FOUNDATIONS OF VIOLENCE

GRACE M. JANTZEN

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The pursuit of death and the love of death has characterized Western culture from Homeric times through centuries of Christianity, taking particular deadly shapes in Western postmodernity. This necrophilia shows itself in destruction and violence, in a focus on other worlds and degradation of this one, and in hatred of the body, sense and sexuality. In her major new book project *Death and the Displacement of Beauty*, Grace M. Jantzen seeks to disrupt this wish for death, opening a new acceptance of beauty and desire that makes it possible to choose life.

*Foundations of Violence* enters the ancient world of Homer, Sophocles, Plato and Aristotle to explore the genealogy of violence in western thought through its emergence in Greece and Rome. It uncovers origins of ideas of death from the ‘beautiful death’ of Homeric heroes to the gendered misery of war, showing the tensions between those who tried to eliminate fear of death by denying its significance, and those like Plotinus who looked to another world, seeking life and beauty in another realm.

To Tina Macrae

I would rather see her lovely step
and the radiant sparkle of her face
than all the war-chariots . . . and soldiers . . .

(Sappho)
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One of the many pleasures of the Lake District is the luminous green of the grass, setting off the beauty of the trees and fells, the becks and tarns, the harsh and gentle landscape. It has been my good fortune to live for the past six years in an ancient cottage in South Lakeland, to wake up daily to the ever-changing beauty of sea and sky, tree and hill, and to walk the fells and valleys letting their beauty soak into my soul. In these years, too, it has been my great privilege to learn to play the cello, and thus to be opened to still another kind of beauty with its multiple demands and rewards.

During this time, the world has spiralled into increasing violence. While I have been practicing Bach or Dvořák, the music has been shattered by training flights of jet aircraft screaming overhead. While I have been sitting on a rocky outcrop or walking among bluebells, children in Afghanistan and in Iraq have been killed and maimed, their water supplies polluted and even the sands of their deserts contaminated. While I have had the peace to read and contemplate, refugee camps in Palestine have burst open with young people whose education and life prospects are disrupted until their only way forward is a trajectory of desperation. In a multitude of ways the western world projects its violence outwards. The world is an increasingly dangerous place. Violence is ugly.

The dissonance between beauty and violence has prompted this project. In my previous work, I began to explore the concepts of necrophilia and natality, the love of death and the love of new life. Here, I wish to take these concepts further, to look at the roots of the preoccupation with death and violence in the western world, and to show how beauty can be a creative response to destructiveness. I offer here the first volume of a multi-volume project, *Death and the Displacement of Beauty*. The fundamental thesis of the project is that the choice of death, the love of death and of that which makes for death, has been characteristic of the west from Homeric and Platonic writings, through centuries of christendom, and takes particularly deadly shapes in western postmodernity. This preoccupation with death shows itself in destruction and violence, in a focus on other worlds and in the degredation and refusal of beauty in this one, in fear and hatred of bodiliness, sensory experience, and sexuality. It is a gendered necrophilia, which calls upon the ‘Name of the Father’ (whether in theological or psychoanalytical terms) to
assert its dominance. It is deeply interwoven with the discourse of ‘race’ and postcolonialism. I shall show how violence and the love of death has been sedimented in layer upon layer in western history, so that we now live in a material and discursive situation in which our habitus is deadly.

Although diagnosis and analysis is crucial, however, it is not enough. What I wish to show, also, is how the attraction of beauty can inspire resistance and creative response, and can draw forward desire that is premised not upon lack or death but upon potential for new beginning. Preoccupation with death requires a refusal of beauty, or its displacement into some less threatening sphere. Conversely, response to beauty reconfigures consciousness towards creativity and new life. Beauty, creativity, seeks to bring newness into the world, a newness that is at odds with violence. All of these terms – death, beauty, violence, creativity – have long and complicated histories and cannot be used as though they have unambiguous meaning. What I propose to do, therefore, is to consider how their understanding and practice has shaped western culture, and thereby help to effect a shift in the consciousness and praxis of western post/modernity, disrupting the symbolic of violence and beginning to open out a new imaginary of beauty which makes it possible to choose life.

In order to develop this theme, my project runs across some academic currents and conventions. I am telling a long story, a story that will take several books to complete, at a time when grand narratives are suspect; even then I am leaving out many things which could well have been included. I am crossing all sorts of disciplinary boundaries, transgressing in fields outside of my expertise, and inviting readers to go with me in that transgression. Nobody can be expert in all fields, and inevitably different readers will find different parts to their taste. Inevitably, too, I will make mistakes; I hope that readers will point them out for correction in subsequent editions. The important thing, though, is that the issues are raised in such a way that they become part of collective discussion; that we do not turn our eyes away from either beauty or violence; that we begin to hear what each says to the other; that there may be healing and hope.

I have worked mostly from primary classical sources; but in order to be accessible to as wide a readership as possible, I have chosen wherever possible to cite easily available translations, often Penguin, in the hope that many readers will refer back to them. They are not always the most scholarly translations; anyone wishing to explore further should turn to the Loeb Classical Library, which offers the text in Greek or Latin with a careful English translation on the facing page. The exception is Plotinus, where I have used Loeb throughout, since the Penguin translation is inaccurate to the point of distortion. I have indicated in a footnote at the beginning of appropriate chapters the method of reference for the major figures in that chapter: for Plato and Aristotle this is by standard book and line numbers; in most other cases it is to page (not line) numbers in Penguin editions. In citations, I have silently changed punctuation and spelling for consistency; but unless otherwise indicated, all italics are in the original.
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