are not demons,
but human beings like himself.
He doesn't wish them personal harm.
Nor does he rejoice in victory.
How could he rejoice in victory and delight in the slaughter of men?
He enters a battle gravely,
with sorrow and with great compassion,
as if he were attending a funeral.

There one finds, also, this elegiac poem by the Persian poet Rumi:

ONE SONG

What is praised is one, so the praise is one too,
many jugs being poured

into a huge basin. All religions, all this singing,
one song.

The differences are just illusion and vanity.
Sunlight looks slightly different

on this wall than it does on that wall and a lot different
on the other one, but

it is still one light. We have borrowed these clothes, these time-
and-space personalities,

from a light, and when we praise, we pour them back in.

Twenty-five years after the advance on Beirut and the release of that album, at the very end of a long list of credits appearing at the close of Waltz with Bashir, Dylan’s name appears at the bottom of the screen and rises slowly before us. Apparently, he had supported the film in some, likely monetary, way. A moving gesture from a poet whose essential authenticity has (with the possible exception of those fallow years immediately following upon heels of that early 80’s recording) always shone before us renegade inspiration and exemplar. Amid more public displays of Bono and Springsteen attendant upon Barak Obama’s recent inaugural celebration, this quiet, almost hidden, gesture suggests, possibly, a moral sensibility more in keeping with a deeply humanistic spirit compromised neither by popularity nor facile expedience. An inner integrity and depth that ought to be far more prominently embodied within existential-humanistic psychology as well, the more so as our current administration’s foreign policies—its advances on certain other fronts notwithstanding—begin to resemble disconcertingly those of the latter years of George W. Bush.

Masters of memory and paradox, like Lao-tzu and Rumi and Dylan, and now Holman as well, surely must recognize one another across centuries and cultural divides, communing almost telepathically beyond continents and oceans, protective walls and local terrains. Nietzsche once referred to this Enlightened Conglomerate as a “republic of genius,” a nation of illumined individuals unbounded by theology, birthright, location, or time. Dylan, I am told, has been playing his early masterpieces Masters of
War (about our own gargantuan military-industrial complex and the conversion of violence into matters of ideological/political convenience/abstraction) and John Brown (about the mortifications of war and the essential fragility/sameness of combatants) on recent tours. Listen to these acoustic treasures if you are as yet unfamiliar with them; your education in humanist psychology is incomplete until you do. For my part, I am heartened, yet not really surprised, to see Dylan’s name quietly gracing Folman’s list of acknowledgements for Dance with Bashir. (“Perhaps a film,” too, muses Folman’s psychotherapist comrade at one point in the movie, “can be therapeutic.”) It really is all one ongoing symphony or travesty or song of the spheres.

Parts of this essay, including Kristina’s stunning adaptation of Edvard Munch’s The Scream, are excerpted/adapted from Ethics and Lao-Tzu. This book, too, relates, in collage-like form, a psychotherapeutic journey into memory of a tortured past that dovetails in significant ways with themes inherent in Folman’s film. Compelling in each instance are the redemptive aspects of intrapsychic/interpersonal/therapeutic encounter—what Buber had called “healing through meeting.”