Part 2: The individualisation of the concept of honour

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The Genealogy of Belligerent Affects

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ABSTRACT The initial purpose of this article is to explore the variegated negotiations of notions of ‘honour’ in an historical setting, and a multitude of generic registers, extending from Cervantes to Al-Qaeda, and by implication Daesh/The Islamic State. The second, but central aim is to suggest that a specific, affective logic is at work across apparently widely different works and phenomena, namely the way in which failed intersubjective or political recognition results in various types of metaphoric and literal warfare, in the hope of gaining ‘honour’.

KEY WORDS war | hate | affects | dis-honourable | respect | recognition

INITIAL INROAD

In what follows, we are going to embark on a series of brief, interlinked encounters with widely different works and phenomena. The claim is, that this meandering series will allow for a gradual unveiling of a particularly problematic, social logic whereby the trauma of (perceived) withheld recognition leads to an affective quest for ‘honour’. It is perhaps superfluous to mention that we are very much in the midst of social passions, feelings of slight, jealousy, envy, resent-

1. This was originally given as an experimental talk at a research-seminar whose theme was "war-affect-honour", organized by Aasta Marie Bjorvand Bjørkøy, Stefka Georgieva Eriksen and Thorstein Norheim and, at the University of Oslo, 25 September 2015. I would like to thank Thorstein warmly for inviting me, and all the participants for a most generous and perceptive response to this paper; a set of responses that rendered any subsequent quest for honour entirely and mercifully superfluous.

2. There is a huge span between, say, A-J Greimas’ Semiotics of Passions, Minnesota UP 1992, and Sianne Ngai, Ugly Feelings, Harvard UP 2005. Although Ngai slightly veers away from the domain of affect theory proper, her study is a brilliant and thought-provoking analysis of these minor and shameful emotions, as they play themselves out in literature, and in our culture at large.
ment, all of which Nietzsche stigmatized as base, reactionary sentiments. While this may be true, one of the major problems haunting contemporary, global society is a radically widening gap of inequality between the super-rich and all the rest of us, and in that context, feelings of anger and indignation perhaps ought not be brushed aside as merely yet another tiresome display of feelings of inferiority? Peter Sloterdijk, Axel Honneth, Thomas Piketty, Stéphane Hessel\(^3\) all of these widely different figures have suggested that anger and resentment might be transformed into a positive, political force for the good, ideally helping us turn towards a state of more evenly distributed recognition, and at least less inequality. One of the hypotheses of this article, is that such a project is not merely desirable, but extremely acute and necessary, in that frustrated reactions to withheld recognition all too easily turns into violent and belligerent quests for what is strikingly often termed ‘honour’.\(^4\) An adjunct suggestion is, that once subjects renounce the struggle for recognition, we leave the realm of emotions, and enter a territory of affects.

Briefly put ‘affects’ are collective, bodily mediated passions that circulate between individuals, and are organized pre-individually; an example might be the sudden sense of panic in a crowd: single individuals in the crowd may have all sorts of conscious, well-shaped emotions, but once panic erupts, a strong current of bodily affects cause the crowd to stampede heedlessly along. In that case, ‘emotions’ have turned into ‘affects’, an affect that circulates in-between all the bodies in the crowd, and that have barely become conscious and fully shaped in the minds of the panicking individuals. But what has all of this got to do with literature, and with notions of honour, one might ask?

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\(^4\) I have found very useful, in terms of historicizing and contextualizing the concept of “honour” in regard to a literary analysis, Thorstein Norheim’s article, ‘Et spørsøy om ære. Om Dag Solstads krigstrilogi som æreslitteratur med vekt på Krig og Fredrik Lindgren (2016). And as well Frank Henderson Stewart’s *Honor*, Chicago UP 1994, and James Bowman’s *Honor. A History*, Encounter Books 2006, both pointed out to me by Norheim.
CLARIFYING DIGRESSION

Put otherwise: How to think more carefully about the possible interlinking of ‘affect’ and ‘honour’, as they occur in aesthetic works, and in a contemporary social and political setting?

I am inspired in my endeavours by two or three currents that would seem to commingle and intersect, albeit not always in straightforward ways.5

On the one hand, what we might describe as a re-introduction and re-legitimization of passions and emotions into the academic study of literature. In particular, I’m thinking of two seminal works, Rita Felski’s *Uses of Literature*, and Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht’s *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*.6 All differences aside, they both would seem to advocate a rejection firstly of the semi-automatic hermeneutics of suspicion, the spontaneous ‘critique’ of everything, which is by now most uncritical, and stem from what has become, in the wake of Cultural Studies, a habit, perhaps even a bad, lazy habit.7 And secondly, they reject a certain form of deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, that would always be able to find, at the end of any reading, an experience of difference, deferral, absence, spectrality. Thirdly, they take aim at a more vague, but widespread ethos in the Humanities, to do with something we admonish our students not to do: ‘don’t feel – instead, make observations, and argue based on those’. Felski and Gumbrecht converge in pleading that as readers, even professional readers, we do in fact have all sorts of emotions in the encounter with literary texts; we identify with characters, we are fascinated and wrapt up in plots, we are deeply ensconced in sensations of series of moods and atmospheres, and in this respect we completely resemble all other lay readers. In the words of Felski: ‘A phenomenology of reading calls for an undogmatic openness to a spectrum of literary responses; that some of these responses are not currently sanctioned in the annals of professional criticism does not render them any less salient’ (2008, 18).8

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5. I should mention that these works are not merely included by way of being “inspirational”; apart from playing a local and tactical role in providing a framework for mapping the aesthetic logic of belligerent affects, they might very well go into a syncretistic, future welding together, with a view to explore further the complexities at work in the production of warlike, honorific affects.


7. Duly noting that Gumbrecht is of course an important figure in the American landscape of people doing Cultural Studies; whereas Felski draws on a historicist-hermeneutical and neo-phenomenological strand, indebted to e.g. Paul Ricoeur, cf. Felski 2008, pp. 16–20.

8. Felski, op.cit., p.18. Felski is responding to a general legitimation crisis for literary studies in the US, and one element in that response consists in trying to bridge the gap between lay and professional readers, partly by way of owning up to the fact that even the most professionalized reader is (also) a lay reader, with all of the attendant reactions of such a reader.
This is of course not to imply that any of them advocate a crass, anti-rationalist obscurantism that would take us straight back to the regressive ‘je ne sais quoi’ of père Bouhours in 17th century France, far from it, that would be suicidal, worse: uninteresting, in the academe. But they do suggest, on this reading, that we take these phenomena into account, and reconsider them anew, and in earnest, rather than pretend they don’t exist.9

Secondly, however, since the mid-1990’ies we have had the so-called Affective Turn in literary studies10, inspired quite heavily by the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari11, and later their translator, the political philosopher Brian Massumi. From that ‘turn’, I extract the suggestion – as touched upon above – that we should distinguish sharply between emotions and affects. Whereas the first are strictly individual and fully conscious, the latter are posited as being pre-individual; to circulate in-between affected and affecting bodies; affects are not necessarily fully conscious; and they may organize themselves as ‘machinic assemblages’12, and lastly, would seem to work in ways that are not entirely unrelated to Bruno Latour’s notion of actor–network theory (ANT), i.e. with fluid and elastic boundaries between human and non-human actors.13

I’m going to draw on both layers of signification today, those of Felski/Gumbrecht, and Deleuze/Guattari, and so will shift between using ‘emotions’ and ‘affects’ to signal those two modalities, or registers of meaning, as a platform for what is to follow. The common denominator, one might say, between the reappraisal of the status and function of emotions, and the relatively novel interest in ‘affects’, is – negatively put – the principled rejection of what is sometimes described as a reductive form of dualist, rational thinking. As always, Descartes is


10. An important marking of this general surge, was The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social, Eds. Clough and Halley, Duke University Press 2007.


12. A ‘machinic assemblage’ is one of the many neologisms Guattari and Deleuze came up with. In this context, I am going to use it in the following way: A machinic assemblage is what occur when strict boundaries between subjects and objects are transcended in a complex, interlinked series of events that violently transforms hitherto safe limits and conditions, e.g. in the case of high-technological warfare, or even a tornado.

The kind of persistent schema that distinguishes sharply between mind and body, reason and emotion, subject and object, and so forth, and that tends to privilege mind and reason heavily. Ontologically, this means that reality is deemed to be something that we can cognize, grasp in thought, and epistemologically this obviously entails a trust in rational procedures, and a certain scepticism of what is considered to be the imprecise and unreliable registers of emotions.

This is close to being a caricature, but it nonetheless has a very pervasive influence in shaping the typical ethos of a researcher, even in the human sciences – and it is against this backdrop that the efforts of Felski, Gumbrecht, Guattari, Massumi and many others might best be gauged.

SPAIN 1605

It also allows me to build a convenient bridge onto the topos of Cervantes’ Don Quijote, according to Kundera the first proper novel in European literature. On a standard reading, Don Quijote might be said to be caught in an unsure oscillation between reality and phantasm, rationality and madness, i.e. a Cartesian trap. But I would like to focus on a slightly different aspect. For, the opening scene is one of striking loneliness and isolation, and thus a glaring lack of acknowledgment. Don Quijote de la Mancha is a petty nobleman, but he is quite poor, he doesn’t have a wife, he is getting on in age, nearing fifty, he lives in the provinces, and he’s a very bad businessman, spending all of his meagre income on what is widely considered to be merely silly books. In many ways, he’s a nobody, a loser even.

According to the omniscient and playful narrator: ‘his mind was so tattered and torn that, finally, it produced the strangest notion any madman ever conceived, and then considered it not just appropriate but inevitable. As much for the sake of his own honour, as for his duty to the nation, he decided to turn himself into a knight errant, travelling all over the world with his horse and his weapons, seeking adventures and doing everything that, according to his books, earlier knights had done’ (1999, 15).

The point is to suggest that we may be allowed to read the figure of Don Quijote not only in the light of the affective turn, and the pervasive role of emotions in literature, but as well within the framework of Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition.

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14. I suspect this is why neither of them tap into the slightly boring territory of cognitive science, and that field’s mode of analysis of “emotions”. Both Felski and Gumbrecht are more inclined to adopt a position that is broadly historicist and phenomenological.

As is well known, Honneth claimed – in his emphatically social and normative\textsuperscript{16} rethinking of the Hegelian notion of the formation of collective and reciprocal forms of subjectivity as a life and death fight for recognition – that all subjects need to receive a sufficient, minimum amount of acknowledgment in the three elementary and interlinked domains of love, work and society. So recognition of being worthy of love and devotion by family and friends, recognition by colleagues that we are not entirely incompetent, and, lastly, recognition by civil society that we have certain basic legal and political rights. If recognition is lacking, in any of these domains, a struggle for it ensues.\textsuperscript{17}

If – for some reason – one, or all of these forms of acknowledgment is withheld, or retracted, there arises a ‘crisis of recognition’, and we are then bound to try to resolve this conflict, and establish or re-establish a suitable level of acknowledgment. Now I want to return to Cervantes, for his narrator explicitly uses the term ‘honour’ to describe the legitimizing fantasy of the ‘ingenious gentleman’ of La Mancha: ‘As much for the sake of his own honour’ the narrator put it in the above passage.

My first working hypothesis is, that the contentious issue of ‘honour’ only ever arises in the wake of a conflict of acknowledgment. More precisely, ‘honour’ is something you seek, only if you haven’t received proper acknowledgment.\textsuperscript{18} Had Don Quijote gained a wife, and had children of his own, established a thriving household, and perhaps achieved some measure of political success amongst his peers, the problem of ‘his own honour’ would never have arisen. Instead, Don

\textsuperscript{16} Cf. Honneth 1995, op.cit., p. 1. It is extremely important to take note of the fact that Honneth’s essay explicitly and consistently abandons a merely individualist perspective; the premise is, that there is no sovereign, autonomous ‘I’, but that we are always already ensconced in the on-going formation of a complex collage of political and social subjectivities. From a somewhat different, theoretical perspective Judith Butler explores other aspects of this, cf. Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?, Verso 2010, e.g. pp. 31–32, in which passage Butler interestingly takes off from Hegel as well, but in other directions than those of Honneth, cf. e.g. Butler 2010, pp. 39–42, 52–54, 137–163. Butler never mentions or quotes Honneth’s work, but she takes aim at a certain too bland and quick implicit understanding of what it might mean to gain recognition, cf. ibid., p. 137–145, e.g. questioning the oftentimes skewed understanding of gaining citizenship (‘skewed’ in the sense that the new subject must comply with all the conditions of being recognized as a legitimate, juridical subject, but cannot begin to question or problematize those conditions.). Butler would appear, however, to use ‘emotions’ and ‘affects’ as synonymous terms.

\textsuperscript{17} A crucial point being, that for all of the abovementioned, errant figures a Honneth-like socially legitimate and legitimizing struggle can be said to be dismissed out of hand, or to have been left behind. Why? Because – bearing in mind Enzensberger, see below – that form of struggle comes to look impossible and pointless for the radical loser; the radical loser, instead, is bent on destruction and apocalypse, rather than forming a part of collective movement to improve the plight of any given group of social individuals.
Quijote sought to turn himself into an artificial knight errant\textsuperscript{19}; which catapults us to quite another part of the world.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, 1982

For, at the very end of Sylvester Stallone’s first 1982-instalment of the Rambo-films, ‘First Blood’, the deeply traumatized, mostly silent Vietnam-veteran John Rambo, who has incidentally received the congressional medal of honour, and who has been utterly humiliated by the sheriff in the small town ironically named ‘Hope’ (situated in British Columbia, USA), finally speaks out, and says: ‘Back in the field we had a code of honour’ (1982, 1:18:32). He goes on to explain how in Vietnam, he was a hero given great responsibilities and shown ‘trust’, but back in America he couldn’t even hold a simple job in a car-wash, and was met everywhere by scorn and contempt.

Rambo is very much, in the universe of Stallone’s film, a (veteran) knight errant, but a knight in the midst of an acute crisis of recognition, and struggling desperately to achieve honour. The fact that all three types of acknowledgment have been withheld in civilian life; he has no wife or children, no friends (as the film opens, he is told that one of his very few, surviving soldier friends just died of cancer), he has no job, he is treated like a vagrant vagabond – propels him into a desperate attempt to attain at least a shred of honour. In causal terms, the effective agent is the sheriff. In ‘Rambo’, the sheriff takes one glance at Rambo walk-

\textsuperscript{18} There is a potentially pointless argument lying in wait here, concerning the semantics of the term ‘honour’, for is it not synonymous with ‘esteem’ and ‘respect’ e.g.? In the English translation of Honneth’s 1992-work, the translator has chosen ‘esteem’, ‘respect’ and ‘dignity’ seemingly almost at random, cf. Honneth 1995, pp. 92–129. As well, there’s the issue of relative cultural contexts: In a late-modern, Scandinavian society ‘honour’ will strike most as antediluvian, quaint, ridiculous even; but in Pakistan or Afghanistan, at least in certain segments in those countries, it is probably safe to assume that things look slightly different. And then there’s the problem of crimes named ‘honour killings’ e.g., that bizarre oxymoron whereby an attempt is made to legitimize killing an innocent woman. To be sure, all of these descriptions are quite normative. My point is, that I will suspend those considerations for the sake of carrying through my line of argument here, and based on the belief that what ‘honour’ is made to mean in all of the works analysed above, is shorthand for unsuccessfully trying to resolve a crisis of recognition by reverting to forms of symbolic or physical violence.

\textsuperscript{19} It is worth pointing out, that all of these figures (Don Quijote, Rambo, Kierkegaard, Al-Qaeda) are, in manifold ways, nomadic, itinerant, vagabondages, non-sedentary. First of all, this would appear to make them particularly amenable to a Deleuze and Guattari-style ‘nomadic’ reading, but as well underscores the point I am trying to establish, namely that the unresolved struggle for recognition propels the subject into a belligerent quest for ‘honour’.
ing into town, and immediately classifies him as a stray vagabond, an uncouth, subaltern subject deemed highly undesirable in the small town of Hope. This is central, for ‘Hope’ (the naming of the town is glaringly symbolic, and deliberately ironic) is, before all else, a topological scene of recognition: a place, where Rambo might in principle have settled down, gained a job, got a family, achieved a minimal dosage of recognition, and thereby reinserted himself into American society as a so-called proper, well-functioning subject. Now the fact that the sheriff offers him a lift, only to drop him off outside of town; compounded by the fact that once he stubbornly returns, he is subjected to a series of humiliating manoeuvres (he is made to undress at the local police station, he is showered down by a water hose, etc.), cause the cessation of apathy and resignation in Rambo, and an explosion of rage and violence erupts.20

Likewise for Don Quijote, who only becomes well when, at the end of the second volume, he renounces the search for honour, and replace it with a willingness to receive ordinary respect or mundane acknowledgment: ‘I was mad, and now I am sane; I was Don Quijote de la Mancha and now, as I have said, I am Alonso Quijano the Good. I pray that my repentance, and my honesty, may return me to the good opinion your graces once held of me’ (…) The scribe was present, and remarked that in none of the books of chivalry he had read had there ever been a knight errant who died in his bed (…) as had Don Quijote, who, amid universal sympathy, and tears from everyone who was with him, surrendered his spirit – that is to say, he died’ (1999, 744–745).21

Let us note that Don Quijote finally leaves the zone of knighthood and honour, he lets go of the pompous and pretentious title, and what he receives in turn is ‘universal sympathy’, and he can therefore die redeemed, and with a crisis of recognition that is properly resolved – unlike poor John Rambo.

In addition, we should take heed of the fact that there is a subtle theological subtext in both narrative universes, that of Cervantes, and that of Stallone. Formally

20. In the local context of the film itself, there are very clear indications that Rambo suffers from PTSD (hallucinations and flashbacks, e.g.), but while acknowledging this is obviously the case, I want to make the argument that a merely clinical and diagnostic approach doesn’t take us very far, in terms of comprehending the problematic of a crisis of acknowledgment. Brushing aside Cervantes and Rambo as nothing but patients, would seriously underestimate the very real problems to do with the social logic of recognition.

21. Amidst the narrator’s consistently ironic tone, we should observe the fact that Don Quijote is returned to an un-heroic everyday stratum of the life-world; in that stratum, any notion of being a martyr, a prophet, a knight or a hero, is simply senseless. These figurations of subjectivity need never be summoned, for Alonso Quijano dies submerged in ‘universal sympathy’. Quijano is then remarkably unremarkable.
speaking, the last scene in *Don Quijote* has the Catholic structure of sacrament, confession and redemption, so that all is again well with Alonso Quijano. And in David Morell’s 1972-novel\(^2\), on which the film is based, Rambo is described as something of a Jesus-figure, a messianic ghost left in the lurch; he sacrificed himself for the glory of the American nation, and got nothing in return. Which very much brings us to the Danish philosopher-poet Søren Aabye Kierkegaard.

**COPENHAGEN, DENMARK 1843**

It is now time to broach two texts by Kierkegaard, *Frygt og bæven* and *Øjeblikket*. In the one, Kierkegaard depicts Abraham as ‘Troens riddere\(^2\)’, ‘the knight of faith’, as opposed to e.g. the hero of infinite resignation, the one who feels that he has to give up everything to accept the absolute reign of God. Being the knight of faith means – in contradistinction – having endorsed *credo quia absurdum*, and thereby having accepted that the inaccessible objective always justifies the means: ‘Men Abraham troede og tvivlede ikke, han troede det Urimelige (…) Men han tvivlede ikke, han skuede ikke ængstelig til højre eller venstre, han udfordrede ikke Himlen ved sine bønner’ (1962, 22–23). This is why Abraham – on Kierkegaard’s interpretation – can commence bringing his only son to Mount Moria without a moment’s hesitation, and without ever feeling that he gives up on anything, because he has already been given all, and therefore never lost anything.

Even the most superficial reading of Kierkegaard, however, quickly reveals a chilling similarity between Kierkegaard’s knight of faith, and the fundamentalist terrorist: Both are willing to sacrifice all in the name of an allegedly higher cause.\(^2\) And in *Øjeblikket*, those last belligerent texts, ‘flyveblade’, launched against Den Danske Folkekirke, the Danish people’s church, Kierkegaard time and again underscores the likeness between a true Christian, and a soldier on a rampage. What emerges in Kierkegaard’s brand of devout, late-protestant theology, is an implicit sense of honour tied to absolute and unmitigated devotion to a stern and capricious God.


\(^2\) It would perhaps be potentially interesting to pit Alberto Toscano’s *Fanaticism*, Verso 2010, against the general schema I draw on here, in that Toscano attempts to argue that fanaticism is a very central part of Western enlightenment itself, and thus does not allow for a simplistic, mutually exclusionary and bipolar reading.
But why this fanatical fury on the part of Kierkegaard? I suspect that part of the psycho-social reason has to do with the fact that acknowledgment was being withheld from Kierkegaard. All of Kierkegaard’s writings on religion had been more or less ignored by the people’s church, he had to finance the publication of all of his writings himself, and Kierkegaard was seen as a highly gifted, but at the same time whimsical and flamboyant person, definitely not bishop-material (as was his brother). As well, when Kierkegaard wrote Øjeblikket he was at his wit’s end, in that the significant fortune he had inherited from his father was all spent, and hardly anything was left. So we might harbour suspicions that Kierkegaard was embroiled in a crisis of acknowledgment, and that his obsession with the honour and glory of Abraham, was somehow related to this crisis, or even coming out of it.25

Kierkegaard held the ‘spidsborger’, the bourgeois, in great contempt, but why exactly? One possible motive being that the bourgeois had settled for a wife and children, a family, a business, a busy life. Notwithstanding his early fondness for the ethical stance26, in his writings scathing comments on the ludicrousness of the bourgeois are to be found in great numbers. The preeminent bourgeois hypocrite was, in Kierkegaard’s view, the officially sanctioned state priest; all of the ones who had ignored or brushed aside Kierkegaard’s writings as merely peculiar, and who had attained a solid amount of acknowledgment in all of Honneth’s registers.

This brings us to the second hypothesis: If the crisis of acknowledgment and the ensuing struggle for recognition is not resolved, or even dealt with, a series of warfare is launched. Don Quijote immediately begins a string of minor and ridiculous battles and skirmishes in Cervantes’ novel, Rambo launches a hysterical large-scale attack on the town of ‘Hope’ and its hopeless sheriff, including the National Guard; and Kierkegaard ventured forth into an increasingly aggressive, futile and bizarre battle against the Danish people’s church, culminating in Øjeblikket, and then collapsed and died.

There is thus an odd and thought-provoking relation of similarity between Don Quijote, Rambo and Kierkegaard: their obsession with ‘honour’ comes out of an unresolved crisis of acknowledgment, and ‘honour’ signals the initiation of a series of warfare, battles, belligerence of all kinds. Let us note as well that they are

25. To be sure, this is potentially a rather reductive take on the Kierkegaardian crisis; quite evidently, there are central religious and philosophical concerns at stake for Kierkegaard, but at the same time, I would claim, there is this striking, temporal and perhaps causal relation between withheld recognition, and belligerent quest.

all single and childless, and hold no offices; thus, they are situated on the margins of established society. Their modes of warfare are internally different (Don Quijote uses a horse and a lance, Rambo a knife and various machineguns, and Kierkegaard pen and word), but they converge in attacking civil society, and in setting up a physically or symbolically violent scene that revolves round a fight for ‘honor’.

Which brings us to the third hypothesis: the launch of warfare betokens the production and establishment of affects in machines of assemblage. What happens every time, is that the single, isolated individual, the one endowed with emotions of humiliation, rage or boredom, even, stages a network of steeply rising intensities in a cluster of machinic assemblages.

In the case of Don Quijote, this not only involves re-naming himself and Dulcinea and his horse, but as well turning windmills into dragons, and so forth; belligerent affects suddenly circulate in a series of rapid intensities. The lone figure of Rambo, who in the opening scenes wander into ‘Hope’, is brought into intensive connection with the deputies, the woods in North-western America (in one famous scene he completely blends into a tree), a helicopter, the national guard, and so forth. Likewise, in Kierkegaard, the church institution is turned into a behemoth, a Leviathan, and the citizens of Copenhagen are involuntarily enmeshed in the assemblage by virtue of receiving all of these ‘flyveblade’, Øjeblikket.

So the hypothesis I propose is, that in all these instances, and setting aside (obviously) for a moment the many distinctive differences between Cervantes, Rambo and Kierkegaard, damaged or weakened acknowledgment-emotions are turned into intensive affects, and affects are organized as a series of belligerent, machinic assemblages chasing the production of ‘honor’.

**ENZENSBERGER’S RADICAL LOSERS, 2005**

To the extent that there is some heuristic gain to be had from these hypotheses, we are now in a position to move on to Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State. And I’ll open this final and fourth visit with a brief detour, by way of an enlistment of Hans-Magnus Enzensberger’s 2005-description of the so-called ‘radical loser’.27

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In Enzensberger’s view, the mostly male soldiers, killers and terrorists in Syria, in Paris, in Molenbeek, are all descendants of Dostojevskyi’s man from the underground. As opposed to the ‘normal’, non-radical loser, who resigns and accepts his defeat, or the victim (who may demand satisfaction), or the defeated (preparing for next round) – the ‘radical’ loser has completely and irreversibly interiorized the judgment of his peers, has actively imbibed the idea that he is a loser, and nothing but a loser. But he carefully keeps this a secret to the world at large. 

Out of this point zero-position, this nadir of non-recognition, anti-recognition even, comes an unstable, highly volatile condition. Oscillating between self-hatred, the sense that his life is utterly worthless, and megalomania, the desire to become a master over life and death. So initially, he literally isolates himself, or enters into a mental crypt.

Enzensberger remarks that modernity has accelerated the production of this type of loser: ‘Over the past two centuries, the more successful societies have (…) democratized the struggle for recognition and awakened expectations of equality, which they are unable to fulfil. And at the same time, they have made sure that inequality is constantly demonstrated to all of the planet’s inhabitants round the clock on every television channel. As a result, with every stage of progress, people’s capacity for disappointment has increased accordingly’ (2005, 3). Enzensberger add that: ‘What the loser is obsessed with is a comparison that never works in his favour (…) The irritability of the loser increases with every improvement that he notices in the lot of others’ (2005, 3). The radical loser unconsciously begins to look around for some semi-ideological program that might legitimize and channel his feelings of impotence and rage for revenge.

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28. Enzensberger’s typology is quite hasty; but concerning a further reflection on these types, it might be worthwhile to draw on the work of Simon Critchley, particularly his Infinitely Demanding, Verso 2007, examining the consequences of a sense of disappointment and loss, and the ways in which an active and a passive nihilism might arise as part of a set of responses to that. Critchley then goes on to – plausibly – suggest the formal structure of an ethical reaction that far surpasses the blind alley of nihilism. The problem being, self-evidently, that Enzensberger’s radical losers are not very receptive readers of a work like Critchley’s.

29. We may term persistent discursive stigmatization and vilification a sort of ‘anti-recognition’, a systematic work seeking to degrade a given group of subjects.

30. Cf. for a pertinent enquiry into the problem of the mental crypt, Nicolas Abraham, The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonomy. University of Minnesota Press, new ed., 2005. Sadly, Omar Mateen, the Florida-killer; Larossi Aballa, the recent Paris-killer; and Thomas Mair, who killed British politician Jo Cox, all would seem to fit into the pattern described by Enzensberger. The only, and quite disturbing, difference being that these were not Arab or African, but so-called ‘homegrown’ murderers.
Enzensberger dryly observes that there is no shortage of such programs. And next points out that the radical loser is caught in a vicious circle between two opposed notions: ‘It’s all my fault’, and ‘it’s all the fault of the others’. Note that in both cases all forms of acknowledgment is withheld, and the mutually intensifying quest for honour commences. The only solution, on the description of Enzensberger, is for the radical loser to simultaneously destroy himself and all the others. ‘Glory’ or ‘honour’ then becomes names that the active nihilist might bestow on his rampage of destruction in order to lend it a glorifying aspect.

But first, quite often he’ll enter a ‘loser-collective’, headed by a charismatic super-loser: from Hitler to Osama Bin-Laden, the logic of the inferiority complex runs its course; a heinous scapegoat is found, the Jews or America, or the social-democrats, or immigrants, or some other suitable generality; and the scene is set for apocalypse.

According to Enzensberger, radical losers have difficulties distinguishing between mutilation and self-mutilation, and unfortunately so-called ‘globalization’ has spawned a particularly nasty affective and machinic assemblage of loser-collectives. Al-Qaeda’s, and now Daesh/The Islamic State’s (per)versions of Islam, are characterized by 1, a fusion, or amalgamation between religious, political and social motives; 2, a rhizomatic network structure of organization; 3, the eclectic appropriation of a rich pre-history, borrowing rhetoric and strategies of self-staging from all sorts of antecedent terrorist groups in Europe, 4, not least an extreme deftness in the use of all current social media, and 5, lastly, the strategic use of suicide attacks.31

The backdrop for all of this is, I contend along with Enzensberger, a pervasive, virulent sense of loss and humiliation in the Arab world, and in parts of the African continent. Enzensberger: ‘The Arab world’s sense of pride is hurt not only by military inferiority to the West. Far worse is the impact of intellectual and material dependency.’ (2005, 8). Every Arab is heavily reliant on Western technology, and there has been a significant brain drain from the Arab world; in addition, leadership is most often despotic and closed in on itself. All of this creates a double-bind of attraction and revulsion in the migrant, and in the average Arab, and it this ubiquitous sense of shame, irritation and dependency that enables the formation of virtual death-cults, such as IS. Unfortunately, their efforts lethally damage the prospects of the Arab world and of Islam in general, and Enzensberger ends by

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31. It might be fruitful to look into Talal Asad’s *On Suicide Bombing*, Columbia UP 2007, in that Asad questions the stark pitting of Western, allegedly just war, against the vilified acts of suicide bombing. Asad’s point is not that terrorism is under any condition morally legitimate, but that the contrast between just (state)war and terrorism is far from straightforward.
prosaically noting that: ‘In a global society that constantly produces new losers, this is something we will have to live with’ (2005, 10).

SOMEWHERE IN THE DESERT OF PAKISTAN, POST 9-11

By way of entering into the final stages of these brief encounters, it is now time to visit a few passages in the writings coming out of Al-Qaeda.

First, this is a quote from Osama Bin-Laden’s open letter to the Americans in 2002, titled ‘Why We are Fighting You’. This ‘letter’ followed in the wake of other letters from a group of American intellectuals, and then Saudi-Arabic intellectuals, all based on a distinction between Islam proper, and militant Islamism.

Bin-Laden answers by way of emphasizing: ‘the *Umma* of honour and respect’, and quoting the Koran: ‘But honour, power and glory belong to Allah, and to his Messenger (Muhammad), and to his believers (63:8). So do not become weak (against your enemy), nor be sad; you will overcome if you are indeed true believers (3:139)’. It should be noted that Bin-Laden explicitly invokes the terms ‘honour’ and ‘glory’, and as well quotes the term ‘enemies’ from the Koran: this is the asymmetric statement of a radical loser, forming a part of the machinic assemblage, Enzensberger termed a ‘loser-collective’, and actively trying to raise the intensity of belligerent affects, and as well attempting to avoid any sign of compromise or mutual understanding.

Later, in 2006, an audio-taped message from Bin-Laden once again was addressed to all Americans, and bizarrely contained a ‘truce offer’, among other things featuring this revealing passage: ‘You have tried preventing us from leading an honourable life, but you will not be able to prevent us from a noble death’. The implicit assumption, in the midst of the pompous rhetoric and the conspicuous assumption of a zero-sum game at work, is that since there is no ‘honour’ to be had in life, the only remaining possibility of gaining honour is in death. In passing, let us note that this is an age-old, pre-modern schema or pattern being revived,

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33. It’s interesting that on one reading the US and Europe never acknowledged Al-Qaeda as an enemy proper, cf. Carl Schmitt’s early work (*Begriff des Politischen*), this would be the avoidance of the political: insisting that the ‘war on terrorism’ is not political, but merely a matter of removing a virus from the social body. Accordingly, Osama Bin-Laden’s approaches became more and more desperate and pathetic; No one was ready to acknowledge him as an enemy proper, and his own suspicion of being merely a loser was strengthened.
a schema that would be in full flourish in some of the chivalric novels Don Quijote
read\textsuperscript{35}, e.g.

My third example is taken from the ideological figure behind Al-Qaeda, Ayman
Al-Zawahiri, and was part of a film being broadcast by Al-Sahb Media Produc-
tions in 2005, titled ‘Wills of the Knights of the London Raid’. Let us note that the
title of knighthood is explicitly made use of. In it, Al-Zawahiri berates the Queen
of England, and in passing state this: ‘Let Bush, Blair, and those that march behind
their Crusader-Zionist banner, know that the honourable mujahidin of Islam have
made a covenant with their Lord to fight them until victory or martyrdom’.\textsuperscript{36} First,
what we might term the rebirth, or re-production, of theological affects and termi-
nology appear striking; secondly, let us register an implicit, but distinctive sense
of insecurity: ‘to fight them until victory or martyrdom’ (my underlining) implies
that the speaker is far from sure of victory, and would hasten to add that death is
indeed ‘honourable’ and glorious.

All of these traits and examples serve to show the precision of Enzensberger’s
analysis of the radical loser. It also seems to confirm some of the hypotheses of
this article: that the issue of ‘honour’ only ever arises out of an unresolved crisis
of acknowledgment; that this typically launches a series of belligerence, or what
Deleuze and Guattari would call the ‘war machine’\textsuperscript{37}; thirdly, that this machine
takes the form of turning emotions into intensified, quasi-theological affects, and
into ‘machinic assemblages’ – all of the pent-up emotions of isolated, individual
losers are gathered together in the machinic collective of the terrorist rhizome,
being produced by and producing belligerent affects.

\textbf{TOWARDS THE LIBERATING LOSS OF HONOUR}

Don Quijote was ridiculous, and Cervantes was deeply ironic. Yet, in the midst of
all that ridiculousness and comic insignificance, he nonetheless served as a formal
matrix for what later erupted in Rambo, in Kierkegaard, and lastly in Al-Qaeda
and The Islamic State. This obviously prompts us to reflect further on how this
intensive re-production of belligerent affects between politics and aesthetics
might be dampened, lessened, if not eliminated. Enzensberger kept a cool, cynical
head, but perhaps Enzensberger’s phlegm is slightly too defeatist and fatalist: Is

\textsuperscript{35}. And in the Icelandic sagas, \textit{Chanson de Roland}, etc. The link between warfare and ‘honour’ is
evidently very strong, and predominantly pre-modern. The interesting thing is, that notions of
‘honour’ would seem to persist.

\textsuperscript{36}. \textit{The Al-Qaeda Reader}, op.cit., p. 239.

\textsuperscript{37}. In \textit{A Thousand Plateaus}, op.cit., pp. 387–467.
there really nothing at all to be done, other than resign and accept? The implicit common-sense argument of this article will have been, that working towards a less unjust world possibly would weaken the ominous nexus between the frustrated desire for acknowledgment and belligerent affects. In that case, the psychopolitical ideal would be an uneventful, a-heroic, honour-less society, but at the same time a society based on a far more even, global distribution of acknowledgment and justice. The problem is, that this is in a sense far too self-evident, and too glib. Part of the problem is the barrage of obstacles, psychological, historical, economical, technological, that would seem to hinder any easy form of solution. Don Quijote repented on his deathbed; Rambo was salvaged by his old superior; and Kierkegaard was posthumously redeemed and canonized. But what to do with all the little men, all the radical losers seeking out ‘honour’ in future skirmishes? Producing a societal state in which we could safely say that we had now left behind honour, that we came after honour, constitutes a minor, utopian ideal. But to uphold and nourish that ideal, is perhaps more important than ever.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


