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A Literary Aesthetics of War Crime

RAFE MCGREGOR
Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK

In order to develop a literary aesthetics of war crime, I examine the phenomenon of moral immunity in military memoir. Using three paradigmatic examples of memoirs of unjust wars characterised by the routine perpetration of war crimes, I argue that moral immunity is achieved by means of three literary devices: literary irresponsibility, ethical peerage, and moral economy. I then employ the proposed literary aesthetics of war crime to provide an answer to the perennial question of the relationship between literature and morality as well as to two specific instantiations of this question, the value interaction debate in literary aesthetics and the ethics of reading in literary theory. My conclusion is that the literary aesthetics of war crime demonstrates both that there is a systematic relationship between aesthetic value and moral value and that there is no systematic relationship between literary ambiguity and moral uncertainty.

Keywords: Autobiography; colonialism; moral value; philosophy of literature; war.

1. *Introduction*

The value interaction debate and the ethical turn in criticism both address the perennial question of the relationship between art and morality, the first from the perspective of analytic aesthetics and the second from the perspective of literary theory. The value interaction debate has not been restricted to literature, although it has been primarily concerned with works of narrative art and, in consequence, literature and film (McGregor 2014: 450). As one might expect from the distinct approaches, literary aesthetics has focused on the specific issue of whether a moral defect in a work is (also) an aesthetic defect while literary theory has explored the ethics of reading, the relationship be-

tween literary responsiveness and ethical responsibility in the reception of texts, more broadly.[1] Where the relation between moral and literary defects has thus far been debated almost entirely in short form and almost exclusively restricted to fiction, the relationship between responsiveness and responsibility has been explored in both articles and monographs and included both fiction and nonfiction.[2] Tess McNulty (2018: 384) notes that although the value interaction debate and ethical turn in criticism were contemporaneous, the philosophical and critical movements have remained almost entirely independent of each other for two decades. She characterises the former as examining the relationship between aesthetic reception and ethical thinking in terms of the success (or failure) of works to produce their intended effects and the latter as examining that relationship in terms of the distinction between ambiguity and edification on the one hand and didacticism and indoctrination on the other hand.

McNulty proposes a rapprochement of literary aesthetics and literary theory by employing tools from the former to debunk a conclusion in the latter. She uses the analytic concepts of uptake, failed uptake, and imaginative resistance to argue that—contrary to received critical wisdom—there is no systematic relationship between either ambiguity and uncertainty or between didacticism and conformity. In other words, McNulty demonstrates that sophisticated ambiguity does not necessarily produce the moral uncertainty characteristic of the ethical knowledge conveyed by literature (and, similarly, that simplistic didacticism does not necessarily produce the conformity associated with literature as a vehicle for politics). There is no corresponding received aesthetic wisdom, although the recent history of the value interaction debate has been dominated by two theories, moderate moralism and robust immoralism. The former, with which Noël Carroll (1996: 236) initiated the debate, holds that a moral defect can be an aesthetic defect in a work of literature. The latter, introduced by A.W. Eaton (2012: 290), holds that a moral defect can be an aesthetic merit in a work of literature. While the positions appear compatible Eaton is clear that they are not, as they both argue for a systematic relation between specific kinds of moral defect and aesthetic value—reaching conclusions in opposite directions.

My approach is firmly anchored in literary aesthetics, but my method involves the extension of its analytic concepts to a practice or genre to which it is not usually applied, i.e. to nonfiction.[3] In this particular combination of approach and method, I take my lead from Sarah Worth

[1] For the purpose of this paper, I assume that there is a strong relation between aesthetic value and literary value (value *qua* literature), i.e. aesthetic value is at the very least a significant component of literary value.

[2] The two publications that initiated the respective debates are exemplary in this regard; see: Carroll (1996) and Miller (1987).

[3] For paradigmatic examples of these two approaches to fiction, see: Lamarque and Olsen (1994) and Friend (2012).

(2017: 39–67), who shifts the focus of the debate about the values of literature from its previous emphasis on the values of fiction to an examination of what is distinctive about nonfiction. One of the consequences of this shift is to prioritise the distinction between narrative and non-narrative representation over the distinction between fictional and nonfictional representation and while my literary aesthetics of war crime is not reliant on this priority, I do endorse it. In the course of her argument for the value of reading fiction, Worth (2017: 101) uses memoir as a case study of a blended genre: 'Memoir shares qualities of both fiction (because of its literary style, prose, character developments, and plot formations) and nonfiction (because it is all supposed to be true).' I shall also focus on memoir, specifically on military memoir. Where McNulty integrates literary aesthetics with literary theory by employing analytic concepts from the former to debunk a conclusion in the latter, I employ analytic concepts to life writing, a practice or genre that is standardly explored by means of literary theory. My proposal for a literary aesthetics of war crime will then provide a solution to both the value interaction debate and the ethics of reading, as well as a characterisation of the relationship between literature and morality more generally.

2. *Moral immunity*

The literal meaning of *biography* is life-writing and *life writing* is a term employed to describe practices that include, but are not restricted to, the writing of letters, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, and biographies. Hermione Lee (2009: 5) uses the following definition of biography as her starting point: 'Biography is the story of a person told by someone else.' Linda Anderson (2011: 6–8) traces the first use of 'autobiography' to the end of the eighteenth century and notes that a hierarchy of self-representation was quickly established in which autobiographies were regarded as more valuable than memoirs in virtue of their greater seriousness, which was in turn a function of prioritising teleology over chronology. Laura Marcus (1994: 3) identifies the greater value associated with autobiographies over confessional writing and memoir on the basis that the former are '"sincere"', understood as exploring the totality of the self. She notes that autobiography is a fundamentally hybrid and unstable genre, bridging divides between subject and object, private and public, fiction and fact, and literature and history. This is reflected in the many varieties and experiments with autobiography that have occurred since the term was first used, from William Wordsworth's *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem* (1805), a blank verse poem of fourteen books, to J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime* (2009), an autobiography that combines fiction with fact and is written in the third person.

I delineate autobiographies as, paradigmatically: (1) narrative representations, (2) narrated in the first person, (3) with an identity of (a)

author, (b) narrator, and (c) protagonist, (4) all of whom are real people. Within this genre, I conceive of memoir as a subcategory that typically shares all four of the above characteristics and typically represents a part rather than the whole of the author's life, in consequence of which it may lack the seriousness (teleological) and sincerity (exploratory) associated with autobiography. John Gibson (2012: 109) describes autobiography as 'one of the last unexplored frontiers in literary aesthetics' and I concur with this assessment. I have selected military memoirs as an especially ethically problematic kind of memoir and selected three extreme cases, where the wars involved are unjust and where the authors are either active participants in or passive witnesses to war crimes. I do not offer a definition of unjust war, but take the colonial conflict in George Robert Elford's *Devil's Guard* (1971) and the white supremacist wars in Peter McAleese's *No Mean Soldier: The Autobiography of a Professional Fighting Man* (1993) to be uncontroversially unjust. I take the Iraq War in James Ashcroft's *Making a Killing: The Explosive Story of a Hired Gun in Iraq* (2006) unjust in virtue of the widespread scepticism concerning its legality (Chilcot 2016). I take war crimes to include any act in breach one of any of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 or their three Additional Protocols of 1977 and 2005 (ICRC 2020).

Devil's Guard may be the most disclaimed book ever, beginning with a Publisher's Note that distances the publisher from the point of view expressed in the memoir and an Introduction in which the author, George Robert Elford (a pseudonym), abdicates from any moral responsibility for reproducing the story of the narrator and protagonist, Hans Josef Wagemueller (also a pseudonym), a junior officer in the *Waffen-SS* in the Second World War and in the *Légion étrangère* in the First Indochina War. The memoir is a curious and complex mélange of fiction and fact. On the one hand, the book has been widely denounced as Neo-Nazi fiction and its two sequels were published as war fiction (Elford 1988, 1991; Gibbons-Neff 2017). On the other hand, there is evidence both that the Foreign Legion allowed the many German volunteers to serve together and that fifty of the original members of the *36. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS* (Wagemueller's unit, thinly-disguised in the memoir) not only survived the war, but escaped prosecution for war crimes (Windrow 2018; Ingrao 2006). The memoir demonstrates an undeniable familiarity with the operational tactics of the 36th *Waffen-SS* Division and there are many passages whose authenticity is verified by more rigorous military histories (see: Fall 1961). As such, I shall treat the memoir in the same manner as the other two while recognising that some of the content is likely fictional.

No Mean Soldier is closer to an autobiography than a memoir, beginning with Peter McAleese's birth in 1942 and chronicling the next fifty years of his life. I shall focus on his military service for two white supremacist regimes from 1977 to 1983, for Ian Smith's Rhode-

sian Front government during the Rhodesian Bush War and then for P. W. Botha's National Party government during the South African Border War (chapters six to eight of twelve). McAleese is credited as the author 'with Mark Bles' and copyright is shared by the two. As the use of his name disqualifies Bles from being a ghostwriter, I take the relationship between Bles and McAleese to be similar to that between Elford and Wagemueller (and Ashcroft and Thurlow below), i.e. the former was responsible for the form of the work and the latter for its content. *No Mean Soldier* should not be confused with *Beyond No Mean Soldier: The Explosive Recollection of A Special Forces Operator!* (McAleese 2015), which is actually a second edition of the autobiography. McAleese joined the Parachute Regiment of the British Army at the age of seventeen and became one of the youngest men to pass selection for the Special Air Service (SAS) a mere two years later. He was dismissed from the SAS twice for drunken brawling, completed his military service in 1969, and received three custodial sentences for intimate partner violence over the next seven years. He began a career as mercenary in 1976, fighting with the infamous Colonel Callan in the Angolan War of Independence, as a foreign volunteer in the Rhodesian Security Forces and the South African Army, and as a mercenary again in Colombia from 1988 to 1989, where he was contracted to assassinate Pablo Escobar.

Making a Killing is a memoir of James Ashcroft's (a pseudonym) work as a contractor for a UK-based private military company (PMC) called Spartan (a disguised name) from September 2003 to March 2005. He is the product of Winchester School and the University of Oxford and served in the British Army as an infantry officer from 1992 to 1998. The narrative begins with Ashcroft in his mid-thirties, giving up a career in law in the City of London to satisfy his longing to return to the adventure of military life. In Baghdad, Ashcroft joins a team of five other mercenaries, all ex-soldiers in their forties: Seamus and Les, former senior non-commissioned officers in the British Army; and Hendriks, Kobus, and Etienne, former special forces operators in the South African Army. He completes three contracts with the team over the next eighteen months: providing personal security for foreign journalists, escorting oil tankers from Kuwait to Baghdad, and training a security force to protect the city's water supply. Ashcroft and his professional collaborator, Clifford Thurlow, published a sequel, *Escape from Baghdad: First Time Was For the Money, This Time It's Personal*, in 2009. Unlike the prequel, *Escape from Baghdad* is lacking in authenticity and I take the pair of books to follow the pattern of the *Devil's Guard* series, i.e. whatever the relationship between narrative and history in the first, it is substantially looser in the second.

In spite of—or perhaps, more accurately, in consequence of—the criminal wars and war crimes represented in each of these memoirs, the authors (by which I refer to Wagemueller, McAleese, and Ashcroft

respectively) seek some kind of acquittal, amnesty, or absolution from their readers. This can be understood as a straightforward desire to avoid being judged as morally abhorrent, which seems a minimal requirement if the reader is to accept the author's invitation to the read the narrative *qua* memoir, i.e. with an interest in the life of the author as opposed to a historical interest in the wars represented or a criminological interest in the crimes represented. I shall call this authorial intention, that reader engagement with the work is characterised by some degree of identification, empathy, or sympathy, *moral immunity*. In the remainder of this paper, I argue that moral immunity is achieved by the deployment of three distinct devices: literary irresponsibility, ethical peerage, and moral economy. In literary aesthetic terminology, these devices are all aesthetic merits employed in a morally defective manner, i.e. inventive design features intended to diffuse moral responsibility. In literary critical terminology, the devices are all sophisticated instantiations of ambiguity employed to a simplistic didactic end, i.e. inventive uses of language intended to justify white (or Western) supremacism. McNulty (2018: 384) notes that sophisticated ambiguity has standardly been associated with modernist or canonical texts so its perhaps surprising appearance in these memoirs evinces Gibson's claim about the lack of philosophical exploration of autobiography.

3. *Literary irresponsibility*

In 'Fiction and the Nonfiction Novel', Peter Lamarque (2014: 83–84) establishes a taxonomy of the relationship between fiction and nonfiction in the novel. His taxonomy identifies six categories of novel, including paradigmatic fiction, paradigmatic nonfiction, and the nonfiction novel. Paradigmatic nonfiction includes biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs, which may be more or less literary in the relationship between their form and content. 'Nonfiction novel' was coined by Truman Capote to describe his *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences* (1966) and presents nonfictional content in the form of a novel, i.e. using the literary techniques associated with paradigmatic fiction in order to increase the work's impact on readers (Lamarque 2014: 88). Lamarque's (2014: 98) objection to nonfiction novels is the moral irresponsibility of the authors:

> The "nonfiction novelist" cannot have it both ways: cannot claim the high ground of the serious reporter or historian and also the imaginativeness and inventiveness of the novelist. There is a moral dimension here as well as a theoretical tension between practices.

Lamarque criticises authors such as Capote, Norman Mailer, and Tom Wolfe for writing realist novels in the tradition of Tobias Smollett, Charles Dickens, and Evelyn Waugh (paradigmatic fiction), but claiming the accuracy of the representation of reality associated with biography, autobiography, and memoir (paradigmatic nonfiction). This

critique can be extended beyond the specific criticism of writing one type of novel in the guise of another to a more general literary device, towards which Lamarque (2014: 103) gestures in his summary of his argument:

> where authors deliberately conceal their intentions, apparently inviting response under one set of norms (e.g., serious reporting) while hiding behind the privileges of another (e.g. literary licence), then, as we saw, the question of moral responsibility inevitably comes up.

I shall refer to the deliberate misrepresentation of literary content for the purpose of inviting response under an inappropriate set of norms as *literary irresponsibility*.

Devil's Guard is a eulogy for National Socialism, an apologia for colonialism, and a polemic for the escalation of United States' involvement in the Second Indochina War. By the time of its publication, the waging of that war was two years into its Vietnamization phase, an exit strategy that was justified on the basis of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam being strong enough to win the war on its own (Wiest 2002: 50–51). This context is significant as there is a much closer relationship between the military and political aspects of *Devil's Guard* than the other two examples, which for the most part focus on the trials, tensions, and thrills of contact with the enemy. The polemical intention behind the novel is literally rather than figuratively staged in the twelfth chapter (of eighteen), titled 'Dialogue with an Agitator' (Elford 1971: 221). Wagemueller describes a raid on a *Viêt Minh* village in which sixteen insurgents have been found drunk and incapable. Following the battalion's standard operating procedure, the Legionnaires execute the insurgents, bayoneting them to death while they are asleep to avoid wasting ammunition. When a Chinese commissar and his *Viêt Minh* deputy are captured while trying to escape, Wagemueller decides to take the advice of one of his officers, Erich Schulze, who suggests that a public debate with the prisoners will provide an entertaining interlude from the routine of operations. The bulk of the chapter (eleven of fourteen pages) comprises a discussion in which Schulze and his comrade, Bernard Eisner, engage the two commissars in a superficial (but nonetheless serious) elenchus aimed at proving the political, ethical, and economic superiority of capitalism over communism. The Chinese commissar, Kwang, is allowed to expound on the merits of communism at length and is even provided with a drink of water to facilitate further pontification. Schulze brings the debate to a close once he feels he has refuted Kwang's argument and honours his word by releasing both commissars from custody.

While the debate is in progress, Wagemueller reflects on its impact (Elford 1971: 232):

> The villagers listened in utter silence; their faces betrayed no emotion—only alertness. Some of the elder men were listening so intently that their mouths hung open and their eyes appeared transfixed on Schulze. I was

> not sure if all that Erich [Schulze] said had reached the people, and if so, how deeply his words had penetrated into their simple minds. I was sure of only one thing, that never before had they witnessed someone challenging the Viet Minh platform openly, in front of people. They had never heard someone denouncing the holiest of the Communist prophets and everything they stood for. No one could ever call a Viet Minh leader a liar and live to tell the story. Besides, no French officer in Indochina had ever bothered to talk to *les sauvages* on equal terms, and certainly not about political or economic issues.

There are several unintended ironies in this passage, not the least of which is Wagemueller's criticism of his French comrades for referring to the Vietnamese as *savages* mere sentences after he himself has referred to them as *simple*. While the debate provides a curious interlude in a narrative that is otherwise almost completely focused on combat operations, it is important to recognise its significance within Wagemueller's narration. When the Legionnaires learn that the *Viêt Minh* subsequently executed thirty people in the village, Wagemueller speculates that it was because they had repeated Schulze's argument. For all the incongruity of the debate, it constitutes an explicit justification of the German presence in Vietnam. The incident is, in fact, a clear case of literary irresponsibility because notwithstanding the bookending of the debate between two sets of war crimes (the execution of the insurgents and the execution of the villagers), the dialogue is represented as a genuine and legitimate exploration of two opposing views. Indeed, as the debate progresses, it is easy to forget that the commissars are being interrogated at gunpoint, uttering what they believe to be their last words.

A recurring rhetorical strategy in military memoir is the use of humour to represent situations that are either terrifying, tragic, or both. This of course reflects the way in which soldiers and non-combatants deal with repeated exposure to the threat of death, permanent injury, and capture. The representation of terror or tragedy in a humorous manner deploys literary irresponsibility when the humour is used to characterise the events rather than the author's response to those events, i.e. when the reader is invited to find the events themselves rather than the author's response amusing. McAleese makes occasional use of humour in *No Mean Soldier*, particularly in the two chapters that deal with his service in the Rhodesian Security Forces. The most extended example of literary irresponsibility is his narration of an incident at the school in Bindura, a mining town in north-eastern Zimbabwe (1984) with a population of approximately eighteen thousand, at the end of 1979. Over a thousand white Rhodesians, all in formal evening dress and heavily-armed, descend on the school hall for the annual ball. Once the festivities are underway, two Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) insurgents make a token attack, firing a few rounds from their assault rifles. In response, drunken

guests charge from the hall, pouring fire into the darkness, causing the insurgents to withdraw. At the sound of a firefight, however, the Guard Force (heavily-armed African security guards), launch a counter-attack on what they assume are the insurgents, also firing into the darkness. The battle between the revellers and their guards lasts for hours, with hundreds of rounds fired. McAleese's (1993: 149) final observation is: 'Bindura looked as though it had been attacked by stormtroopers, with bullet strike on walls, smashed windows, shattered door, and riddled cars, but, once again, with the luck of the devil, no one was hurt.' The invitation to find the incident amusing belies the fact that it took place in a densely-populated urban area in a country that had already suffered fifteen years of civil war.

In *Making a Killing*, Ashcroft discusses both his personal motivation for joining Spartan and the political motivation behind the Coalition Force (CF) invasion of Iraq. I discuss the former in the next section. With respect to the latter, he is sceptical about the justification provided by the Bush and Blair administrations as well as the way in which the subsequent occupation is conducted by the Coalition Provision Authority (CPA), critical of both phases of the Iraq War (2003–2011), the invasion (March to May 2003) and the insurgency (2003–2011). PMCs such as Spartan were involved in the second phase and it was this phase that had the most devastating effect on the civilian population of Iraq: reliable estimates put civilian casualties during the invasion at approximately three thousand seven hundred and fifty, but those during the insurgency at approximately one hundred and twelve thousand four hundred and fifty (Conetta 2003; IBC 2020). Ashcroft is well aware of the dire management of the occupation, but nonetheless unequivocally frames the role of the PMCs in Iraq as serving the Iraqi population rather than the CPA. The following two statements are explicit, the first made in the first chapter (of twenty-six) and the second on the penultimate page of the Afterword:

> (1) 'We were *not* an occupying force safeguarding the second largest oil reserves on the planet. We were rebuilding Iraq to bring security to the Iraqis' (Ashcroft 2006: 6).
>
> (2) 'The water purification plants I protected prevented outbreaks of typhoid, cholera and gastroenteritis and have directly saved the lives of thousands of Muslim children, the sick and the elderly. PSDs [personal security details] don't get paid to kill people. We get paid to save lives and stay out of trouble' (Ashcroft 2006: 268).

In all three examples (Wagemueller, McAleese, and Ashcroft), literary content (interrogation at gunpoint, danger of civilian casualties, and sustaining the occupation) is deliberately misrepresented (as political debate, a hilarious near-miss, and public service) so as to invite response under a more morally-acceptable set of norms. The deployment of literary irresponsibility contributes to authorial moral immunity.

4. *Ethical peerage*

In the course of her explanation of rational response to ethical disagreement in 'Literature and Disagreement', Eileen John (2014: 239) contrasts epistemic peers with ethical peers. Using literary examples as evidence, she argues that conciliation is a rational response to an ethical peer, even when that peer is an epistemic inferior. Epistemic peerage is determined by a combination of possessing the relevant information and the relevant capabilities and the idea is that if two epistemic peers disagree, each has rational grounds for conciliation. In the epistemic case, conciliation is contrasted with steadfastness and involves an individual either withholding or lowering confidence in his or her initial belief. Ethical peerage is determined by a combination of possessing a capacity for ethical judgement and a comparable interest in the resolution of the disagreement. In the ethical case, conciliation is 'a matter of people revising their reasoning, or seeing the need to revise their reasoning, so that even if beliefs remain in place, whether and how those beliefs are grasped and supported has shifted in a conciliatory way' (John 2014: 240). The concept of an ethical peer is thus both more simple and more complex than that of an epistemic peer. It is simpler because all persons are assumed to be ethical subjects, i.e. to have the capacity for ethical judgement and moral responsibility. It is more complex because it presupposes the existence of an ethical community, which consists of ethical peers whose interests should be acknowledged and for whom the ethical judgement should make sense. Significantly, the status of ethical peerage is, unlike that of epistemic peerage, determined by a person's situation rather than their competence. In the relationship between reader and author, there is an initial assumption of *ethical peerage* and this assumption promotes conciliation rather than steadfastness in cases where the reader disagrees with the author's ethical judgement.

McAleese begins *No Mean Soldier* with two attempts to establish himself and his readers as peers in an ethical community, in order to gain the trust of his audience prior to disclosing his participation in criminal wars and perpetration of war crimes. The front matter of *No Mean Soldier* consists of a half title, title page, copyright, epigraph, contents, acknowledgements, and preface. The epigraph (which is very likely the first part of the book that will be read) and the preface (which is very brief, less than a single page) play a significant role in immediately and effectively inaugurating a relationship of ethical peerage between author and reader. I quote the epigraph, which is a quote from Theodore Roosevelt (quoted in McAleese 1993: v), in full:

> It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of the deed could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and short-

> coming, who does actually strive to do the deeds, who knows the great enthusiasms and spends himself in a worthy cause, who at best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly. His place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat.

The first three paragraphs of the preface are (McAleese 1993: 1):

> Before you start, I want to clear up a couple of points. I've always been a professional operational soldier and not, repeat not, a "career" soldier of the sort who wants only to keep his nose clean and worries about his promotion and pension prospects. In fact, I don't think I made a bad depot soldier when necessary, and maybe my turnout has been smarter than most. I wonder how many soldiers nowadays bother to iron creases into their combat uniforms? I've never soldiered just for profit. During all my service in three regular armies, my pay was unimpressive by modern standards. I went from one fighting zone to another but I receive no pension. Nor do I have funds from another source. I've done it for the adventure, because I have always been a professional soldier, and because I love a fight. I've never been happier than in action.

In the context of the memoir, the epigraph identifies the man (and in memoirs such as this it is always a *man*) of action as having greater moral significance than the critic. This greater moral significance is afforded in virtue of the value of action as opposed to inaction, of imperfect strife in service of a worthy cause. In other words, it is morally better to perpetrate some immorality in the course of striving for a moral end than to perpetrate no immorality because one does not pursue that end in the first place. McAleese is of course implying that he is the man of action and the reader the critic. Though the wars of white supremacism in which he fought hardly constitute a worthy cause they are represented as wars against communism, as part of the Cold War in which the majority of McAleese's readership at the time of publication would likely have been sympathetic to the West. One might in fact take this epigraph to be not merely establishing McAleese as an ethical peer in spite of the criminal wars and war crimes, but to be establishing him as an ethical superior, above and beyond the judgement of anyone who is not a man of action, who is a *cold and timid soul*. The epigraph serves to introduce the preface, in which McAleese explicitly establishes himself as the man of action (a category that excludes career soldiers). He addresses the reader both directly and in a direct manner, inviting reception as a frank, sincere, and most importantly honest interlocutor. As such, the two parts of the front matter of the memoir constitute a statement of and an appeal for ethical peerage.

Like McAleese, Ashcroft takes pains to portray himself as a scrupulously honest narrator. He (2006: 3) is candid about the financial rewards of his work as a mercenary, stating at the very beginning of the narrative: 'We were in Iraq for the $500 a day we earned.' The financial rewards are always described as only one of two reasons, however, the other being his longing for a return to the adventure of military life.

Ashcroft reflects on both the complexity of his motivation as well as the changes to that motivation at several places in the memoir. At the beginning of chapter two, he (2006: 31) makes a direct appeal for ethical peerage in a manner similar to McAleese, addressing what he correctly imagines will be the main moral reservation for readers, the fact that mercenaries are literally paid to kill:

> Civvies often ask if you enjoy killing people. They assume killing someone means wandering along the high street and slaughtering an innocent passby with a loving family at home. But it's not like that. The people I end up killing are always in the act of actively trying to kill me in some murderous, violent and agonising fashion. So, no, I don't enjoy killing people, but, yes, I feel great afterwards because I feel the initial and immediate exhilaration at realising that I am alive and that the man who tried to kill me has failed.

This deployment of ethical peerage at the individual level is of course matched by the deployment of literary irresponsibility at the organisational level (discussed in the previous section) such that Ashcroft represents himself as seeking dangerous, well-paid work for a humanitarian cause rather than killing for money or killing for pleasure.

Wagemuller is by far the most arrogant and unremorseful of the three authors and narrates with the bombast, hyperbole, and braggadocio of a very vainglorious yarn-spinner. Notwithstanding his attitude and the extreme violence in which the narrative revels, he is careful to establish some kind of ethical community between himself and his readership. The first paragraph of the Foreword (the first part of the book narrated by Wagemueller rather than Elford) contains the following passage (Elford 1971: 12):

> I was a *kopfjaeger*—"headhunter," as our comrades of the Wehrmacht used to call us. We were a special task force of the *Waffen* SS—the "fighting SS"—which had nothing to do with concentration camps, deportations, or the extermination of European Jewry. Personally I never believed that the Jews could or ever would become a menace to Germany and I hated no people, not even the enemy. I never believed in German domination of the world but I did believe that Germany needed lebensraum. It was also my conviction that Communism should be destroyed while still in its cradle. If my beliefs should be called "Nazism," then I was indeed a Nazi and I still am.

There are two points of particular interest here. First, Wagemueller immediately distances himself from what, in the West at any rate, is usually considered the most morally abhorrent aspect of National Socialism, the Holocaust perpetrated against Europe's Jewish population. Second, he frames his Nazism in terms of anti-Communism, in much the same way as McAleese frames his own support of white supremacist regimes. For Wagemueller this has an additional significance in that, as noted in the previous section, the book is part polemic against a US withdrawal from Vietnam. By distancing himself from what many readers will regard as the worst National Socialist atrocities and aligning himself with anti-Communist sentiment, he makes a subtle (albeit typically arrogant) appeal to ethical peerage. In all three

examples, the authors (McAleese, Ashcroft, and Wagemueller) make explicit claims to ethical peerage with their readers, promoting conciliation in the face of apparent immorality (fighting for pleasure, killing for money, and National Socialism) and in so doing invite immunity from that immorality.

5. *Moral economy*

Norbert Götz (2015: 149) traces the first use of 'moral economy' to 1729 and notes the various denotations and connotations between then and historian E.P. Thomson's distinction between political economy and moral economy in 1971. The denotation with which I am concerned is both subsequent and specific, Carroll's (2013: 235) use of the term in explaining why many viewers have a pro-attitude to the fictional character Tony Soprano in the television series *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) when they would abhor his counterpart in reality. Carroll uses *moral economy* to describe the array of characters represented in a narrative that correspond and contrast with respect to their morality. Within the moral economy of *The Sopranos*, where most characters demonstrate significant ethical defects, Tony is one of the least reprehensible. The moral economy frames viewer engagement with the series and produces the pro-attitude in the following way (Carroll 2013: 243):

> the pro-attitude that we extend to Tony Soprano is a result of the fact that we are allied to him. And we are allied to him because in the fictional world of *The Sopranos* alternative alliances would either be worse morally or irrelevant.

Carroll claims that the distinction between viewer responses to Tony and to his real-world counterpart is a consequence of the extent of the ethical defects represented in the fictional world rather than any essentially fictional feature of the series. Moral economies are employed in both fiction and nonfiction.

Although Ashcroft recognises the complexity of his own motivations for joining Spartan and displays an ambivalent attitude towards both the CF invasion and the CPA occupation, he establishes a definitive moral economy of the insurgency. His (2006: 6) initial assessment of Iraq in 2003 is as 'on the slippery slope to chaos', which is—with the benefit of hindsight—unfortunately completely accurate. Ashcroft uses 'terrorists' (2006: 6) to describe his enemy, deliberately conflating 'Al Qaeda and radical Islamists' (2006: 7) with '"fedayeen"' (2006: 19) insurgents, all of whom are represented as exacerbating the chaos. The CF for whom the mercenaries are working, which in Ashcroft's case is the US Army, is represented as for the most part well-intentioned, but poorly-led and badly-trained, in consequence of which they often involuntarily or unknowingly contribute to the chaos. Finally, the private security contractors—particularly those working for Spartan—are framed as experienced professionals, the only faction whose intervention always reduces the chaos. The distinction between the Americans

and the contractors is particularly effective in that it not only distances Ashcroft from the extensive civilian casualties of the insurgency, but also—somewhat ironically considering they are only there for the money—sets the contractors up as morally superior to the soldiers. While Ashcroft is often complimentary about individual US soldiers, he makes numerous criticisms of their lack of professionalism throughout the memoir, most of which are aimed at their lack of concern for civilian casualties. The following three quotes are indicative:

(1) 'the trigger-happy Americans at the CF checkpoint' (Ashcroft 2006: 17).

(2) 'I remembered reading that for every 15,000 rounds of ammo the US military fires there is one fatality. This guy was doing his best to lower the average' (Ashcroft 2006: 28).

(3) 'The highest scoring killer of private security contractors up until then was, of course, the United States Army, seconded by terrorists, but only when catching stray terrorist fire because they were driving along in traffic mingled with a US patrol' (Ashcroft 2006: 71).

Ashcroft's moral economy clearly establishes the PMCs as the least morally reprehensible faction amidst the chaos and he makes a subtle but explicit claim to the moral superiority of the British military over the US military by comparing the rules of engagement in Northern Ireland with those in Iraq. Ashcroft has experience of the former as a British Army officer and experience of the latter as a private military contractor, which affords his view a certain authority. The most damning comparison is not, however between Northern Ireland and Iraq, but within Iraq, specifically the different strategies pursued by the British and US military components of the CF (Ashcroft 2006: 70–71):

> Unlike the Brits mounting occupation and peacekeeping duties, the US troops in Iraq, especially in Baghdad in late 2003 and through 2004, were the same guys who fought their way in. The poor sods in the 3rd Infantry Division had a combat mindset not in any way conducive to peacekeeping. As for their anti-ambush drills, they had to be seen to be believed. Every weapon in the convoy unloaded in a 360° arc into anything that moved… dogs, donkeys, children, buses, private contractors, you name it, got some.

In my discussion of the literary irresponsibility deployed by Ashcroft, I described how he framed the role of the PMCs as serving the interests of the civilian population rather than the CPA and the deployment of a moral economy of the insurgency both reinforces and is reinforced by the literary irresponsibility. The PMCs had nothing to with the invasion, whose justification is suspect, and do not dictate the terms of the occupation, which is being poorly-managed; instead, they use their superior skills and mindsets to ease the burden of the population by protecting journalists, petrol convoys, and the water supply. The moral economy and literary irresponsibility work in tandem to conceal the fact that the PMCs were essential to the maintenance of the occupation, the prolonging of the insurgency, and—in consequence—the suffering of the civilian population.

Wagemueller establishes a simple moral economy between the *Viêt*

Minh and the Legion in which the atrocities of the former are always prior to and more extensive than the atrocities of the latter. Although the moral economy of atrocity is a straightforward *us versus them*, it is at times deployed in a subtle manner, for example in the two incidents that bookend the political debate I discussed previously: the Legionnaires bayonet sixteen sleeping insurgents to death, but the *Viêt Minh* execute thirty villagers. The latter atrocity is, in numerical terms alone, almost twice as bad as the former. In the chapter that follows, Wagemueller (Elford 1971: 238–239) states: 'only the French "crimes" received blaring headlines. The Viet Minh atrocities (far more numerous and excessive) were given a few back-page lines once in a while.' The *Viêt Minh* atrocities are unequivocally *far more numerous and excessive* than the French. The second aspect of the moral economy of atrocity is perhaps more effective as it seeks to absolve the Legionnaires from—or at the very least reduce their moral responsibility for—the atrocities. The representation of French atrocities as a response to *Viêt Minh* atrocities (with an implied causal relation) is reiterated at several places in the narrative, and the following two are representative:

(1) 'I was there at the beginning and I know that it was not the French who started the atrocities and what one may rightly call genocide. Genocide is a Communist specialty' (Elford 1971: 70).

(2) 'We were not any better than the Viet Minh and we knew it. But we did want to fight a clean war and we were not the ones who started the atrocities. We only retaliated in kind. We could do nothing else' (Elford 1971: 127).

The perspective on the atrocities is that they are both a response to the Communist atrocities and a necessary evil.

McAleese justifies his active support of white supremacist governments by means of establishing a moral economy that is similar to, albeit distinct from, Wagemueller's. Where Wagemueller's moral economy of atrocity is used to represent the atrocities the Legion commits as being morally acceptable in virtue of being less extensive and a necessary response to the atrocities of the enemy, McAleese's moral economy of settler colonialism is deployed as evidence for what constitutes perhaps the most common apologia for colonisation, that it is in the interests of the colonised. McAleese uses the crimes of the military and civilian organisations fighting for black liberation to justify the continued existence of the two white supremacist governments, Ian Smith's Rhodesian Front and P.W. Botha's National Party. I take an example from each:

(1) 'By the time I arrived, both Robert Mugabe's ZANLA and Nkomo's ZIPRA had carried out countless attacks on the local population and the blacks suffered more than the whites' (McAleese 1993: 92).

(2) 'Ondjiva was a wreck by now, with few civilians left who could stand the constant battering and looting by FAPLA and SWAPO' (McAleese 1993: 171).

The first quote refers to the situation in Rhodesia in 1977 and the ZANLA and Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army insurgents. The second quote refers to the situation in Angola in late 1981. Ondjiva—a town near the South West African (now Namibian) border—was occupied by the South African Defence Force to use as a forward operating base against the People's Armed Forces of Liberation of Angola and the military wing of the South West African People's Organisation. In both cases, it is made clear that white supremacist rule is safer and more secure for African civilians, inviting the reader to ally herself with the colonial settlers rather than the black insurgents, as the lesser of the two evils. In all three examples, the authors (Ashcroft, Wagemueller, and McAleese) establish moral economies (of insurgency, atrocity, and settler colonialism) that frame the author's faction as the least morally reprehensible of the various options and thus invite moral immunity from their membership of those factions.

6. *Conclusion*

In the previous three sections I introduced three literary devices, Lamarque's literary irresponsibility, John's ethical peerage, and Carroll's moral economy. I showed that all three of these devices were deployed in all three of the military memoirs for the purpose of moral immunity, i.e. for creating some kind of identification, empathy, or sympathy with the authors in spite of their participation in criminal wars and war crimes. In *Devil's Guard*, Wagemueller represents an interrogation as a political debate, appeals to the anti-communist sentiments of his readers, and justifies his atrocities as a necessary response to his enemy. In *No Mean Soldier*, McAleese conceals tragedy by means of comedy, represents himself as a man of action pursuing a worthy end, and frames settler colonialism as being in the interests of the African population. In *Making a Killing*, Ashcroft represents the PMCs as serving the Iraqi population, himself as seeking adventure in a humanitarian cause, and the PMCs as the only faction reducing the chaos in occupied Iraq. The three devices employed together in each memoir create a complex narrative framework in which readers are invited to treat the author with what Carroll calls a *pro-attitude*—a vague, but useful term that includes a broad range of responses from actually identifying with the author to simply not regarding him as morally abhorrent. This invitation to adopt a pro-attitude to the author will not of course be accepted by all readers, but the invitation itself evinces coherence and precision in its design and construction. The use of literary devices in service of moral immunity is thus very similar to—if not identical with—what one would expect to find in literary works or canonical texts. I am not suggesting that these memoirs have equivalent literary value to, for example, the realist novels Lamarque mentions, but that the literary

devices they deploy should be taken seriously. I am, in other words, suggesting that the relationships among literary irresponsibility, ethical peerage, moral economy, and moral immunity constitute a literary aesthetics of war crime.

In the introduction, I described the literary aesthetic concern with the relationship between literature and morality as being focused on the value interaction debate, the question of whether a moral defect in a work is (also) an aesthetic defect. To date, the most popular answers are from Carroll, who argues for a systematic relation between moral defects and aesthetic defects, and Eaton, who argues for a systematic relation between moral defects and aesthetic merits. The literary devices I have explored in this paper are all, in analytic aesthetic terms, aesthetic merits, understood as adding value to the memoirs when they are being judged as works of literature. Moral immunity—i.e., some kind of acquittal, amnesty, or absolution from participating in criminal wars, war crimes, or both—is clearly a moral defect. The authors' deployment of the literary devices for the purposes of moral immunity is thus evidence of a systematic relation between aesthetic merits and moral defects rather than evidence of a systematic relation between aesthetic merits and moral merits. I also described the literary critical concern with the relationship between literature and morality in the introduction, characterised as being focused on the relationship between literary responsiveness and ethical responsibility in the reception of texts. McNulty identifies literary theory as associating sophisticated ambiguity with moral uncertainty and simplistic didacticism with political conformity. The literary devices I have explored are all, in literary critical terminology, sophisticated instantiations of ambiguity employed for the purpose of political conformity, i.e. creating moral immunity from fighting for colonial or neocolonial powers. In consequence, they offer evidence for McNulty's debunking of critical wisdom on the univocal relationship between literary ambiguity and moral uncertainty.

With this in mind, I consider the literary aesthetics of war crime proposed in this paper to provide a compelling (if not conclusive) solution to both the value interaction debate (favouring Eaton's robust immoralism) and the ethics of reading (favouring McNulty's debunking). Setting aside these specifically disciplinary concerns, there remains the perennial question of the relationship between literature and morality. In focusing on the way in which the authors of military memoirs use distinctively literary devices to achieve distinctively (im)moral responses in their readers, the literary aesthetics of war crime demonstrates that the moral dimension of literature cannot and should not be ignored. In arguing for the way in which literary irresponsibility, ethical peerage, and moral economy are deployed in the service of moral immunity I have focused exclusively on immorality in literature. I make no claims about the way in which different literary devices are deployed in the service of moral ends such as compassion, respect, and

justice. The evidence from immorality is nonetheless sufficient to show that literature should not be experienced, interpreted, or appreciated in isolation from its moral dimension. Whether one's preference in articulating literature is as an institution or a canon, the value of literary works or canonical texts for art, for culture, and for humanity is inextricably bound up with their moral value.[4]

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