

PAGE-TURNER

## A READER'S WAR

By Teju Cole, FEBRUARY 10, 2013

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"Thanks to literature, to the consciousness it shapes, the desires and longings it inspires...civilization is now less cruel than when storytellers began to humanize life with their fables." This defense, made by Mario Vargas Llosa when he received the Nobel Prize in Literature two years ago, could have come from any other writer. It is, in fact, allowing for some variety of expression, a cliché. But clichés, so the cliché goes, originate in truth. Vargas Llosa reiterated the point: "Without fictions, we would be less aware of the

importance of freedom for life to be livable, the hell it turns into when it is trampled underfoot by a tyrant, an ideology, or a religion."

It would be hard to find writers who disagree with Vargas Llosa's general sense of literature's civilizing function. Toni Morrison, in her Nobel lecture in 1993, said, "We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives." This sense of literature's fortifying and essential quality has been evoked by countless other writers and readers. When Marilynne Robinson described fiction as "an exercise in the capacity for imaginative love, or sympathy, or identification" she was stating something almost everyone would agree with. We praise literature in self-evident terms: it is better to read than not to read, for reading civilizes us, makes us less cruel, and brings the imaginations of others into

ours and vice versa. We persist in this belief regardless of what we know to the contrary: that the Nazis' affection for high culture did not prevent their crimes.

There was a feeling during the years of George W. Bush's Presidency that his gracelessness as well as his appetite for war were linked to his impatience with complexity. He acted "from the gut," and was economical with the truth until it disappeared. Under his command, the United States launched a needless and unjust war in Iraq that resulted in terrible loss of life; at the same time, an unknown number of people were confined in secret prisons and tortured. That Bush was anti-intellectual, and often guilty of malapropisms and mispronunciations ("nuclear"), formed part of the liberal aversion to him: he didn't know much about the wider world, and did not much care to learn.

His successor couldn't have been more different. Barack Obama is an elegant and literate man with a cosmopolitan sense of the world. He is widely read in philosophy, literature, and history—as befits a former law professor—and he has shown time and again a surprising interest in contemporary fiction. The books a President buys might be as influenced by political calculation as his “enjoyment” of lunch at a small town diner or a round of skeet shooting. Nevertheless, a man who names among his favorite books Morrison’s “Song of Solomon,” Robinson’s “Gilead,” and Melville’s “Moby Dick” is playing the game pretty seriously. His own feel for language in his two books, his praise for authors as various as Philip Roth and Ward Just, as well as the circumstantial evidence of the books he’s been seen holding (the “Collected Poems” of Derek Walcott, most strikingly), add up to a

picture of a man for whom an imaginative engagement with literature is inseparable from life. It thrilled me, when he was elected, to think of the President’s nightstand looking rather similar to mine. We had, once again, a reader in chief, a man in the line of Jefferson and Lincoln.

Any President’s gravest responsibilities are defending the Constitution and keeping the country safe. President Obama recognized that the image of the United States had been marred by the policies of the Bush years. By drawing down the troops in Iraq, banning torture, and directly and respectfully addressing the countries of Europe and the Middle East, Obama signaled that those of us on the left had not hoped in vain for change. When, in 2009, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, we noted the absurdity of such premature plaudits, but also saw the occasion as encouragement for the

difficult work to come. From the optimistic perspective of those early days, Obama’s foreign policy has lurched from disappointing to disastrous. Iraq endures a shaky peace and Afghanistan remains a mire, but these situations might have been the same regardless of who was President. More troubling has been his conduct in the other arenas of the Global War on Terror. The United States is now at war in all but name in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. In pursuit of Al Qaeda, their allies, and a number of barely related militias, the President and his national-security team now make extraordinarily frequent use of assassinations.

The White House, the C.I.A., and the Joint Special Operations Command have so far killed large numbers of people. Because of the secret nature of the strikes, the precise number is unknown, but estimates range from a

several hundred to over three thousand. These killings have happened without any attempt to arrest or detain their targets, and beyond the reach of any legal oversight. Many of the dead are women and children. Among the men, it is impossible to say how many are terrorists, how many are militants, and how many are simply, to use the administration's obscene designation, "young men of military age." The dependence on unmanned aerial vehicles—also called drones—for these killings, which began in 2002 and have increased under the Obama Administration, is finally coming to wider attention.

We now have firsthand testimony from the pilots who remotely operate the drones, many of whom have suffered post-traumatic stress reactions to the work. There is also the testimony of the survivors of drone attacks: heartbreaking stories of

mistaken identity, grisly tales of sudden death from a machine in the sky. In one such story reported by The New York Times, the relatives of a pair of dead cousins said, "We found eyes, but there were no faces left." The recently leaked Department of Justice white paper indicating guidelines for the President's assassination of his fellow Americans has shone a spotlight on these "dirty wars" (as the journalist Jeremy Scahill rightly calls them in his documentary film and book of the same title). The plain fact is that our leaders have been killing at will.

How on earth did this happen to the reader in chief? What became of literature's vaunted power to inspire empathy? Why was the candidate Obama, in word and in deed, so radically different from the President he became? In Andrei Tarkovsky's eerie 1979 masterpiece, "Stalker," the

landscape called the Zona has the power to grant people's deepest wishes, but it can also derange those who traverse it. I wonder if the Presidency is like that: a psychoactive landscape that can madden whomever walks into it, be he inarticulate and incurious, or literary and cosmopolitan.

According to a report in the New York Times, the targets of drone strikes are selected for death at weekly meetings in the White House; no name is added to the list without the President's approval. Where land mines are indiscriminate, cheap, and brutal, drones are discriminate, expensive, and brutal. And yet they are insufficiently discriminate: the assassination of the Taliban chief Baitullah Mehsud in Pakistan in 2009 succeeded only on the seventeenth attempt. The sixteen near misses of the preceding year killed between two hundred and eighty and four hundred and ten other

people. Literature fails us here. What makes certain Somali, Pakistani, Yemeni, and American people of so little account that even after killing them, the United States disavows all knowledge of their deaths? How much furious despair is generated from so much collateral damage?

Of late, riding the subway in Brooklyn, I have been having a waking dream, or rather a daytime nightmare, in which the subway car ahead of mine explodes. My fellow riders and I look at one another, then look again at the burning car ahead, certain of our deaths. The fire comes closer, and what I feel is bitterness and sorrow that it's all ending so soon: no more books, no more love, no more jokes, no more Schubert, no more Black Star. All this spins through my mind on tranquil mornings as the D train trundles between 36th Street and Atlantic Avenue and bored commuters check

their phones. They just want to get to work. I sit rigid in my seat, thinking, I don't want to die, not here, not yet. I imagine those in northwest Pakistan or just outside Sana'a who go about their day thinking the same. The difference for some of them is that the plane is already hovering in the air, ready to strike.

I know language is unreliable, that it is not a vending machine of the desires, but the law seems to be getting us nowhere. And so I take helpless refuge in literature again, rewriting the opening lines of seven well-known books:

Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. Pity. A signature strike leveled the florist's.

Call me Ishmael. I was a young man of military age. I was immolated at my wedding. My parents are inconsolable.

Stately, plump Buck

Mulligan came from the stairhead bearing a bowl of lather. A bomb whistled in. Blood on the walls. Fire from heaven.

I am an invisible man. My name is unknown. My loves are a mystery. But an unmanned aerial vehicle from a secret location has come for me.

Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was killed by a Predator drone.

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His torso was found, not his head.

Mother died today. The program saves American lives.

I was in New York City on 9/11. Grief remains from that awful day, but not only grief. There is fear, too, a fear informed by the knowledge that whatever my worst nightmare is, there is someone out there embittered enough to carry it out. I know

that something has to be done to secure the airports, waterways, infrastructure, and embassies of our country. I don't like war; no one does. But I also know that the world is exceedingly complex, and that our enemies are not all imaginary. I am not naïve about the incessant and unseen (by most of us) military activity that undergirds our ability to read, go to concerts, earn a living, and criticize the government in relative safety. I am grateful to those whose bravery keeps us safe.

This ominous, discomfiting, illegal, and immoral use of weaponized drones against defenseless strangers is done for our sakes. But more and more we are seeing a gap between the intention behind the President's clandestine brand of justice and the real-world effect of those killings. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words against the Vietnam War in 1967 remain resonant today: "What do they think

as we test our latest weapons on them?" We do know what they think: many of them have the normal human reaction to grief and injustice, and some of them take that reaction to a vengeful and murderous extreme. In the Arabian peninsula, East Africa, and Pakistan, thanks to the policies of Obama and Biden, we are acquiring more of the angriest young enemies money can buy. As a New York Times report put it last year, "Drones have replaced Guantánamo as the recruiting tool of choice for militants."

Assassinations should never have happened in our name. But now we see that they endanger us physically, endanger our democracy, and endanger our Constitution. I believe that when President Obama personally selects the next name to add to his "kill list," he does it in the belief that he is protecting the country. I trust that he makes the selections with great seriousness, bringing his rich

sense of history, literature, and the lives of others to bear on his decisions. And yet we have been drawn into a war without end, and into cruelties that persist in the psychic atmosphere like ritual pollution.

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*Pete Souza/The White House/Getty.*

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