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A Moral Witness

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Yours, for Probably Always: Martha Gellhorn's Letters of Love and War, 1930–1949

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If journalism is a rough draft of history, then war reportage is very rough indeed. In the hurly-burly of violent conflict, journalists have none of the historian's Olympian overview of motives and consequences. The fog of war falls on correspondents as well as on generals—propaganda, prejudice, ignorance, and the need to tell engaging stories to faraway readers limit and distort their vision. Censorship and partisanship disguise the naked truth. War correspondents can seem, even to themselves, like parasites on misery. A corrosive cynicism drifts like mustard gas across the history of writing about war. Samuel Johnson set the tone in 1758:

Among the calamities of war may be justly numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehoods which interest dictates and credulity encourages. A peace will equally leave the warrior and the relator of Wars destitute of employment; and I know not whether more is to be dreaded from streets filled with Soldiers accustomed to plunder, or from garrets filled with Scribblers accustomed to lie.

Irvin McDowell, a Union general in the American Civil War, sardonically informed the first celebrity war correspondent, William Howard Russell of the London *Times*, that, in giving permission for journalists to enter a war zone, "I have suggested to them that they should wear a white uniform to indicate the purity of their character."

Martha Gellhorn was many things, including a novelist and short story writer, but a "relator of Wars" is the most important of them. She was certainly no saint and did not wear a white uniform. She was well aware of the treacherous allure of tall tales from the battlefield. She was, after all, married for five years to one of great spinners of self-aggrandizing narratives, Ernest Hemingway,¹ and it is no accident that, according to Caroline Moorehead's marvelous 2003 biography, Gellhorn coined the word *apocryphians* for the habitual inventors of such fictions.² She was not immune to the self-contempt endemic to the business of turning violence and suffering into stories and money: in the 1959 introduction to her superb collection of reports, *The Face of War*, she describes herself as a "special type of war profiteer."

She was not a neutral observer—she cared far too much for democratic values and was too enraged by cruelty to believe in what she called "all that objectivity shit." She did not offer sweeping analyses of military and diplomatic strategies. She did not think, at least after the disillusionment that followed her early immersion in the Spanish Civil War, that journalism fed a public "love of truth." As she wrote in 1959, her faith in the "benign power of the press" had been broken: "Gradually I came to realize that people will more readily swallow lies than truth, as if the taste of lies was homey, appetizing: a habit." She had no illusions of influence: "For all the good our articles did, they might have been written in invisible ink, printed on leaves, and loosed to the wind." She felt, as she wrote to her lover and fellow war correspondent William Walton in



Robert Capa/International Center of Photography/Magnum Photos

Martha Gellhorn, Idaho, 1940

1949, “the absolute folly of journalism which at best reflects the vision of one person, and pretends to give an ‘over-all picture.’”

Why, then, did she keep doing it for almost half a century, from the Spanish Civil War to the Soviet invasion of Finland, through the fall of Czechoslovakia, the Normandy landings and the liberation of Dachau, to the Vietnam War, the killing fields of El Salvador and Nicaragua during Ronald Reagan’s dirty wars in the mid-1980s, and, when she was eighty-one, the US invasion of Panama? It was a matter of character and conscience, those most old-fashioned of virtues. She wrote to her beloved mother, Edna, when she was going to Vietnam in 1966, in a letter to be sent only in the event of her death that Janet Somerville includes in *Yours, for Probably Always*, her enthralling collection of Gellhorn’s correspondence from the 1930s and 1940s:

It may be that the human race is on the way out, a failed species, and anything one tries to do is futile. But I think that even if I knew that was true, I would still believe that each individual is responsible for his conscience; and must live by his standards of right and wrong, as long as he breathes. All I know how to do is write: the only way I can write with any authority, in the hope of influencing even a very few people is to write from firsthand knowledge.

To witness other people’s suffering and to write well about it was for her a way of being in the world, not a profession but an ethical act: “Serious, careful, honest journalism is essential, not because it is a guiding light, but because it is a form of honorable behavior, involving the reporter and the reader.” How quaint that word, “honorable”—and how potent in our time, when the legitimacy of reportage is under such sustained assault. Male honor and its savage imperatives are the engines of war and atrocity. Gellhorn’s honor drove her to record the consequences for others, especially for women, children, and refugees. On New Year’s Day, 1945, while covering the war on the western front in Europe, she thought of “a wonderful New Year’s resolution for the men who run the world: get to know the people who only live in it.”

Gellhorn got to know, and taught her readers to know, the people who only live in the hellish worlds our rulers create. She devoted herself to what Edward Gibbon, in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, calls “the melancholy calculation of human calamities.” This devotion is what makes her one of the great American moralists.

When Gellhorn first wrote about war, from Madrid in 1937, it was at the prompting of a man she rather coyly called in print “a journalist friend”—Hemingway. According to Moorehead, he asked her why she was not writing about the war. She replied, “I don’t know about soldiers and weapons.” Hemingway said, “Well, write about what you do know about, which is people.” This was, of course, an established division of journalistic labor: the real stuff of war for the boys, “human interest” for the girls. Yet Gellhorn transformed a sexist imposition into a moral choice. She changed the angle of vision of war reporting from “soldiers and weapons” to “people.” She redefined danger—that most potent allure of the war zone—from the heroism of sudden death to, as she wrote to her friend Eleanor Roosevelt in 1938, “lonely persecution and starvation and the fear of women alone in their flimsy houses with the children, when the night bombers come over.”

Thus when she was not permitted to go with the male war correspondents officially covering the D-Day landings in June 1944, she managed instead to bluff her way onto a hospital ship, claiming that she was writing a story about the nurses. It was, she recalled in 1992, a “wonderful rap to say...it’s a women’s story, which is then regarded as of absolutely no interest at all and harmless.” She locked herself in a toilet until the ship sailed and was then able to report on the great event from a uniquely up-close perspective. And watching a Jewish doctor care for a wounded German prisoner allowed her a characteristically laconic reflection on humanity in extremis: “We are helpless against our own decency really.”

Gellhorn took “color” writing and made it darkly potent. By the 1960s, and the Vietnam War, US and South Vietnamese officialdom had begun to grasp just how dangerous she was. The war is remembered as one in which American reporters had unusually free access and a consequently powerful impact on public opinion at home. But Gellhorn, even though she was one of the most famous war correspondents, was effectively shut out from both access and impact. She made her own

way to Vietnam in August 1966 and wrote a series of six long articles, but US newspapers declined to publish them. “Everywhere I was told that they were too tough for American readers,” she told Philip Knightley in an interview for his skeptical book on war reporting, *The First Casualty*, published in 1975. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* eventually published two of the milder pieces, and the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, of all places, published one. Only in Britain, in the *Guardian*, did the full series see the light of day.

And when Gellhorn tried to return to Vietnam, her visa applications were consistently refused: “It appears I am on some sort of black list and I will not be allowed to report from South Vietnam again.” Appeals to the US authorities for help were rebuffed. This did not happen to many other American journalists, certainly not to ones of Gellhorn’s fame and stature.

What did she do to deserve this? Gellhorn, looking back in 1988, characterized her Vietnam reports as “a model of self-censorship,” and wrote that “there are smarmy sentences in those reports that I wrote with gritted teeth.” She did not reveal any secrets—everything she wrote about was, as she put it, “there for anyone to see, open, obvious.” Her sin, rather, was to write about the war not as an American tragedy but as a Vietnamese one. She was interested in the otherwise anonymous victims of napalm dropped on villages, in the peasants uprooted from their homes in order to be “pacified,” in “that distant, small, brown-skinned people, who do not look or live like us.” She did not, like almost all the other journalists, follow the action; she followed its aftermath. She went to the refugee camps, the orphanages, and in particular the children’s hospitals in the Mekong Delta. What is offensive in the pieces she wrote, what put them beyond the pale, is their human intimacy:

The children have learned not to move, because moving hurts them more, but their eyes, large and dark, follow you....

A child of seven, the size of our four-year-olds, lay in the cot by the door. Napalm had burned his face and back and one hand. The burned skin looked like swollen, raw meat; the fingers of his hand were stretched out, burned rigid. A scrap of cheesecloth covered him, for weight is intolerable, but so is air.

Decades earlier, while covering World War II in 1944, Gellhorn had mused in print that “perhaps it is impossible to understand anything unless it happened to you yourself.” What we are experiencing in passages like this is something happening: to the child, to Gellhorn, and, through the melancholy calculation of those exquisitely weighted sentences, to us. “If you see something,” Gellhorn says in a letter to her friend and former teacher Hortense Flexner in 1940, “you write it, to give the exact emotion to someone who did not see it.” What’s crucial, though, is the very particular balance between moral engagement and cool detachment we encounter in her writing—the engagement creates the emotion; the detachment holds it back so that it is not all used up by the reporter and enough space is left for the reader’s feelings to be activated.

The technique here owes much to Hemingway—but what good writer’s of the period doesn’t? After she divorced him in 1945, Gellhorn always bristled at portrayals of herself as his protégé or sidekick. It is thus salutary to find her writing to her then lover Bertrand de Jouvenel in 1930, long before she met Hemingway, that he “has affected my style, which is really too bad.” Like almost everyone else, she would have been influenced by the figure de Jouvenel refers to in 1932 as “the Great God Hemingway” even if she had never become entangled in his life and legend.

Gellhorn could write a scene like the one in the hospital so intimately because she felt it intimately. In some of her reports from Vietnam, that word “honor” is slipped in. The one sentence, tellingly, that the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* decided to cut from the piece it printed is a question about honor: “Is this an honorable way for a great nation to fight a war 10,000 miles from its safe homeland?” This is less an accusation than a confession. The sense of dishonor was deeply personal to her as an American. As she wrote of Vietnam to her friend Betsy Drake in June 1975, when the war had just ended, in a letter included in Moorehead’s selection of her correspondence, “I felt it as a personal guilt and shame and horror.”³

Gellhorn could never be the “walking tape recorder with eyes” that, as she put it during World War II, she aspired to be.

While she claimed that “nothing about the reporter matters. What matters is the thing: the facts: what happened: how it was,” this is not really true. Her “I” is as important as her eyes. She had written, as far back as 1934, in a letter to her friend Cam Beckett that

you wouldn't believe how the world narrows when you have to say *I* instead of *She*. But I must do it; because writing is more than just putting words down on paper to fill the time, hoping for money to come and a dash of fame.... For me, it's my mind's and spirit's purge: there are certain things to be eternally rid of.

What matters in Gellhorn's reportage is not just “the facts” but how she defined what facts counted most and how she evoked them for her readers, and those choices were never separable from her conscience and her character. And while she seems startlingly rebellious in her private and professional lives, that character is a wondrous flowering of the early-twentieth-century progressive American bourgeoisie. Her mother, Edna, the driving force of the League of Women Voters in Gellhorn's hometown of St. Louis, writing to de Jouvenel in 1934, informs him that “we're very middle-class, somewhat conventional, sure that our only usefulness and happiness lies in service, sort of people.” Her father, a gynecologist, was Jewish and had been born in Germany. Gellhorn wrote to Drake, “I was brought up in a good tough school whose basic instruction is: Get on with it. Somehow.”

Moorehead, who was Gellhorn's friend as well as her biographer, recalled that “‘buck up’ was a phrase we all heard, when we strayed too near to self-pity.” Duty, indefatigability, and an underlying sense of the importance of being earnest in the pursuit of justice are the values Gellhorn held to. It is apt that her political and personal lodestar was Eleanor Roosevelt, who, perhaps more than any other twentieth-century American figure, embodied those values in public action. Gellhorn's letters to and from Roosevelt (with whom she sometimes stayed in the White House) are among the treasures of Somerville's rich collection.

If this is where the engagement comes from, how did she maintain that remarkable counterweight of detachment? Reading her letters allows us to see not just the “I” who witnessed so much but also Gellhorn's capacity to stand outside that self. Parallel to her war journalism, the letters to her lovers and intimate friends involve a remarkable feat of reportage on the war within Gellhorn herself. It is a conflict most crudely defined by Hemingway when he cabled her from Cuba, while she was away covering World War II: “ARE YOU A WAR CORRESPONDENT OR WIFE IN MY BED?” Gellhorn knew damn well what the answer was but there was for her a much more complex and perhaps unanswerable question: How could she be a woman while occupying so male a space in the world?

When Gellhorn took up with de Jouvenel, a married man who stayed married, her father, disapprovingly, said to her that “there are two kinds of women and you are the other kind.” Gellhorn was always indeed the “other kind” of gender: she had to make her life in a no-man's-land between the proper femininity she rejected and the masculinity she could not have. Writing to her in 1934, de Jouvenel claimed that if Gellhorn provoked his wife to take legal action against them, “it would be something as destructive as when Oscar Wilde attacked Queensberry.” The evocation of the most infamous queer scandal may be over the top but was not entirely inapt. For Gellhorn certainly did not fit into her era's binary oppositions of male and female, and the result was not just that others did not know quite what to make of her, but that she was never quite sure what to make of herself.

Gellhorn, blond and long-legged, was well aware of—and not at all displeased by—her sexual attractiveness to men: “I am,” she wrote to Cam Beckett in 1934, “considered to be rather beautiful, with a good body.” It was one of her professional assets. She wrote to Drake in 1972, “Though I never used them for sexual attraction, my looks were a passport which somehow made tolerable the interruption of a furious woman, bullying powerful people to be concerned about unpowerful people.” But on the other hand, she reveled in being one of the boys, in the hard-drinking swagger of reporters and fighters. Her voice, as Ward Just put it, “had so much gravel in it you could walk on it.”

Sexual connection eluded her. She wrote to Allen Grover from Paris in 1936 of her female friends' diagnosis: “They are

now decided that I am a lesbian because no men mar the scenery, because I deny the gloating satisfaction in physical love whereof they all brag." In that letter of 1934, de Jouvenel calls himself "half-a-man and you half-a-woman" because she did not share his sexual pleasure in their couplings. He blamed himself for the "violent physical incompatibility" that existed between them, and called himself an "incompetent lover." But Gellhorn clearly felt the failure to be her own. She told him she was "going to see a doctor about my lack of sexual reaction." She wrote to him of

how I failed you, being unable to give you complete joy in sexual love—because I was unable to attain that climax; and how I even faked it on occasions when you had tried and I felt your wretchedness at failure.

Sex and love would not, for Gellhorn, cohere into a settled sense of herself as a woman. It seems that the real male love of her life was the great war photographer Robert Capa—even though (perhaps because) "there was never, not for one minute ever, the slightest sexual attraction between us." She did not find Hemingway physically attractive, even though she married him. "He needed me to run his house and to copulate on (I use the adverb advisedly, not with but on) and to provide exercise in the way of a daily tennis game," she wrote to Drake in 1974.

Her friend Leonard Bernstein told Gellhorn he wrote the song "100 Easy Ways to Lose a Man" (from *Wonderful Town*) with her in mind, but her letters show that breaking up, however frequently she did it, was hard for her to do. It forced her to confront the ways in which she was not a "woman" in the sense that her male lovers could understand the idea, and—much more painfully—in the way she understood it. In 1950 she told David Gurewitsch—Eleanor Roosevelt's friend and personal physician, with whom Gellhorn was then in love—"I am not good enough to be a pair, to belong to a man." She added:

I have not even thought of myself as a woman much before.... I have done nothing but fail, as a woman, because I never felt like one really.... I have consciously used what I suppose must be sex appeal (but what a cheap thing it is: all women have it) for vanity, from loneliness, from doubt, or simply to exert power.

In 1958, when she was fifty, she wrote to Rosamond Lehmann:

I still have a few friends, men, (not quite the same as the others, the first ones) and they and the dead have always mattered more to me than any lovers. Lovers somehow never seemed serious; there was something I couldn't quite believe—and even in the most anguishing intoxicating depths of a love affair, I would always rather be with my friends, who were my own people and where I belonged. I found this very queer (I bet you do too), very unwomanly & probably neuter of me. I only loved the world of men—not the world of men-and-women. I only loved the men as they were themselves, not as they became in relation to women. Perhaps I am simply a born visitor—meant to go, as a stranger, into someone else's territory, having none of my own.

This is distressing and poignant, but it also gets to the nub of the reason why Gellhorn's sense of being unwomanly was a source not just of personal anguish but of her great power as a journalist. The "I" of her reportage, the witnessing self, can never be a pompous, arrogant omniscient persona. It never loses its vigilant self-awareness. It is a hard-won construct, distilled from a deep loneliness, a radical uncertainty, and a consequent habit (so vibrantly manifest in her letters) of merciless self-analysis. It is also what allows her, even in those moments of almost unbearably intimate confrontation with the suffering of others, to be the perfect stranger in another's territory, the emissary from the zone of human calamities to the land where people are comfortable enough to want to read all about it.

Her journalistic work is so closely intertwined with terrible historical events that it seems odd to say that Gellhorn was really an anti-historian. Her dispatches were not first drafts of history; they were letters from eternity. She wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt in 1939 that "perhaps because I try to be a writer, perhaps because I am a woman, I cannot avoid seeing history always in terms of people." To see history—at least the history of war—in terms of people is to see it not as a linear process but as a series of terrible repetitions: what happens to human flesh in episodes of organized violence is always and everywhere the same. It is her ability to capture the precise and particular while doing justice to the terrible futility of this

sameness that makes Gellhorn's reportage so genuinely timeless. When we read her, we are simultaneously drawn into the uniqueness of a moment and into the undertow of her distraught awareness that this moment, in its essence, has happened before and will happen again.

As early as 1935, her regular correspondent Allen Grover wrote to Gellhorn that "I should one day publish your collected letters. They're magnificent prose." They are—and they are also precious traces of the turbulent, passionate, relentless, self-examined inner life of a woman of honor whose indomitable character is beautifully summed up by her mother in Somerville's invigorating collection: "She lacks everything that makes living easy, she possesses most things that make it worthwhile."

Due to an editorial error, an earlier version of this article incorrectly identified Janet Somerville as Martha Gellhorn's stepdaughter. The text above has been amended.

1 See my "[The Male Impersonator](#)" in these pages, June 22, 2017. ↩

2 *Gellhorn: A Twentieth Century Life* (Henry Holt, 2003). ↩

3 See *The Selected Letters of Martha Gellhorn*, edited by Caroline Moorehead (Henry Holt, 2006). ↩